



The City of New York
Department of Investigation

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REPORTERS/EDITORS PLEASE NOTE: THIS IS A CORRECTED RELEASE AND UPDATES WITH THE CORRECT CHARGE THAT HEAVEN WEST PLED TO. PLEASE SEE YELLOW HIGHLIGHTED CORRECTIONS.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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FINAL TWO DEFENDANTS PLEAD GUILTY IN FRAUD INVOLVING COVID-19 HOTEL ROOM ISOLATION PROGRAM

Jocelyn E. Strauber, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Investigation ("DOI"), announced today the guilty pleas of the two remaining defendants in a four-defendant scheme to defraud the New York City COVID-19 Hotel Room Isolation Program of over \$400,000. The United States Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York prosecuted this case.

Today, HEAVEN WEST, 22, of Atlanta, Georgia, pled guilty in the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, before U.S. Magistrate Judge James L. Cott, to one felony count of Wire Fraud. Upon conviction, this offense is punishable by up to 20 years in prison. WEST is scheduled to be sentenced on May 18, 2023.

On Tuesday, December 13, 2022, TATIANA BENJAMIN, 28, of Brooklyn, N.Y., also known as "TA BANKS," and "LYRIC MUVAA," pled guilty in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, also before Magistrate Judge Cott, to one felony count of Conspiracy to Commit Wire Fraud. Upon conviction, this offense is punishable by up to 20 years in prison. Sentencing is scheduled for May 18, 2023.

DOI Commissioner Jocelyn E. Strauber said, "With these guilty pleas, all four defendants are held accountable for their misuse of a City program intended to serve healthcare workers, COVID-19 patients and others impacted by the pandemic, for their personal profit. DOI, our fellow City agencies, and our law enforcement partners are committed to protecting City resources and ensuring that those resources benefit their intended recipients, and I thank the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York for their prosecution of this matter and the City Office of Emergency Management for their cooperation on the investigation."

According to the indictment to which BENJAMIN and WEST pled guilty, they participated in a scheme to defraud the City's Hotel Isolation Program, which provided free hotel rooms for patients convalescing from COVID-19 and for healthcare workers who needed to self-isolate due to exposure, by falsely claiming to be healthcare workers, misappropriating actual healthcare workers' identifying information, and using Facebook to advertise fraudulently-obtained hotel rooms to individuals who did not meet the Hotel Isolation Program's requirements.

BENJAMIN and WEST were charged in October 2021, along with two other co-defendants, TATIANA DANIEL and CHANETTE LEWIS. On November 22, 2022, DANIEL pled guilty to one felony count of

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Conspiracy to Commit Wire Fraud; that release can be found here: <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/doi/press-releases/2022/November/22Daniel11.22.2022.pdf>. On December 2, 2022, LEWIS pled guilty to two counts of Conspiracy to Commit Wire Fraud; that release can be found here: https://www.nyc.gov/assets/doi/press-releases/2022/December/23Lewis_12022022.pdf. The October 2021 arrest release can be found here: <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/doi/press-releases/2021/October/COVID-19HotelFraudPR.10.05.2021.pdf>.

Commissioner Strauber thanked U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York Damian Williams and his staff for the prosecution of this matter, which was handled by Assistant United States Attorney Michael Neff of the Complex Frauds and Cybercrime Unit; and Jonathan Mellone, Special Agent-in-Charge, New York Regional Office of the U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General and his staff for their partnership on the investigation. Commissioner Strauber also thanked New York City Emergency Management Commissioner Zachary Iscol and his staff for their cooperation on the Hotel Isolation Program investigation.

At DOI, the Hotel Isolation Program investigation was conducted by DOI's Office of the Inspector General for Emergency Management, Confidential Investigator Hope Stagnaro, under the supervision of Assistant Inspector General Aleksandro Tilka, Deputy Inspector General Arturo Sanchez, and Inspector General Audrey Feldman. The investigation was supervised by Deputy Commissioner/Chief of Investigations Dominick Zarrella and First Deputy Commissioner Daniel G. Cort.

DOI is one of the oldest law-enforcement agencies in the country and New York City's corruption watchdog. Investigations may involve any agency, officer, elected official or employee of the City, as well as those who do business with or receive benefits from the City. DOI's strategy attacks corruption comprehensively through systemic investigations that lead to high-impact arrests, preventive internal controls and operational reforms that improve the way the City runs.

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