

# East St. Louis Woman Charged In \$800,000 Unemployment Insurance Scam

by Dan Brannan, Content Director  
June 25 2021 3:20 PM



**EAST ST. LOUIS** – A federal grand jury in East St. Louis returned a seven-count indictment charging Talfanita M. Cobb, 49, of East St. Louis, with participating in a scheme that fraudulently obtained more than \$800,000 in unemployment insurance benefits from three states.

The indictment charges Cobb with conspiracy, mail fraud, and aggravated identity theft. Some of the money allegedly came from federal pandemic unemployment compensation funds.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has caused tremendous pain and suffering in our country,” said U.S. Attorney Steven D. Weinhoeft. “So many Americans have lost their lives, and many thousands more face severe economic hardship after losing their jobs. For those most affected, the federal government has approved special funds. It is reprehensible that unscrupulous individuals would take advantage of these new programs to line their own pockets. These individuals should take note: we will investigate and prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law.”

According to the indictment, Cobb’s co-conspirators used stolen identities to apply for unemployment insurance benefits in Arizona, Ohio, and Texas. Each application allegedly listed Cobb’s address in East St. Louis as the address of the applicant. The applications were approved, and unemployment benefits were issued to the individuals whose names and identities had been stolen.

Some of the funds were allegedly deposited directly into a bank account controlled by Cobb. After a short time, however, the co-conspirators were able to acquire debit cards, which the states issued in the names of the identity theft victims and allegedly mailed to Cobb in East St. Louis.

The indictment alleges that, after she received the unemployment debit cards in the mail, Cobb went to various ATMs in the Metro East and withdrew funds from the cards. She is accused of transferring some of the funds to a co-conspirator using Bitcoin and keeping a percentage of the money for herself.

Inspector in Charge William Hedrick of the United States Postal Inspection Service’s Chicago Division stated, “Individuals who use the U.S. Mail to steal public benefit money designated for citizens suffering unemployment as a result of a pandemic must be held accountable. The Postal Inspection Service and its law enforcement partners are committed to investigating and prosecuting those who wish to exploit relief funding for their own personal benefit.”

An indictment is merely a formal charge against a defendant. Under the law, the defendant is presumed to be innocent of the charges until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt to the satisfaction of a jury.

Cobb is scheduled to be arraigned by United States Magistrate Judge Mark A. Beatty at 10 a.m. on Wednesday, July 7, 2021, at the federal courthouse in East St. Louis.

Mail fraud and conspiracy to commit mail fraud are punishable by up to 20 years in prison and fines of up to \$250,000. Each of the aggravated identity theft charges carries a mandatory two-year prison sentence, which must be served consecutively to any sentences imposed on the fraud counts.

In addition, Cobb could also be ordered to pay restitution. The investigation was conducted by the St. Louis Offices of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service and the U.S. Department of Labor – Office of the Inspector General, with assistance from the Arizona Department of Employment Security – Office of the Inspector General, Special Investigations Division, and the Southern District of Illinois Coronavirus Fraud Task Force. The Task Force consists of various federal and state law enforcement agencies that have dedicated resources to investigating fraud relating to pandemic relief funds.

The Illinois Attorney General's Office is also a member of the Task Force and has dedicated both investigators and prosecutors to help with these cases. The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Scott A. Verseman.