



The City of New York
Department of Investigation

JOCELYN E. STRAUBER
COMMISSIONER

180 MAIDEN LANE
NEW YORK, NY 10038
212-825-5900

Release #09-2024
nyc.gov/doi

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2024

CONTACT: DIANE STRUZZI
(212) 825-5931

DEFENDANT SENTENCED FOR DEFRAUDING COVID-19 HOTEL ROOM ISOLATION PROGRAM

Jocelyn E. Strauber, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Investigation ("DOI"), issued a statement on today's sentencing of one of four defendants who defrauded the New York City COVID-19 Hotel Room Isolation Program by illegally obtaining and renting out hotel rooms that were set aside for healthcare workers and convalescing COVID-19 patients. This prosecution was part of a larger case that involved more than \$400,000 of fraud against the program. DOI investigated this case with the United States Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, which handled the prosecution, and the New York Regional Office of the U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General.

CHANETTE LEWIS, 32, of Brooklyn, N.Y., was sentenced by United States District Court Judge Lewis A. Kaplan in the U.S District Court for the Southern District of New York to three years in prison and three years of supervised release and ordered to pay \$289,536 in forfeiture and \$360,330 in restitution.

Co-defendants HEAVEN WEST, 23, of Brooklyn, N.Y., TATIANA BENJAMIN, 29, of Queens, N.Y., were sentenced on February 1, 2024. DOI's statement on that sentencing can be read here: https://www.nyc.gov/assets/doi/press-releases/2024/February/05Benjamin_West.02.01.2024.corrected.pdf TATIANA DANIEL, 29, of Brooklyn, N.Y, will be sentenced at a later date.

In late 2022, LEWIS, BENJAMIN and DANIEL pled guilty to one count of Conspiracy to Commit Wire Fraud and WEST pled guilty to Wire Fraud. LEWIS also pled guilty to a second count of Conspiracy to Commit Wire Fraud for unlawfully obtaining benefits from the New York City Housing Authority ("NYCHA").

Commissioner Jocelyn E. Strauber said, "During the pandemic, this defendant exploited a COVID-19 safe-lodging program for her personal profit; today she faces the consequences of her criminal conduct. I thank New York City Emergency Management for reporting this matter to DOI and our federal partners for their commitment to protecting public resources and ensuring they reach their intended recipients."

The Hotel Room Isolation Program, which was funded by the City and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, was created to provide free, safe lodging for healthcare workers who believed they were exposed to COVID-19 as well as qualifying individuals who either tested positive, believed they were infected, or needed to isolate from a loved one who tested positive.

According to the indictments, to which LEWIS, WEST, BENJAMIN and DANIEL all pled guilty, the defendants participated in a scheme to defraud the Hotel Room Isolation Program in a variety of ways in 2020. They falsely claimed to be healthcare workers, misappropriated actual healthcare workers' identifying information, and used Facebook to advertise fraudulently-obtained hotel rooms to individuals who did not meet the Hotel Isolation Program's requirements. LEWIS worked at a particular call center that handled phone calls and certain reservations for the Hotel Isolation Program. They bragged in some of their Facebook messages to each other about making money from the scheme.

DANIEL also committed COVID-19 pandemic fraud in several other respects: She operated a fraudulent document mill through which she sold fabricated COVID-19 test results; committed unemployment benefit fraud in multiple states; and illegally obtained COVID-19 loans funded through both the United States Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program and Economic Injury Disaster Loan program.

In the NYCHA fraud between July 2020 and October 2021, LEWIS submitted fabricated documents that included purported judicial Orders of Protection, letters from a District Attorney, and letters from doctors attesting to alleged medical issues in order to obtain public housing benefits for her customers.

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 U.S. Attorney Michael Neff of the Complex Frauds and Cybercrime Unit. She also thanked New York Regional Office of the U.S. Department of Labor - Office of Inspector General Special Agent-in-Charge Jonathan Mellone and his staff and NYCEM Commissioner Zachary Iscol and his staff for their cooperation in the investigation. She also thanked NYCHA Chief Executive Officer Lisa Bova-Hiatt and Chief Operating Officer Eva Trimble and their staff for their cooperation.

At DOI, the Hotel Isolation Program investigation was conducted by Confidential Investigator Hope Stagnaro, in the Office of the Inspector General for New York City Emergency Management, and supervised by Assistant Inspector General Aleksandro Tilka, Deputy Inspector General Arturo Sanchez and Inspector General Audrey Feldman. The NYCHA investigation was conducted by Special Investigator Delcine Doscher in DOI's Office of the Inspector General for NYCHA, and supervised by Assistant Inspectors General Robert Joyce and Enio Bencosme, Deputy Inspector General Gregory DeBoer, and Inspector General Ralph Iannuzzi. Both investigations were supervised by Deputy Commissioner of Strategic Initiatives Christopher Ryan and Deputy Commissioner/Chief of Investigations Dominick Zarrella.

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.

**DOI's press releases can also be found at twitter.com/NYC_DOI
Know something rotten in City government? Help DOI Get the Worms Out of the Big Apple.
Call: 212-3-NYC-DOI or email: Corruption@DOI.nyc.gov**