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Five months' jail for man who tried to cheat MSF into disbursing Covid-19 related support funds



Chow Jia Chuan falsely declared that he had lost his job due to the Covid-19 crisis. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG



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SINGAPORE - An unemployed man who ripped off \$500 from a government support scheme that helped people affected by the pandemic and then tried to con another one soon after was sentenced to five months' jail on Thursday (Nov 19).

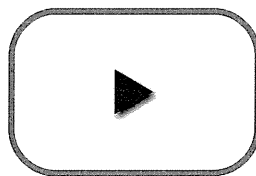
Chow Jia Chuan, 29, resigned from an executive position in IT firm Tabsquare in April but then claimed to have been retrenched.

He applied online for the Temporary Relief Fund four days before his last day at work, falsely declaring that he had lost his job due to the Covid-19 crisis.

The fund, which has since ended, helped Singapore citizens or permanent residents who needed immediate assistance with basic living expenses by giving them a \$500 payout.

One of the requirements is that applicants must have been retrenched or suffered a drop in personal income of more than 30 per cent due to the pandemic.

Chow's application was successful and he received \$500 from the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) on April 21.

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He then applied for a Covid-19 Support Grant on May 5, also declaring that he had lost his job due to the pandemic.

The grant supports people who lost their jobs as well as employees who were placed on involuntary no-pay leave or had their salaries reduced by at least 30 per cent for at least three consecutive months.

Singaporeans and PRs can get up to \$800 a month for three months if they meet the criteria.

Applicants have to submit supporting documents proving their eligibility, such as a letter of retrenchment or termination of contract.

The application period for the grant is projected to close on Dec 31.

Chow did not include any supporting documents in his application, prompting an MSF officer to ask him via e-mail to supply them.

He then forged a retrenchment letter purportedly written by Mr Siddharth Narayanan, the human resource business partner of Tabsquare and e-mailed it to the MSF officer on May 14.

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The officer contacted Mr Siddharth, who said that he had not issued the letter.

Chow applied for the grant again on May 21, a day after he had been told that his earlier application had failed.

He submitted the same forged letter together with his application.

Deputy Public Prosecutor Jeremy Bin said this was not processed, as the MSF officer had already determined that a false declaration had been made in the previous application.

A police report was lodged on May 27.

Chow pleaded guilty to three cheating-related charges. Two similar counts and one charge for forgery were taken into consideration during sentencing.

The court heard that Chow has refunded the \$500 he received from the MSF.

DPP Bin urged the court to impose a jail term of six months, saying that Chow had sought to exploit the pandemic and the Government's response to it for financial gain.

He also noted that Chow had displayed "persistent criminal behaviour" even after his May 5 application was rejected by seeking to cheat the MSF again in the May 21 application.

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Chow's lawyer, Ms Nicole Huang, said her client had committed the offences out of desperation to meet his financial needs and pressure from futile job searches.

District Judge John Ng granted Chow's request to defer his sentence until Nov 30 so that he can settle his personal affairs.

Chow could have been jailed for up to 10 years and fined for each offence.

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