

Testimony of Freddy Wiggins
Before the Committee on Labor and Workforce Development
Council of the District of Columbia
Public Hearing Regarding:
Oversight of the Department of Employment Services
September 16, 2020

Hello. My name is Freddy Wiggins, and I am here today to share my story about obtaining unemployment insurance benefits.

I first applied for unemployment insurance on April 1st, and I began receiving benefits a week later. In my third week of receiving unemployment, I accidentally answered a question incorrectly on my claims card – a common mistake, I later learned – and my benefits stopped. I contacted D.O.E.S., and I was told that it could take up to 21 business days for D.O.E.S. to fix the issue in their system. It ended up taking almost eight weeks for the issue to be resolved.

During this time, I called D.O.E.S. two or three times every week. I often waited on hold for four or five hours just to be told that there was nothing that could be done to help me. I called D.O.E.S. more than fifteen times during this period, and not once was I able to learn anything new about why my issue still had not been resolved. When I asked for a supervisor, I was told there wasn't one.

In my fifth or sixth week of calling, I was told that my claim would be expedited and that someone would get back to me in four to five days. No one ever got back to me. This happened twice more. After the third time, I received an email with a very confusing questionnaire. I completed the questionnaire, but no one ever followed up with me.

My issue was finally resolved when I emailed the Director of D.O.E.S and explained what had been happening. She immediately got back to me and had a staffer help me. I received backpay a week later.

My experience with D.O.E.S. was extremely taxing. Over the almost eight weeks that I went without any income, I was at my wits end. I had no idea what was happening or how I would pay rent or any of my living expenses. I had to rely on free meal sites and loans from family members. While I did ultimately receive backpay, I am still in a deep financial hole that will take me a while to get out of.

Moving forward, I hope that D.O.E.S. will provide more training and tools to call center workers. It is absolutely ridiculous for people in dire situations to have to wait on hold for hours and ultimately receive no help. While some of the call center workers were nice, others had no customer service skills and were unsympathetic about my situation. This is unacceptable.

I hope that sharing my story will help lead to changes at D.O.E.S. so that others do not have to experience what I did. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.