



BUTTE COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY



MICHAEL L. RAMSEY
District Attorney

MARK MURPHY
Chief Deputy District Attorney

JASON WINES
Chief Investigator

PRESS RELEASE

Embargoed until
June 3, 2021 @ 10:00 a.m. Press Conference

Jail Inmates and Others Charged with COVID -19 Unemployment Insurance Fraud

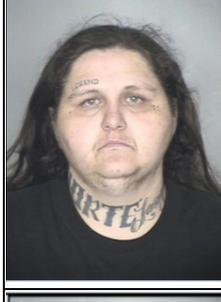
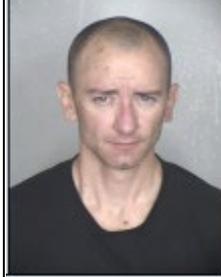
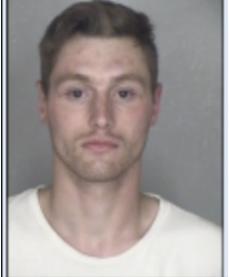
Butte County District Attorney Mike Ramsey announced today that fifteen (15) Butte County Jail inmates and their outside supporters were charged this week with felonies for fraudulently applying for COVID-19 related unemployment financial aid. In several instances, inmates received over \$30,000 in unemployment benefits while they were incarcerated in the Butte County Jail. Over \$369,000 in fraudulently obtained unemployment monies have thus far been identified. Ramsey said that in addition to charges of fraud, several of those arrested also face charges for identity theft.

Ramsey said his office became aware of the potential fraud soon after the State of California began issuing expanded COVID-19 unemployment relief benefits. Ramsey said his office quickly created a team of investigators and prosecutors to look into the allegations. Starting with a list of Butte County Jail inmates, evidence was found showing numerous people were working together to fraudulently obtain financial benefits.

Ramsey said investigating these cases was extraordinarily complex and time-consuming. The 15 people charged today were just the first wave of cases Ramsey expects to see in the months to follow. Ramsey said his office is currently investigating over 20 additional cases. The investigation to date has uncovered \$369,513.72 of money fraudulently obtained.

While his office was investigating the fraud, Ramsey said it became clear this was a statewide issue. Due to the ease of the online application process and the lack of controls or checks and balances at the state EDD, the program was ripe for abuse. Once local agencies identified the problem they reached out to EDD for the records needed to verify the theft. Ramsey stated the number of suspected fraud cases throughout the state created an information request backlog with EDD, slowing the local investigations. Ramsey said unlike many states, California did not create a system to cross-reference applications for benefits with those currently incarcerated in prisons and local jails. Ramsey said his team has expended hundreds of hours investigating these cases with search warrants into suspect's homes, bank accounts, social media accounts, and cell phones.

Attached are the subjects of today's announcement:

 <p>Javier Amescua 24 Gridley, CA \$30,000.00; +\$111,289.00 ID theft Inmate <u>Possess stolen car + battery</u></p>	 <p>Lakeisha Barnett 27 Yuba City, CA \$31,380.00; +\$27,300.00 ID theft Helper</p>	 <p>Israel Contreras-Gallardo 35 Chico, CA Attempted Fraud Inmate <u>Dissuading a witness w/ threats or violence</u></p>
 <p>Brandon Crowder 26 El Dorado Hills, CA \$17,078.00 Inmate <u>Domestic violence</u></p>	 <p>Jose F. Garcia 31 Gridley, CA \$30,000.00 Inmate <u>Car theft + failure to appear</u></p>	 <p>Luis Gaspar 23 Orland/ Chico \$30,000.00 Inmate <u>Battery + resisting police</u></p>
 <p>Benjamin Jacoboni 31 Chico, CA \$16,178.00 Inmate <u>Drug sales + felon w/ ammo</u></p>	 <p>Norma Navarro 42 Gridley, CA \$12,788.00; + \$28,200.00 ID theft Helper</p>	 <p>Lacey Tolson 33 Chico, CA \$13,873.00 Helper</p>
 <p>Carolyn Ball 34 Oroville, CA \$5,436.00 fraud; +\$15,540.00 ID theft; Inmate <u>Felony warrants (different counties) + drugs in jail</u></p>	 <p>Angela Frias 33 Chico, CA \$15,900.00 Inmate <u>Drug sales, felon w/ firearms, child endangerment</u></p>	 <p>Rachelle Ann Velasquez 23 Chico, CA \$1,740.00 Inmate <u>Drug sales</u></p>
 <p>Michael Curry 38 Paradise, CA \$5,696.00 Inmate <u>Felon w/ firearm</u></p>	 <p>Robert Dwelle 24 Paradise, CA \$11,148.72 Inmate <u>Drug sales, illegal firearms</u></p>	 <p>Monica Ruggiero 33 Chico, CA \$21,458.00 Inmate <u>Murder + drug sales</u></p>

Ramsey said those charged were part of at least two groups who conspired together. While the majority of the ID thefts were against a person known to the suspects, there were instances of ID theft from strangers. Ramsey says people should monitor the following:

- 1) Credit reports
- 2) An increase in mail from EDD
- 3) Any correspondence from EDD in other person's names
- 4) Sanitize your social media accounts to remove personal identifying information
- 5) Check with your employer for any verifications of employment in your name

Anyone who feels they may be a victim of EDD fraud, but have not received suspicious mail from EDD, notify EDD directly at 1-800-229-6297 or www.edd.ca.gov.

If you have received suspicious mail or other notices from EDD, notify the District Attorney's Office at 1-866-DAFRAUD (1-866-323-7283), or scan and email the suspicious documents to dafraud@buttecounty.net