

# [***7 Minnesotans accused in scheme to defraud pandemic food program go on trial***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BX5-RWK1-JC5B-G1NW-00000-00&context=1516831)

The Associated Press

April 29, 2024 Monday 9:12 PM GMT

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**Section:** DOMESTIC NEWS; STATE AND REGIONAL

**Length:** 621 words

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**Dateline:** MINNEAPOLIS

**Body**

MINNEAPOLIS — Seven people went on trial Monday for what federal prosecutors have called a massive scheme to exploit lax rules during the COVID-19 pandemic and [*steal from a program*](https://apnews.com/article/sports-health-travel-education-70d77fb2757d0b6fbc2012bf2c534a34) meant to provide meals to children in Minnesota.

The seven will be the first of 70 defendants to go on trial in the alleged scam. Eighteen others have already pleaded guilty.

Prosecutors have said the seven collectively stole over $40 million in a conspiracy that cost taxpayers $250 million — one of the largest pandemic-related fraud cases in the country. Federal authorities say they have recovered about $50 million.

Prosecutors say just a fraction of the money went to feed low-income kids, and that the rest was spent on luxury cars, jewelry, travel and property.

**THE ALLEGED PLOT**

The food aid came from [*the U.S. Department of Agriculture*](https://apnews.com/article/sports-health-travel-education-70d77fb2757d0b6fbc2012bf2c534a34) and was administered by the state Department of Education. Nonprofits and other partners under the program were supposed to serve meals to kids.

Two of the groups involved, Feeding Our Future and Partners in Nutrition, were small nonprofits before the pandemic, but in 2021 they disbursed around $200 million each. Prosecutors allege they produced invoices for meals that were never served, ran shell companies, laundered money, indulged in [*passport fraud,*](https://apnews.com/article/arrests-minneapolis-2d48601c7f4d1c8cdda29a48a6670f4c) and accepted kickbacks.

**THE BIG PICTURE**

An Associated Press analysis published last June documented how thieves across the country plundered billions in federal COVID-19 relief dollars in the [*greatest grift in U.S. history.*](https://apnews.com/article/pandemic-fraud-waste-billions-small-business-labor-f33cdb6d2a9f0dbee8716c349d82250a) The money was meant to fight the worst pandemic in a century and stabilize an economy in free fall.

But the AP found that fraudsters potentially stole more than $280 billion, while another $123 billion was wasted or misspent. Combined, the loss represented 10% of the $4.3 trillion the government disbursed in COVID relief by last fall. Nearly 3,200 defendants have been charged, according to the U.S. Justice Department. About $1.4 billion in stolen pandemic aid has been seized.

**THIS CASE**

The defendants who went on trial Monday before U.S. District Judge Nancy Brasel in Minneapolis are Abdiaziz Shafii Farah; Mohamed Jama Ismail; Abdimajid Mohamed Nur; Said Shafii Farah; Abdiwahab Maalim Aftin; Mukhtar Mohamed Shariff; and Hayat Mohamed Nur. They have all pleaded not guilty. Their trial is expected to last around six weeks.

“The defendants’ fraud, like an aggressive cancer, spread and grew,” prosecutors wrote in a summary of their case.

Prosecutors say many of the purported feeding sites were nothing more than parking lots and derelict commercial spaces. Others turned out to be city parks, apartment complexes and community centers.

"By the time the defendants’ scheme was exposed in early 2022, they collectively claimed to have served over 18 million meals from 50 unique locations for which they fraudulently sought reimbursement of $49 million from the Federal Child Nutrition Program,” prosecutors wrote.

**FUTURE CASES**

Among the defendants awaiting trial is [*Aimee Bock, the founder*](https://apnews.com/article/health-minnesota-covid-nutrition-cc55a566c806a29a7f2e64c762975a09) of Feeding our Future. She's one of 14 defendants expected to face trial together at a later date. Bock has maintained her innocence, saying she never stole and saw no evidence of fraud among her subcontractors.

**THE *POLITICS***

The scandal stirred up the 2022 legislative session and campaign in Minnesota.

[*Republicans attacked*](https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-health-minnesota-st-paul-government-and-politics-26a3cb54fc0fa3cf591185dfb44149b0) Democratic Gov. Tim Walz, saying he should have stopped the fraud earlier. But Walz pushed back, saying the state’s [*hands were tied by a court order*](https://apnews.com/article/health-sports-covid-st-paul-luge-a3441331f6abbde2ad12aefcee7b2197) to resume payments despite its concerns. He said the FBI asked the state to continue the payments while the investigation continued.

The Minnesota Department of Education now has an independent inspector-general who is better empowered to investigate fraud and waste.

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