

Testimony of Cynthia Spencer

**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

Good morning. My name is Cynthia Spencer and I'm here today to share my story about applying for Unemployment Benefits. In March, I lost my job working at a file clerk for a law firm because of the health pandemic. I first applied for Unemployment Benefits around April 20, 2020. I was denied on April 29, 2020. I tried calling DOES but was unsuccessful in reaching them. I held on the phone for hours - wanting to know why I was denied. I had to appeal the decision within 15 days, but I did not know how to file an appeal. I do not have access to a computer, and the library in my area was closed. Without the income from my job, and without unemployment benefits, I would not have been able to make it.

I reached out to the Legal Aid Society which I have been dealing with them since 2012 - I talked with Candis of Legal Aid and told her I need help with unemployment benefits. She talked to Attorney Andrew Patterson of Legal Aid, and he called me the following day. I explained to him my problem, and he explained that DOES said I did not qualify for regular Unemployment Benefits. But he asked if I applied for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Program, which I had no idea even existed. When I got the denial letter, DOES did not say I could apply for PUA. DOES needs to let workers know that there are other programs instead of just saying that Unemployment Benefits applications are denied. They should include information about PUA in the denial letter for example. So I applied for PUA and got a letter from DOES on May 2, 2020 that I was approved. But if it wasn't for Legal Aid Society - I don't know where I would be. I think DOES needs to do more to get the word out about PUA, and do more to make sure that people who qualify for PUA can get those benefits without needing help from a lawyer.