Amtrak OIG investigation leads to three guilty pleas in $3.5 million pandemic relief fraud scheme

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RIVERSIDE, Calif. — Three California residents pleaded guilty this week to wire fraud for their roles in a scheme that bilked approximately $3.5 million from the Paycheck Protection Program, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office, Central District of California.

Daryl D. Knighten Jr., 34, of Perris, pleaded guilty Thursday to one count of wire fraud. Vanessa M. Williams, 37, of Corona, and Denise Mata, 36, of Moreno Valley, each pleaded guilty Tuesday to one count of wire fraud. All three are scheduled to be sentenced on January 14, 2027.

According to the U.S. Attorney's Office, from March through August 2021, the defendants submitted fraudulent PPP loan applications for themselves, family members, associates, and applicants they recruited. The applications falsely claimed the applicants were self-employed, contained fraudulent tax documents, and falsely certified that the loan proceeds would be used for permissible business purposes.

Lenders approved PPP loans for the defendants and more than 100 co-schemers. According to prosecutors, co-schemers paid kickbacks to the defendants after receiving funds through the scheme. The defendants and their co-schemers used the proceeds for personal benefit rather than allowable PPP expenses and later submitted fraudulent documents seeking loan forgiveness.

Knighten admitted to causing at least $145,550 in losses to the PPP program. Williams and Mata admitted to causing losses of at least $187,497 and $201,642, respectively. Federal prosecutors estimate the scheme caused approximately $3.5 million in losses.

"We hope these guilty pleas send a clear message that those who exploit emergency relief programs for personal gain will be held accountable," said Basil Demczak, Special Agent in Charge of Amtrak Office of Inspector General's Western and Central Field Offices. "We appreciate the strong partnership among the investigative agencies and prosecutors involved and remain committed to pursuing those who defraud taxpayer-funded relief programs."

Amtrak OIG conducted the investigation in support of the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee Task Force, with assistance from Homeland Security Investigations. The case also received support from the task force's Pandemic Analytics Center of Excellence, which applies advanced analytical and forensic technologies to assist inspectors general and law enforcement agencies investigating pandemic relief fraud.

Anyone with information about suspected pandemic-relief fraud can submit tips or complaints to the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee online at https://www.pandemicoversight.gov/contact/about-hotline.

Reports of fraud, waste, or abuse; criminal or unethical acts affecting Amtrak's property or operations; or mismanagement in Amtrak programs or operations can be made 24 hours a day via the Amtrak OIG Hotline at 1-800-468-5469 or online at https://direc.to/hPAu.

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