

The Columbus Dispatch

CRIME

Columbus mother and daughter among 15 indicted in pandemic unemployment assistance scheme



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Columbus Dispatch

Aug. 20, 2025 | Updated Aug. 22, 2025, 9:18 a.m. ET

Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

Three Columbus-area women, including a mother and daughter, are among 15 people facing charges in a multi-million-dollar COVID-19 unemployment fraud scheme.

They are charged with manipulating the state Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program to inflate payouts and clear application issues for applicants in exchange for kickback payments.

The scheme involved a network of recruiters and resulted in over \$7 million in fraudulent payments.

Three Columbus-area women, including a mother and daughter, are among 15 people who have been indicted by a grand jury in connection with a sprawling COVID-19 unemployment assistance scheme that prosecutors say resulted in the fraudulent release of more than \$7 million in benefit payments.

Markeya Smith, 28; her mother, Brandy Smith, 45, both of Columbus; and Shirkara Reggins Cochran, 42, of Canal Winchester, face a slew of charges in connection with the scheme, including engaging in corrupt activity, money laundering, theft, and telecommunications fraud, according to Franklin County Common Pleas Court filings.

The grand jury also indicted 12 other co-conspirators in connection with the scheme.

According to the Ohio Office of the Inspector General, the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services hired outside contractors to help process claims and release money for the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program, which was "inundated" with unemployment compensation claims during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In October 2022, ODJFS launched an investigation and discovered what it called suspicious activity concerning Markeya Smith, who worked for Randstad as a contractor and was assigned to the Ohio PUA program. ODJFS accused Markeya Smith of improperly clearing application issues and fraudulently inflating the incomes of PUA applicants so they could receive larger weekly payouts, according to the state Inspector General's office.

During that same month, ODJFS also found that Brandy Smith, a former ODJFS customer service representative, improperly approved PUA claims even after she was no longer a customer service representative with the department.

After reviewing ODJFS records, investigators said they found "significant overlap" on the PUA claims accessed by the two women. Additionally, investigators found that both women were acquaintances of Cochran, who worked as a subcontractor to ODJFS with [Insight Global](#), an employee staffing agency.

Cochran is also accused of improperly accessing PUA claims and disbursing money that applicants were not entitled to, and using a fake name during her employment with Insight Global. Prosecutors allege that she used her mother's name, "Cherita," during her employment.

During the course of their investigation, authorities say they found that the three women would receive cash or electronic payments from PUA applicants in exchange for improperly releasing PUA funds. Investigators also found that the trio would use recruiters to find additional PUA applicants who wanted to have issues removed from their PUA applications or who wanted their claims to be fraudulently inflated, according to the inspector general's office.

Investigators also noted that even after Markeya Smith was terminated from her position as a customer service representative with Randstad, she still had access to the ODJFS benefits system and released nearly \$3 million in PUA benefits before her access was revoked, according to the inspector general's office.

The three women have not entered a plea yet, and no attorney is listed for any of them.

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