



NEWS RELEASE

Office of the Inspector General Ellen Biben

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Buffalo Man Collected Unemployment Benefits While in State Prison, Inspector General Finds

State Inspector General Ellen Biben today announced that state prison inmate Albert Weathers and his girlfriend, Lisa Conroy, pleaded guilty to a scheme in which Weathers stole thousands of dollars in unemployment benefits while he was behind bars.

An investigation by the Inspector General's Office found that Weathers illegally collected unemployment benefits 31 times while serving a prison sentence at Groveland Correctional Facility after Conroy used her home computer to file bogus unemployment claims for him.

"These two individuals took advantage of a system that was ripe for abuse, ripping off benefits that are intended for help people who are legitimately entitled to them," said Inspector General Biben. "I want to thank the State Department of Labor for their assistance in uncovering this scheme."

Appearing in Erie County Court this morning before Buffalo City Court Judge Penny M. Wolfgang, Weathers pleaded guilty to one count of grand larceny in the Fourth Degree, a Class E felony, while Conroy pleaded guilty to attempted grand larceny in the Fourth Degree and offering a false instrument in the Second Degree; both misdemeanors. Conroy, 39, of 629 Emerson Dr., Amherst, and Weathers, 37, formerly of Buffalo, also agreed to pay full restitution.

"I commend Inspector General Biben and the state Labor Department for uncovering this scheme to defraud the unemployment insurance system," said District Attorney Frank A. Sedita III, whose office is prosecuting the case. "Together, we were able to reach a speedy and just conclusion to this case."

During a seven-month period in 2009 and 2010, Weathers illegally collected \$8,773 in weekly unemployment checks of up to \$283 apiece. Conroy, a state Parks and Recreation senior engineering technician who met Weathers just one month before he was sent to state prison, would send money to Weathers after withdrawing unemployment benefits that were electronically deposited in Weathers' bank account.

Recipients of unemployment benefits, including Weathers, are required to submit weekly unemployment benefit certifications attesting to, among other things, that they are still unemployed and that they are ready, willing and able to work. These certifications are filed with and maintained by the New York State Department of Labor as official records.

The Department of Labor referred the case to the Inspector General after cross-checking unemployment benefit claims with computer records from the state Department of Corrections.

Weathers has one prior felony conviction. He was sentenced on March 18, 2009 to six months in jail and five years probation after pleading guilty to first degree criminal contempt. He violated his probation and was sentenced on Jan. 8, 2010 to one-to-three years in state prison. He is currently serving his sentence at Fishkill Correctional Facility.

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