Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Middle District of Florida

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE Tuesday, January 17, 2023

Middle District Of Florida Task Force Continues To Combat COVID-19 Fraud

Tampa, FL – United States Attorney Roger B. Handberg announces the results achieved by the Middle District of Florida's efforts to combat fraud related to COVID-19. Those efforts have included complementary actions by the Criminal, Asset Recovery, and Civil Divisions, along with federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies.

"The Middle District of Florida United States Attorney's Office remains committed to protecting the integrity of government programs established to provide relief for those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic," said U.S. Attorney Handberg. "These cases should serve as a warning to those who might have engaged in similar fraudulent activity that holding those accountable for these crimes remains a high priority for federal authorities."

On the criminal enforcement front, the United States Attorney's Office and federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies joined together in March 2020 to form the Middle District of Florida COVID-19 Fraud Task Force to identify, investigate, and prosecute fraud related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Since its inception, the task force has prosecuted 52 individuals for fraud schemes designed to exploit federal programs created or expanded to address the COVID-19 pandemic, including the Paycheck Protection Program ("PPP"), Economic Injury Disaster Loans ("EIDL"), Unemployment Insurance ("UI"), the Main Street Lending Program ("MSLP"), and the Emergency Rental Assistance Program ("ERAP"). These individuals collectively sought to defraud the United States of more than $58 million. Thirty-seven of those defendants have been found guilty, while prosecution remains pending against fifteen others. (*See chart for criminal case details.*)

In one example, U.S. District Judge Wendy W. Berger sentenced Don V. Cisternino (47, Chuluota) to eight years and six months in federal prison for wire fraud, aggravated identity theft, and illegal monetary transaction related to Cisternino's obtaining more than $7.2 million in emergency funds through a PPP loan to which he was not entitled. Cisternino pleaded guilty on September 20, 2022, after being extradited from Croatia.

In December 2022, U.S. Attorney Handberg announced the unsealing of a six-count indictment charging Canadian citizens Evan Edwards (64, New Smyrna Beach) and Joshua Edwards (30, New Smyrna Beach) with federal offenses related to the CARES Act and visa fraud. According to the indictment, Evan and Joshua Edwards conspired to commit bank fraud and committed bank fraud by submitting a fraudulent PPP loan on behalf of Aslan International Ministry, Inc. ("Aslan")—a not-for-profit corporation that purportedly provided religious services. In the loan application, the pair significantly overstated the number of employees and average monthly payroll for Aslan, claiming that it had almost 500 employees and over $2 million in average monthly payroll expenses. They also falsely certified in the loan application that the PPP funds would be used to maintain payroll and for other authorized purposes. Based on the false representations made in the loan application, Evan and Joshua Edwards received into their bank account approximately $8,417,200 in PPP loan funds, a portion of which they used to make a down payment for the attempted purchase of a multi-million-dollar residence for themselves.

Further, the Asset Recovery Division and federal seizing agencies have completed the forfeiture of more than $16.8 million of EIDL, UI, and PPP funds that were fraudulently obtained, depriving the fraudsters of their ill-gotten gains and recovering the proceeds for the victims. More than $9.8

million in additional pandemic fraud proceeds have been seized and are pending civil or criminal forfeiture.

The Attorney General has 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. For more information on the department's response to the pandemic, please visit https://www.justice.gov/coronavirus.

Through the PPP, the federal government authorized over $600 billion in forgivable loans to small businesses for job retention and certain other expenses through the PPP. The EIDL program provides economic relief to small businesses that are currently experiencing a temporary loss of revenue. The MSLP provided support to small and medium-sized businesses and their employees across the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. UI programs provided unemployment benefits to eligible workers who became unemployed through no fault of their own.

The criminal cases charged by the Middle District of Florida COVID-19 Fraud Task Force have been investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Secret Service, the Internal Revenue Service—Criminal Investigation, the Department of Labor—Office of Inspector General, the U.S. Postal Service, the Federal Housing Finance Agency, the Small Business Administration, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation—Office of Inspector General, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, the Special Inspector General for Pandemic Recovery, the Federal Reserve Board – Office of Inspector General, the Metropolitan Bureau of Investigation, the Tampa Police Department, the Orlando Police Department, the Manatee County Sheriff's Office, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office, the Winter Park Police Department, the Osceola County Sheriff's Office, the Seminole County Sheriff's Office, and the Orange County Sheriff's Office. The cases are being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys throughout the Middle District of Florida.

The Department of Justice needs the public's assistance in remaining vigilant and reporting suspected fraudulent activity. To report suspected fraud, contact the National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) at (866) 720-5721 or file an online complaint at: https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/webform/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form. Complaints filed will be reviewed at the NCDF and referred to federal, state, local, or international law enforcement or regulatory agencies for investigation.

