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In Appalachia, A Lawyer's Vast Fraud Dogs Destitute Clients

By **Andrew Strickler** | July 14, 2019, 8:02 PM EDT

By the summer of 2007, Johnny McIntosh could barely walk, much less hold down a job.

At just 40 years old, McIntosh had a back injury from a public works job in his native eastern Kentucky, followed by a re-injury, debilitating pain, depression and suicide attempts.

His application for federal disability benefits, arranged through a flamboyant but well-regarded local lawyer named Eric Conn, was quickly approved. For years, McIntosh lived on a monthly check that by 2016 had grown to \$733.

But that May, a letter from the [Social Security Administration](#) informed him that his financial lifeline was being cut, and that all his medical records approved by a doctor Conn sent him to were being treated as fraudulent. Conn, it turns out, had been running the largest Social Security scam in U.S. history.

Today, McIntosh is one of thousands of people still trying to extricate himself from the rubble of [Conn's](#) racket — which included bribing an administrative judge to rubber-stamp benefit applications and paying off doctors — and convince the agency to restore their payments.

Now living as a squatter in a cabin without electricity owned by a relative, McIntosh has sold most of his possessions and says he feels "much older" than his 52 years.

CONN

BY THE NUMBERS

\$550M

SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS
CONN SECURED FOR CLIENTS

2,900

NUMBER OF AFFECTED
BENEFICIARIES

\$609K

CASH BRIBES PAID TO
ADMINISTRATIVE JUDGE

27 YEARS

FEDERAL PRISON SENTENCE

\$72.5M

RESTITUTION ORDER

6K-7K

CLIENT FILES UNCOVERED
LAST YEAR IN CONN OFFICE

SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE,
COURT RECORDS

"For a long time, it felt like I was being accused of stealing. I got harassing letters. There was a time the SSA was saying I owed them \$70,085, plus a nickel," he told Law360. "I'll never forget that number."

Four years have passed since the revelations of Conn's fraud led to the sudden suspension of checks for hundreds of people who came through Conn's wildly successful Social Security practice, at one time the largest in the state.

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