

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

District of Massachusetts

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Friday, April 2, 2021

Lawrence Woman Arrested for Identity Theft and Unemployment Fraud Related to COVID-19 Pandemic

BOSTON – A Lawrence woman was arrested today in connection with her alleged involvement in a scheme to fraudulently obtain COVID-19-related unemployment assistance.

Raquel Pena, 40, was charged in a criminal complaint with wire fraud, conspiracy to commit wire fraud and aggravated identity theft. Pena was released on conditions after an initial appearance in federal court in Boston.

According to the charging documents, 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). As alleged in the complaint, Pena and others conspired to file fraudulent claims for PUA using others' personally identifiable information. Pena recruited acquaintances to receive the proceeds of the fraudulent claims into their bank accounts, withdraw all or a portion of those funds and give the cash to Pena. The investigation allegedly connected Pena and her co-conspirators to more than \$300,000 in unemployment claims between May 2020 and March 2021.

The charges of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and wire fraud each provide for a sentence of up to 20 years in prison, up to three years of supervised release and a fine of \$250,000. The charge of aggravated identity theft provides for a mandatory sentence of two years in prison to be served consecutively to any other sentenced imposed, 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.

Acting United States Attorney Nathaniel R. Mendell; Joseph R. Bonavolanta, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's Boston Field Office; and Michael Mikulka, Special Agent in Charge of Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, Office of Investigations made the announcement today. The Massachusetts Department of Unemployment Assistance provided assistance in the investigation. Assistant U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Markham of Mendell's Securities, Financial & Cyber Fraud Unit is prosecuting the case.

The details contained in the charging documents are allegations. The defendant is presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

Topic(s):
Financial Fraud
Identity Theft

Component(s):
[USAO - Massachusetts](#)