An indictment is merely a formal charge that a defendant has committed one or more violations of federal criminal law, and every defendant is presumed innocent unless, and until, proven guilty.

MDFL COVID Fraud Criminal Cases			
Charged Cases			
Defendant(s) (Age)	**Charge(s)** ***Max. Imprisonment***	**Type of Fraud***	**Intended Loss** **Amount**

Tampa Division			
Joseph Abdo (39)	Wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years* Illegal monetary transactions *Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years*	PPP	$500k
Alexander Leszczynski (22)	Wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years* Bank fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 30 Years* Illegal monetary transactions *Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years*	PPP	$200k
Charles Cunningham (72)	Bank fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 30 years*	PPP	$800k
Ellyn Pinkney (60)	Wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years*	EIDL	$14M
Kieanna Garrett	Wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years*	EIDL	$40k
Nicole Bramble-King	Wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years*	PPP	$40k
These COVID Fraud cases from the Tampa Division are being handled by AUSAs Rachel Jones, Greg Pizzo, Candace Rich, and Jennifer Peresie			
Orlando Division			

Evan Edwards (64) Joshua Edwards (30)	Conspiracy to commit bank fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 30 years* Bank fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 30 years* Visa fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 10 years* False statements *Maximum Prison Term: 30 years*	PPP	$8M
Emmet Bowens (53)	Wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years* Illegal monetary transactions *Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years*	PPP	$740k
Keith Ingersoll	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 5 Years* Wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years* Aggravated identity theft *Maximum: Prison Term: Two Years Consecutive*	EIDL	$66k
Jaheim Davis	Access device fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years* Aggravated identity theft *Maximum: Prison Term: Two Years Consecutive*	UI	$219k

These COVID Fraud cases from the Orlando Division are being handled by AUSAs Kara Wick, Chauncy Bratt, Shannon Laurie, and Amanda Daniels			
Jacksonville Division			
Jacob Byrd	Wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years*	PPP	$20k
Desmond Williams	Wire fraud conspiracy *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years* Wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years*	PPP	$40k
These COVID Fraud cases from the Jacksonville Division are being handled by AUSA Kevin Frein			
Fort Myers Division			
Venera Price (45)	Mail fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years*	ERAP	$82k
This COVID Fraud case from the Fort Myers Division is being handled by AUSA Yolande Viacava			
Ocala Division			
Lavelle Harris (36)	Wire Fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years*	PPP	$1.2M
Henry Wade	Wire Fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years*	EIDL	$500k
These COVID Fraud cases from the Ocala Division are being handled by AUSA Hannah Nowalk			

Adjudicated Cases			
Tampa Division			
Jorge Gutierrez Echeverria (33)	Wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years*	EIDL	$150k
Keaujay Hornsby (26)	Racketeering conspiracy *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years* Aggravated identity theft *Maximum Prison Term: Two Years Consecutive* Access device fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years*	UI	$3M
Kareem Spann (27)	Racketeering conspiracy *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years* Aggravated identity theft *Maximum Prison Term: Two Years Consecutive* Access device fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years*	UI	$3M
Richard Simpkins (47)	Conspiracy to commit bank fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 30 Years* Illegal monetary transactions *Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years*	PPP	$1.9M
Steve Moodie (33)	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 5 Years*	UI	$1.5M

	Wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years* Aggravated identity theft *Maximum: Prison Term: Two Years Consecutive*		
Marqus Willard Johnson	Bank fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 30 Years* Money laundering *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years*	PPP	$500k
Omar Esquivel Bello	Wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years*	EIDL	$242k
These COVID Fraud cases from the Tampa Division are being handled by AUSAs Rachel Jones, Diego Novaes, Tiffany Fields, Jennifer Peresie, and Greg Pizzo, and DOJ Trial Attorney John Scanlon			
Orlando Division			
Brian Blake (30)	Possession of device-making equipment *Maximum Prison Term: 15 Years* Access device fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years* Aggravated identity theft *Maximum: Prison Term: Two Years Consecutive*	PPP/UI	$832k
Daniel Johnson (34)	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years* Aggravated identity theft	UI	$2.3M

	Maximum Prison Term: Two Years Consecutive Unlawful transfer of firearm *Maximum Prison Term: 5 Years*		
Teresa McIntyre (55)	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud and other offenses *Maximum Prison Term: 5 Years*	EIDL	$730k
This COVID Fraud case from the Orlando Division is being handled by AUSAs Chauncey Bratt, Amanda Daniels, Jennifer Harrington, and Dana Hill, and U.S. Attorney Roger Handberg			
Fort Myers Division			
Daniel Joseph Tisone (34)	Wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years* Bank fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 30 Years* Money laundering *Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years* Aggravated Identity Theft *Maximum Prison Term: 2 Years Consecutive* Possession of Ammunition by a Prohibited Person *Maximum Prison Term: 10 Years*	PPP/EIDL/MSLP	$2.6M
Liliana Gonzalez (31)	Wire fraud *Maximum Prison Term: 20 Years*	PPP	$169k
These COVID Fraud cases from the Fort Myers Division are being handled by AUSAs Trent Reichling and Jesus M. Casas			

