

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Department of Employment Services

MURIEL BOWSER



DR. UNIQUE MORRIS-HUGHES

MAYOR

DIRECTOR

April 7, 2021

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Councilmember, Ward 4

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Christina Henderson
Councilmember, At-Large

Robert C. White, Jr.
Councilmember, At-Large

Trayon White, Sr.
Councilmember, Ward 8

Dear Councilmembers:

Thank you for your letter dated March 11, 2021. At the Department of Employment Services (DOES), we take our commitment to our residents and our unemployment claimants very seriously. We appreciate your concerns and would like to address each of your requests.

- 1. Backpay: “We urge DOES to plan a claims processing “blitz” in the next 30 days in order to expediently process all remaining claims from 2020 and the backlog of emailed weekly certification forms that resulted from recent IT errors.”**

The agency did not have IT errors that resulted in a backlog of weekly certification forms that were emailed to DOES. As a result of changing federal guidance, we have utilized a strategy of updating our system while also continuing to collect certification forms, which is a pre-requisite for receiving payments. This strategy allows DOES to have the proper documentation in place to facilitate payments to claimants, as well as ensuring the new federal benefits can be dispersed as quickly as possible.

DOES’ unemployment teams are working as quickly as possible to process all eligible claims. Since March 13, 2020, we have received over 170,000 individual unemployment compensation claims. Of that number 50,000 are not eligible and we have paid out over 110,000. Our staff continue to work tirelessly to process claims in the order that they are

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received. Additionally, DOES has hired 100 new contract staff adjudicators who will be concentrating on processing all remaining claims.

Similarly, the necessary updates that DOES is making to provide extended benefits under the American Rescue Plan Act will impact our ability to provide back pay. Our team is working to make these updates as quickly as possible and to limit the impact on existing claims. However, no “blitz” will be possible until these updates are made.

- 2. PUA: “Using robocall and texting tools, DOES should immediately notify all PUA claimants of their right to request a higher weekly benefit amount and provide them with instructions on how to do so. And we request a similar blitz on redetermination.”**

Regarding the request to notify claimants about their right to redetermination, as we have mentioned numerous times, each PUA claim is manually reviewed to determine:

- 1) If the PUA applicant is entitled to a higher weekly benefit amount; and
- 2) If the PUA claimant is eligible for back weeks.

The agency will continue to utilize a variety of tools to contact and notify claimants regarding information related to claims processing or updates. As it relates to PUA, the PUA monetary determination letter provided to claimants details the process for requesting a monetary redetermination for a higher weekly benefit amount. The UI newsletter provided to all claimants via email and our social media channels have also reiterated the process for requesting back weeks or a monetary redetermination. Based on Council’s request, we will also work to send a robocall and text message with information on these processes.

- 3. Out of State Wage Issues: “We ask that your agency immediately sit down with its counterpart agencies in Maryland and Virginia to request baseline rules that the District can apply when a claimant has wages from outside DC. Applying such guidelines would ensure efficient resolution for thousands of claimants in the greater Washington region.”**

The U.S. Department of Labor has provided clear guidance on when combined wage claims and stand-alone, traditional UI claims must be filed. The District has been following this guidance when determining that a claim must be transferred to another jurisdiction.

However, once a claim is transitioned to another jurisdiction, the District has no further control or authority over the claim. Our Interstate Program Coordinators continue to reach out daily to their counterparts in Maryland and Virginia and have made repeated follow up requests related to District workers whose claims are having difficulty in those jurisdictions. Ultimately, the Maryland Department of Labor and the Virginia Employment

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Commission are best positioned to answer questions regarding claims that have been transferred to their respective jurisdiction.

- 4. New Biden Administration COVID Package: “We ask DOES to issue clear, plain English language guidance about how the new package will be implemented and how benefits will be impacted.”**

We are currently reviewing the legislation and guidance from the U.S. Department of Labor to develop clear guidance and timelines for the new benefit extensions. We have provided initial information on system updates related to the new legislation, an American Rescue Plan Act fact sheet, and other guidance on both our website and social media. Additionally, on March 23, 2021, DOES shared with Council staff the aforementioned fact sheet on the new COVID package.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'U. Morris-Hughes', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Dr. Unique Morris-Hughes
Director, Department of Employment Services