Beat: News

Social Security Employee Sentenced to 4 Years in Prison

Defrauding the Social Security Admin.

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USPA NEWS - Eric Lemoyne Willis, 46, of West Sacramento, was sentenced today to four years in prison for conspiracy to defraud the United States, theft of government property, and aggravated identity theft, U.S. Attorney Phillip A. Talbert announced.

According to court documents, Willis and co-defendants, Darron Dimitri Ross, 36, of Charlotte, North Carolina, and Joshua Bilal George, 39, of San Diego, conspired to steal public money from the Social Security Administration (SSA). Willis worked as an SSA Operations Supervisor in Sacramento and Lodi from 2015 until his departure in January 2018. During this timeframe, Willis used his authority as an SSA employee to access the confidential Social Security records of numerous Social Security beneficiaries. These records contained personally identifiable information (PII) including names, addresses, Social Security numbers, dates of birth, account numbers, family information, and benefit payment amounts. Willis would seek out PII for beneficiaries who used direct deposit for payment of large benefits. Willis then gave this PII to Ross who resided in North Carolina.

Ross and George's roles in these crimes included calling numerous SSA field offices across the country and using the stolen PII to impersonate the beneficiaries. Ross also opened at least 44 online bank accounts under fraudulent identities to receive diverted SSA benefit payments. If Ross succeeded in convincing an SSA representative that he was the beneficiary, he would request that the beneficiary's direct deposit account be changed to one of the conspirators' fraudulent accounts. The SSA then proceeded to deposit benefit payments into the fraudulent account. The conspirators then withdrew the funds at ATMs and spent additional funds using debit cards associated with the accounts. Ross also transferred a portion of the stolen proceeds to Willis for his participation in these crimes. After the fraud was detected, SSA stopped depositing benefit payments.

The SSA has identified over 200 beneficiaries nationwide who were targeted by these crimes, and it suffered at least $696,912 in fraud losses caused by the defendants' offenses. The defendants spent the proceeds of their crimes on, among other things, trips to Las Vegas and luxury items including Rolex watches. During sentencing, the Court ordered Willis to pay full restitution to the SSA.

"Mr. Willis abused his position with SSA for his personal gain, setting up an elaborate scheme with co-conspirators that defrauded those who needed it the most of over $690,000 in Social Security benefits. This sentence holds him accountable for his egregious criminal actions," said Dawn Nolan, Special Agent in Charge, San Francisco Field Division, of the Social Security Administration Office of the Inspector General. "I thank the U.S. Attorney's Office for prosecuting this individual and protecting the integrity of SSA programs."

This case is the product of an investigation by the Social Security Administration – Office of the Inspector General, Department of Homeland Security – Office of the Inspector General, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert J. Artuz is prosecuting the case.

Ross and George pleaded guilty to similar charges and are scheduled to be sentenced by U.S. District Judge William B. Shubb in August 2022. They face up to 20 years in prison for wire fraud and up to five years in prison for conspiracy to defraud the United States. Ross also faces a mandatory sentence of two years in prison for aggravated identity theft, consecutive to any other sentence imposed. Each of these offenses also carries a maximum fine of $250,000. The actual sentences, however, will be determined at the discretion of the court after consideration of any applicable statutory factors and the Federal Sentencing Guidelines, which take into account a number of variables.

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Wendy writes for the United States Press Agency and is a former columnist with the Fulton County Expositor, Wauseon, Ohio.

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UPA United Press Agency LTD
483 Green Lanes
UK, London N13NV 4BS
contact (at) unitedpressagency.com
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