



PRESS RELEASE

## Spokane Resident Pleads Guilty to Fraudulently Obtaining More Than \$50,000 in COVID-19 Relief Funds

Friday, February 10, 2023

### For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of Washington

Spokane, Washington – Vanessa R. Waldref, the United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Washington, announced today that Natasha Ann Opsal, 41, of Spokane, Washington, has pleaded guilty to felony charges of fraudulently obtaining more than \$50,000 in COVID-19 relief funds. This conviction is the most recent obtained by the COVID-19 Relief Fraud Strike Force, which has brought criminal charges against numerous individuals and recovered millions of dollars in fraudulently obtained COVID relief funding.

On March 27, 2020, the President signed into law the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (“CARES”) Act. The CARES Act provided a number of programs through which eligible small businesses could request and obtain relief funding intended to mitigate the economic impacts of the pandemic for small and local businesses. One such program, the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), provided government-backed loans to small businesses which could be forgiven so long as the proceeds were used for payroll and other eligible expenses. Another program, the Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) program, provided low interest loans that could be deferred until the conclusion of the pandemic to provide “bridge” funding for small businesses to maintain their operations during shutdowns and other economic circumstances caused by the pandemic. The PPP and EIDL programs have provided billions of dollars in aid, the vast majority of which have not been paid back, including hundreds of millions of dollars disbursed within Eastern Washington.

“COVID-19 relief programs were designed to lift up our community during crisis, and due to the number of people and businesses that requested funding, some deserving small businesses were not able to obtain funding to keep their businesses in operation,” said U.S. Attorney Waldref. “We created the Strike Force to ensure that those who misused COVID-19 relief funding are held accountable and to protect the strength and safety of our vital small business community.”

In February 2022, U.S. Attorney Waldref and the U.S. Attorney's Office (USAO) began working with federal law enforcement agencies to create and launch a COVID-19 Fraud Strike Force that would leverage partnerships between different agencies to aggressively investigate and prosecute fraud against COVID-19 relief programs in Eastern Washington. The Strike Force consists of agency representatives from the USAO, Small Business Administration (SBA) Office of Inspector General (OIG), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), U.S. Department of the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration (TIGTA), U.S. Secret Service, U.S. Homeland Security Investigations, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs OIG, General Services Administration OIG, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) OIG, Internal Revenue Service, Department of Energy OIG, and others.

According to court documents and information disclosed during court proceedings, Opsal fraudulently obtained over \$50,000 in COVID-19 relief funding through three PPP loans she obtained in the spring of 2021 for a purported car detailing business. Opsal acknowledged she devised a scheme to defraud the SBA and made false representations about the purported business in order to obtain COVID-19 funding. Opsal pleaded guilty to wire fraud, which carries a maximum sentence of up to 20 years.

"I commend the stellar investigative work on these cases performed by the Strike Force and especially in this case by SBA OIG, U.S. Secret Service, and DHS OIG" said U.S. Attorney Waldref. "We will continue to work together with our law enforcement partners to vigorously prosecute those who abuse and misuse COVID-19 relief funding, and to strengthen our communities by protecting our small and local businesses."

"Individuals making false statements to fraudulently obtain pandemic funds will face justice," said SBA OIG's Western Region Special Agent in Charge Weston King. "Our Office will remain relentless in the pursuit of fraudsters who seek to exploit SBA's vital economic programs. I want to thank the U.S. Attorney's Office and our law enforcement partners for their dedication and commitment to seeing justice served."

Judge Thomas O. Rice accepted Opsal's guilty plea and set sentencing for May 10, 2023, in Spokane.

This case was investigated by the Eastern District of Washington COVID-19 Fraud Strike Force and by the SBA OIG, U.S. Secret Service, and DHS OIG. Special Assistant United States Attorney Frieda K. Zimmerman, and Assistant United States Attorneys Dan Fruchter and Brian Donovan are prosecuting this case on behalf of the United States.

Case No. 2:22-CR-53-TOR

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