



Council of the District of Columbia  
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October 9, 2020

Dr. Unique Morris-Hughes, Director  
Department of Employment Services  
4058 Minnesota Avenue NE  
Washington, DC 20019

Dear Director Morris-Hughes:

Thank you for a productive hearing on DC's unemployment compensation programs. The Department of Employment Services (DOES) is a front-line agency in DC's response to the COVID-19 public health emergency, and we know you have a lot to manage. The three hours you spent on September 30 with the Committee on Labor and Workforce Development and time you and staff members had to allocate to prepare for our questions is very much appreciated.

There is great public interest in your work and the agency's performance. One in five DC workers have filed for some type of unemployment compensation, and many are relying on those funds to survive. Forty-nine people testified live at the public witness segment of the hearing that occurred on September 16, and many more provided testimonies in writing and via voice mail messages. Even more workers reached out to the Committee with their questions and experiences by email, social media, and our online survey. One of the major takeaways from testimony is that DOES communications need to be strengthened to help claimants better understand both how programs work and how to engage with DOES to iron out issues with their claims. The feedback the committee received is that many workers appreciated hearing directly from you, and we hope you and/or agency representatives will continue this productive dialogue in future oversight hearings.

In the September 30 hearing, you agreed to follow-up on specific questions and data requests. Three of these requests I want to highlight and emphasize: **automatic extension of Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits, monetary redeterminations for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), and back pay assessments and payment for UI and PUA.**

Some of these questions were asked by my Council colleagues, and some came from the Committee. The questions are detailed below. We look forward to receiving DOES's responses on a rolling basis, **no later than October 23, 2020**. Please let the committee know if any questions require additional time.

#### **Automatic Extension of UI**

**Many workers who filed for UI at the beginning of the COVID-19 public health emergency in mid-March have reached the end of their initial 26 weeks of benefits.** Some states, including California and Massachusetts, tell claimants their UI benefits will seamlessly switch to

the additional 13-week Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) program if eligible. We are getting contacted by an increasing number of claimants who do not understand or know that they should apply for PEUC. They are also confused between PEUC and the Extended Benefits program.

The Committee asked: **How can DOES automate the 13-week extensions for UI claimants who are eligible for PEUC and Extended Benefits?** The Director said she would look into it. It would be advantageous both to individual households and to our city to have benefits uninterrupted so that workers can pay for their basic needs.

### **Monetary Redetermination of PUA claimants**

DOES was put in the difficult position of building a plane in mid-air with PUA. The program did not exist pre-pandemic, and it has been a lifeline for many independent contractors. In an effort to get money in the pockets of as many as possible, the agency decided to give an initial payment of \$179 a week and said that a monetary redetermination of benefits would happen soon after. Six months later, many PUA claimants are awaiting that reassessment. When the CARES Act added an extra \$600 a week it was manageable, but few households can survive on less than \$800 a month. **In the September 30 hearing, the Committee learned that DOES estimates that over 40,000 PUA claims have been filed, yet only 10 claims examiners work on PUA cases.**

The Committee asked: **How many PUA claimants have received an adjustment in their weekly benefit amount from the initial \$179 per week? When does the agency expect to complete the monetary and back pay redeterminations for current PUA claimants? Is there adequate staffing for PUA?**

### **Back Pay for UI and PUA**

Many claimants have approached the committee with questions about back pay for both UI and PUA. There is general confusion for UI claimants about whether back pay is automatically assessed or claimants need to make a formal request. For PUA, there is similar confusion. The Committee asked: **How many UI claimants have requested back pay, and what percentage of total UI claimants do they represent? How many UI claimants have received back pay? How many UI claimant requests for back pay have been denied?**

### **Additional Follow-Up Questions**

Please provide a copy of DOES's letter to DOL requesting a waiver of the Merit Personnel requirement for "adjudicators."

Please detail how many UI and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) claimants live in each ward.

How are PUA claimants informed of their monetary redetermination amount (for ex., in a mailed letter, email, portal message)? How many PUA claims have been denied?

How many workers have received compensation under the Shared Work program?

How many volunteers (i.e., DC government employees) currently work at DOES? In what roles?

How many grant-funded call takers are employed by DOES to assist the Office of Unemployment Compensation?

How many bilingual call takers are there in the Office of Unemployment Compensation and what non-English languages do they speak?

How much federal funding (from the CARES Act, FFCRA, or other sources) to use toward UI administration has DOES received, and how much funding will it have access to through reimbursement? Please provide an itemized list of each specific purpose of any funding (received or expected), the dollar amount (denote whether spent, encumbered, anticipated up-front funding, or expected reimbursement), and contractor name if relevant. For any expected or potential reimbursements from the federal government not included above, please provide the amount and specific purposes for which the funds will be used.

Thank you again for your collaboration. If you have any questions, please direct them to Legislative Counsel Margaret O’Hora via email at [mohora@dccouncil.us](mailto:mohora@dccouncil.us) or by telephone at (202) 724-8829.

Thank you for your attention to these questions.

Sincerely,



Elissa Silverman  
Chair, Committee on Labor and Workforce Development



Robert White  
Member, Committee on Labor and Workforce Development



Charles Allen  
Member, Committee on Labor and Workforce Development



Brooke Pinto  
Councilmember



David Grosso  
Member, Committee on Labor and Workforce Development