

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Western District of Virginia

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, April 13, 2022

Woman Pleads Guilty to Pandemic Related Fraud

Mother of Conspiracy Ring Leaders Sought Fraudulent Unemployment Benefits for Herself, Family Members and Friends

ABINGDON, Va. – A Southwest Virginia woman, who collaborated with more than 30 others in a scheme to cheat the government out of more than \$499,000 in unemployment benefits, pleaded guilty this week to one count of conspiracy to defraud the government, one count of conspiracy to commit mail fraud, and one count of conspiracy to obstruct justice.

According to court documents, over the course of nine months, Veronica Mullins, 48, of Pound, VA, conspired with Leelynn Danielle Chytka, Gregory Tackett, Jeffery Tackett, and others to commit fraud against the United States in connection with the filing of fraudulent claims for pandemic unemployment benefits on behalf of at least 37 individuals via the Virginia Employment Commission [VEC] website, with a total actual loss to the United States of at least \$499,000.

Specifically, in June 2020, Mullins approached Chytka and asked her for help with filing for fraudulent unemployment benefits. In addition to illegally attempting to gain unentitled benefits for herself, Mullins also provided the personally identifiable information for other individuals, including those of her children, each of whom was also ineligible to receive pandemic-related benefits. When questioned by investigators, Mullins lied about her knowledge of the larger scheme and her role in it.

United States Attorney Christopher R. Kavanaugh of the Western District of Virginia, Special Agent-in-Charge Syreeta Scott, Philadelphia Regional Office, U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General, and Special Agent in Charge Darrell J. Waldon of the Internal Revenue Service – Criminal Investigation Washington, D.C., Field Office made the announcement.

Chytka, the mastermind behind the scheme, was sentenced to nine years in prison.

To date, the following co-conspirators have been sentenced as part of the investigation:

- Jimmy Barnette- 24 months
- George Buckles- 30 months
- Joshua Carroll- 24 months
- Darrell Davis- 18 months
- Melinda Davis – 18 months
- Misty Evans – 12 months
- Eugene Grizzle- 12 months
- Ryan Grizzle – 5 months
- Melissa Hayes – 24 months

- Jacob Hicks – 30 months
- Timothy Hileman- 30 months
- Ajay Johnson – 30 months
- John C. Johnson Jr. – 18 months
- Randall Johnson – 24 months
- Jared Mitchell – 24 months
- Curtis E. Mullins – 12 months
- Eric B. Mullins – 30 months
- Steven J. Mullins – 27 months
- Patrick Payne – 24 months
- Jeremy Short – 27 months
- Gregory Tackett – 108 months
- Jeffery Tackett – 102 months
- Larry Whited – 18 months
- Jeffrey Wiseman – 24 months

The Department of Labor - Office of the Inspector General, the Internal Revenue Service – Criminal Investigation Washington, D.C., Field Office, the Norton Police Department, and the Russell County Sheriff's Office investigated the case.

Assistant United States Attorneys Daniel J. Murphy and Lena L. Busscher 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>.

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