



PRESS RELEASE

## Springfield Man Pleads Guilty in Federal Court to Wire Fraud in Connection with Fraudulent Scheme to Obtain Pandemic Unemployment Benefits

Friday, February 10, 2023

### For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Middle District of Louisiana

United States Attorney Ronald C. Gathe, Jr. announced that Chaz Ryan Watkins, age 35, of Springfield, Louisiana, pled guilty before U.S. Chief Judge Shelly D. Dick to wire fraud in connection with a fraudulent scheme to obtain pandemic unemployment benefits. As a result of his plea, Watkins faces up to 20 years imprisonment.

According to admissions made as part of his guilty plea, between December 2019, and continuing through at least September 2021, Watkins obtained the personal identifying information (“PII”) of inmates incarcerated in Louisiana prisons and of other individuals, including names, birth dates, and Social Security numbers. Watkins submitted claims for pandemic unemployment assistance (“PUA”) benefits to the Louisiana Workforce Commission (“LWC”) in the names of the inmates, who were ineligible for such benefits, and in the names of other individuals, often without the individual’s knowledge or consent. In these applications, Watkins requested that the PUA benefits be transmitted via direct deposit to his financial accounts or via pre-paid debit cards mailed to addresses under his control. Once the funds were received, Watkins withdrew the funds as cash from ATMs at various financial institutions in the Middle District of Louisiana. Watkins received over \$95,000 in fraudulent unemployment benefits.

U.S. Attorney Gathe stated, “Those who take advantage of COVID relief benefits, of any type, will be dealt with harshly by this office. I want to thank our prosecutors and our federal and state partners for their hard work bringing this offender to justice.”

“Theft of federal pandemic funds intended to help those in need will not be tolerated,” said Dr. Joseph Cuffari, Inspector General for the Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General (OIG). “We will continue to work with our partners at the State of Louisiana OIG, the Department of Labor OIG, and the U.S. Attorney’s Office to identify and aggressively investigate allegations of fraud, protecting the integrity of programs funded by the taxpayer.”

Louisiana Inspector General Stephen Street commented, “Once again we see that whenever there is a public emergency, fraudsters will be there to pounce. Chaz Watkins used the names and personal identifying information of incarcerated prisoners and deceased individuals to fraudulently enrich himself and deprive others who had a legitimate need for these emergency benefits. Now Mr. Watkins must bear the criminal consequences for his actions. The Louisiana Inspector General will continue to relentlessly pursue fraudsters who take advantage of an emergency to steal from the taxpayers.” Street added, “I want to thank United States Attorney Ron Gathe and his staff, and our partners at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security OIG and US Department of Labor OIG for another successful criminal outcome.”

This matter is being investigated by the Louisiana Office of State Inspector General, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General, and the U.S. Department of Labor, and is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Kristen Lundin Craig.