

**PUBLIC HEARING TESTIMONY
COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**

COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

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**PUBLIC OVERSIGHT HEARING ON
THE DISTRICT'S UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION PROGRAM
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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**Live Testimony Via Virtual Committee Hearing
conducted on
September 16, 2020**

Chairperson Silverman, Council Members, Council and Committee Staff:

Exactly six months ago today I was furloughed from all employment as an independent contractor due to the coronavirus pandemic and its effect on employer business operations and revenues. As the city's shutdown order went into full effect I was simultaneously laid-off as the coordinator of the D.C. Nightlife Council and a columnist at the Washington Blade.

I joined what is now 145,000 D.C. workers who applied for unemployment compensation with the D.C. Department of Employment Services (DOES), either as 'traditional' UI applicants or 'non-traditional' PUA applicants eligible for benefits and financed by the federal CARES Act.

DOES Director Dr. Unique Morris-Hughes is not testifying today but has instead submitted a statement. The director doesn't like to talk about real statistics or reveal meaningful data, and she fails yet again to provide any performance metrics on claims processed and claims partially or fully paid.

Here is what can be surmised based on agency public statements, through discussions with agency personnel, and by media reports:

- Tens-of-thousands of claims remain unprocessed;
- Approximately half of all processed applicants have not been paid the full benefits owed to them and which are now months overdue;
- Tens-of-thousands of processed claimants are owed weeks of retroactive \$600 weekly federal supplement payments;
- Tens-of-thousands of processed claimants are owed retroactive adjusted local benefit amounts throughout their unemployment period;
- All previously processed PUA claims for unemployment originating in March are unable to receive retroactive payments for that month until the computer system is 'fixed' because it is now too long ago due to the agency's failure to process those payments in a timely manner; and,
- Retroactive and adjusted payments not yet paid to tens-of-thousands of processed claimants total thousands-of-dollars owed to each recipient.

Staff would also quietly tell claimants the multiple months of agency public announcements that claims were being reviewed for back-week payments and local benefit adjustments were untrue and training had yet to occur.

Less than a month ago I became one of a lucky first and few who finally received partial payment of retroactive federal and adjusted local benefits months overdue.

These payments went unpaid despite being told by staff that my submitted documentation was among the most complete the agency had received.

I used no personal 'hook' or political connection to get my back-payments expedited but my social media exposure of agency deficiencies got attention. I doubt anyone else received personal phone calls from agency leadership referencing their tweets when being 'pulled out of line' for special attention.

Agency systems are so dysfunctional, however, that receipt of those long-overdue funds created new issues. My inquiries about these indecipherable and unexplained new problems have not produced response or resolution. I am now not receiving ongoing benefits in a whole new byzantine nightmare.

Palpable is the anger and growing is the despair among those simply trying to financially survive. A local worker online discussion group with nearly 10,000 members now features more inquiries about food pantries and less comments about unpaid unemployment benefits. Many have simply given up on ever receiving the relief they are due or the money they are owed.

Even this hearing today is an insult to the unemployed workers suffering the stark ineptitude of the District government. Nothing you will hear today is not known to you, yet inadequate remedy has been undertaken throughout this major crisis of massive proportions.

The Council authorized a massive sum of money nine years ago to replace the agency's 1970s-era technology. Nothing got done and this day came.

D.C. workers have been left in the lurch while watching local officials ignore them and our pleas for help. We have learned one painful lesson: There's a lot of big talk among you when times are good but very little action that those in need can count on when things go bad.

It's your job to make this work but to date your performance sucks.