Sentenced Cases			
Tampa Division			
Louis Thornton, III (63)	Wire Fraud *Sentence Imposed: 42 months in federal prison*	EIDL/PPP	$815k
Kary Stevenson (48) Corey Quinn (35)	Conspiracy to commit access device fraud and aggravated identity theft *Sentence Imposed: 5 years, 10 months in federal prison (Stevenson)* *Sentence Imposed:7 years in federal prison (Quinn)*	UI	$1M
Bridgitte Keim (52)	Bank fraud *Sentence Imposed: 2 years in federal prison*	PPP	$588k
Wayne Ganaway (47)	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud *Sentence Imposed: 4 years in federal prison*	EIDL	$300k
Eriaius Bentley (29)	Racketeering conspiracy, aggravated identity theft, access device fraud *Sentence Imposed: One year in federal prison*	UI	$3M
Rolanda Wingfield (39)	Access device fraud, Aggravated identity theft *Sentenced Imposed: 3 years in federal prison*	UI	$135k
Tywon Spann (25)	Racketeering conspiracy, aggravated identity theft, access device fraud	UI	$3M

	Sentence Imposed: 6 years and 9 months in federal prison		
Randy Jones (34)	Wire fraud, aggravated identity theft *Sentence Imposed: 5 years and 1 month in federal prison*	EIDL/UI	$250k
Julio Lugo (45)	Conspiracy to commit money laundering *Sentence Imposed: 7 years and 6 months in federal prison*	EIDL/PPP	$4.4M
Keith Nicoletta (49)	Conspiracy to commit money laundering *Sentence Imposed: 24 months in federal prison*	PPP	$1.9M
Rosenide Venant (37)	Conspiracy to commit money laundering *Sentence Imposed: 5 years in federal prison*	EIDL/PPP	$413k
Melinda Hernandez (33)	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud Wire fraud and aggravated identity theft *Sentence imposed: Three years and six months in federal prison*	UI	$1.5M
Briantina Mills	Wire fraud and theft of government funds *Sentence imposed: 15 months in federal prison*		
These COVID Fraud cases from the Tampa Division were handled by AUSAs Rachel Jones, Greg Pizzo, Tiffany Fields, Diego Novaes, and SAUSA Chris Poor			

Orlando Division			
Jacquavius Smith (21)	Possession of short-barreled rifle; felon in possession of firearm; and aggravated identity theft *Sentence Imposed: 7 years, 1 month in federal prison*	PPP	$10k
Johnson Eustache (40)	Wire fraud *Sentence Imposed: 5 years in federal prison*	EIDL/PPP	$2.2M
Joseph Harrison (43)	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud *Sentence Imposed: 12 months in federal prison*	UI	$2.1M
Tomas Ziupsnys (39)	Conspiracy to commit bank fraud; bank fraud; aggravated identity theft *Sentence Imposed: 5 years in federal prison*	PPP	$2M
Holly Urban (36)	Conspiracy to commit bank fraud *Sentence Imposed: 30 months in federal prison*	PPP	$1.5M
Joel Greenberg (37)	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud and other offenses while on pretrial release *Sentence Imposed: 11 years in federal prison*	EIDL	$430k
Don Cisternino (46)	Wire fraud, illegal monetary transactions, and aggravated identity theft *Sentence Imposed: 8 and one half years in federal prison*	PPP	$7.2M

These COVID Fraud cases from the Orlando Division were handled by AUSAs John Gardella, Amanda Daniels, Chauncey Bratt, Emily Chang, and Jennifer Harrington, and U.S. Attorney Roger Handberg			
Fort Myers Division			
Casey Crowther (36)	Bank fraud, false statement to a financial institution, illegal monetary transaction *Sentence Imposed: 3 years, 1 month in federal prison*	PPP	$2.7M
Anthony Bruey (36) Amber Bruey (35)	Conspiracy to commit wire fraud, wire fraud, Conspiracy to commit money laundering, Illegal monetary transactions *Sentence Imposed*: *Anthony Bruey*: *4 years, 3 months in federal prison* *Amber Bruey*: *4 years in federal prison*	PPP/EIDL	$881k
Edrica Leann Watson (30)	False statement to a lending institution *Sentence Imposed: 15 months in federal prison*	PPP	$392k
These COVID Fraud cases from the Fort Myers Division were handled by AUSA Trent Reichling and AUSA Jesus M. Casas			
Types of Fraud* Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) Unemployment Insurance (UI) Main Street Lending Program (MSLP) Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP)			

Topic(s):
Coronavirus
Disaster Fraud
Financial Fraud

Component(s):
USAO - Florida, Middle

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