

Texas woman pleads guilty to Massachusetts unemployment fraud related to COVID-19 pandemic

A Texas woman pleaded guilty today to her involvement in a scheme to fraudulently claim COVID-19-related unemployment assistance.

Donna Wasson, 37, of San Antonio, Texas, pleaded guilty to three counts of wire fraud. U.S. District Court Chief Judge F. Dennis Saylor IV scheduled sentencing for March 8, 2022. Wasson was indicted on May 27, 2021.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) created a temporary federal unemployment insurance program called Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA). PUA, administered by the Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance, provides unemployment insurance benefits for individuals who are not eligible for other types of unemployment benefits (e.g., the self-employed, independent contractors, or gig economy workers).

Wasson applied for Massachusetts unemployment benefits despite residing in Texas and receiving unemployment benefits via the Texas Workplace Commission. In addition, Wasson carried out instructions concerning other fraudulent unemployment claims from a former Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance (DUA) employee, and accessed unemployment claims under multiple stolen identities to fraudulently obtain benefits to which she was not entitled.

The charge of wire fraud provides for a sentence of up to 20 years in prison, up to three years of supervised release and a fine of up to \$250,000. The charge of aggravated identity

theft provides for a sentence of up to two years in prison, one year of supervised release and a fine of \$250,000. Sentences are imposed by a federal district court judge based upon the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

The investigation is being conducted by Homeland Security's Investigation's Document and Benefit Fraud Task Force (DBFTF), a specialized field investigative group comprised of personnel from various local, state, and federal agencies with expertise in detecting, deterring, and disrupting organizations and individuals involved in various types of document, identity, and benefit fraud schemes.

Acting United States Attorney Nathaniel R. Mendell; Matthew B. Millhollin, Special Agent in Charge of Homeland Security Investigations in Boston; and Jonathan Mellone, Special Agent in Charge of the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, Labor Racketeering and Fraud Investigations made the announcement today. Special assistance was provided by the Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance, Program Integrity Unit. Assistant U.S. Attorneys William Abely, Chief of Mendell's Criminal Division, and Dustin Chao, Chief of Mendell's Public Corruption & Special Prosecutions Unit, are prosecuting the case.

On May 17, 2021, the Attorney General established the COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement Task Force to marshal the resources of the Department of Justice in partnership with agencies across government to enhance efforts to combat and prevent pandemic-related fraud. The Task Force bolsters efforts to investigate and prosecute the most culpable domestic and international criminal actors and assists agencies tasked with administering relief programs to prevent fraud by, among other methods, augmenting and incorporating existing coordination mechanisms, identifying resources and techniques to uncover fraudulent actors and their schemes, and sharing and harnessing information and insights gained from prior enforcement

efforts. For more information on the Department's response to the pandemic, please visit <https://www.justice.gov/coronavirus>.

Anyone with information about allegations of attempted fraud involving COVID-19 can report it by calling the Department of Justice's National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) Hotline at 866-720-5721 or via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at: <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>.