

Group seeks solutions for Iowans struggling to file for unemployment

By Linh Ta - April 20, 2020

Out of the 50 refugee clients she's helped file for unemployment, Abigail Sui said only 20 of them have received money from claims so far.

Language barriers, troubles navigating Iowa Workforce Development's website and phone complications have left some members of Iowa's refugee community without the money they need to support their families while they're temporarily laid off from work due to COVID-19, Sui said.



Iowa Workforce Development Director Beth Townsend speaks at a news conference April 9, 2020, in Johnston, Iowa. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

These are some of the struggles A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy, also known as "AMOS," hopes to bring to light during a virtual day of action with its members on Tuesday over Zoom.

AMOS, an organization made up of churches and non-profit groups is hosting a "virtual accountability action," so local legislators can hear about some of the barriers Iowans face filing for unemployment.

Scheduled speakers will talk about challenges like waiting weeks for claims to be accepted, waiting to connect with someone over the phone and barriers for non-English speakers. The event is open only to AMOS members and not for public viewing.

"We knew there were people really struggling to navigate the system," said Sally Boeckholt, a leader with AMOS and a member of First Unitarian Church of Des Moines. "There are real people being affected and sometimes those are the stories that don't really get heard."

Sui, who is a leader with AMOS and works for EMBARC, a non-profit organization that helps refugees, said the process for applying for unemployment claims is particularly cumbersome for their members, who may not have access to an electronic device.

When some of them call Iowa Workforce Development to file an unemployment claim over the phone, they're unaware that the phone will ring for three to five minutes and then go silent — signaling the call was put on hold and will be answered.

Instead, Sui said she herself struggled while helping her clients file for unemployment and hung up and tried calling again — assuming the silence meant the call didn't work.

"How do we expect people to know automatically (that) silence means you're supposed to wait?" Sui said. "How do you expect the person who doesn't write in the language to go check on the website, the resources and all of the timelines?"

Beyond access to online devices, Sui said there is a language barrier that compounds throughout the application process. Google translations of the site don't convert messaging clearly and some of her clients are missing important steps, like knowing they need to file on a weekly basis to receive their claims.

"It's very frustrating and stressful times because the families keep calling because they want to know where the money is, so they can manage to pay food and pay the bills," Sui said.

Beth Townsend, director of Iowa Workforce Development, said she held a conversation with AMOS on Friday to try to provide resources to help alleviate the challenges some Iowans may be facing while filing for unemployment.

She said the department works with Language Link, a translation service for phone calls, and Iowa Workforce Development is allowing English-speaking family members or friends to serve as translators.

So far, she said the department has done 475 calls in 24 different languages.

On average, she said the department is receiving thousands of calls a day, with Mondays averaging around 30,000 calls. Other than on Mondays, an average of 70% of calls are answered.

Townsend said the department has hired temporary employees and has 200 to 250 people who can answer calls at the same time.

“While we may not be able to get to people as quickly as we did before the pandemic, we are working, literally, night and day, seven days a week to provide assistance to all Iowans,” Townsend said in an email to Iowa Capital Dispatch.

Boeckholt said she’s appreciative of the work Iowa Workforce Development has done to help Iowans who are unemployed and she’s understanding of the department’s new workload.

She said the goal of the event is to highlight some of the challenges and offer help if there are simple solutions that can help remove barriers to filing for unemployment.

These are unprecedented times, including for Iowa Workforce Development, Boeckholt said. She hopes they can work together to help find a solution.

“We’re not trying to make their jobs harder,” Boeckholt said. “But maybe there’s some simple things we can lift up to make it easier for folks.”