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Committee on Labor and Workforce Development
Public Oversight Hearing on Unemployment 9/16/20

Good morning and thank you Council Members and committee staff for allowing me to speak with you today. My name is Zachary Hoffman and this morning I am speaking on behalf of the DC Bar and Restaurant Workers Alliance, we are an inclusive, worker-driven platform providing protection, empowerment, advocacy and tangible services to the bar and restaurant workforce. I serve as the Executive Vice President of this organization, and my testimony today will reflect the opinions of my organization and its members.

At the beginning of March 2020, it appeared that COVID-19 would indeed impact our region. I participated in a roundtable discussion with several District agencies, and fellow representatives of the restaurant industry. As far as DC Health and HSEMA were concerned, we were ready to deal with this crisis if and when it would show up at our door. What was not clear at the time for any of us was just how bad this pandemic would become. Closing bars and restaurants seemed likely, and the entire industry was hurled into an unprecedented crisis of uncertainty. On the afternoon of March 15th, I had filed for unemployment for the first time in my entire 12+ year career in restaurants both FOH & BOH; the entire process seemed foreign and wrong. What I and every other newly laid off, furloughed and now underemployed worker in the district found out, the system that is used to administer, file, implement and track unemployment benefits in DC is and continues to be one of the most ineffectual and tragic user interfaces to ever curse our screens since the first generation of government websites.

At the time of this hearing, workers are still waiting for benefits. Not a few, tens of thousands. The impossible to navigate PUA program, auto generated ineligibility claims, incorrect work history on file, being on hold for 9+ hours a day, un-returned emails, responses that contain inaccurate information, weeks and weeks of waiting for claims, incorrect benefit amounts, unreliable information on extended benefits, and more issues that I do not have time to name. This is what hard working Washingtonians were forced to endure and still struggle with during a pandemic. I was personally considered one of the "lucky ones". I waited only 6 weeks since my initial claim had been filed, called 5 times, with no answers and multiple hours on hold, and only sent 4 emails before I started to receive benefits. That scenario is considered a godsend to those I tell about my experience with UI. For weeks we were unable to get direct assistance or reliable guidance from the Department of Employment Services. We begged. We pleaded. We demanded. We hoped. All we got were hold lines that would drop dead at the end of the business day. When reaching out to alternative avenues to find support, even within the Mayor's office, the DC Council and other agencies, we were met with "Wait".

The scope and reality of this global pandemic is not lost on anyone. We are facing a crisis that few generations have the misfortune of dealing with. The challenges and struggles of Covid-19 will be felt for so much longer than any of us wish to. It is a time to rise to the challenge and get things done. It could be forgivable to be caught off guard and surprised at the amount of claims coming in for UI. DOES had stated early on, they were working with numbers of cases outside of their typical yearly average even in March. Nobody can prepare fully for a pandemic, it truly is a nightmare scenario. However, given the urgency and necessity of the unemployment rollout, it is clear leadership in DOES was either unable or unwilling to meet the challenge.

When I testified at another Committee on Labor and Workforce Development Hearings this January regarding Paid Family Leave in a personal capacity; it was clear there were potential issues with the UI portal and how tipped workers utilize District programs. Neither this committee or Director Morris-Hughes could give clear answers to questions at that time about implementation and administration of benefits provided by DOES, leaving one to conclude there has been a pattern of negligence and failure to properly fortify IT infrastructure that is critical to the implementation of benefit programs. Despite years and millions of dollars available to the department to properly develop and build a system that works, we are left with a complete and total lack of anything that could be considered usable. Throughout this process there has been a clear lack of leadership. At every point of contact, workers have been forced to wait and struggle due to the incompetence of this department and it failing to live up to its duty to protect workers in dire circumstances.

That is why today we are formally calling for the resignation of Director Unique Morris-Hughes from the Department of Employment Services. It is abundantly clear leadership is needed at DOES. It is also clear that leadership does not currently exist in the department currently. The Council must call for an independent investigation into all aspects of DOES that pertain to Unemployment Benefits. Understanding where breakdowns occurred, how they happened, and a full accounting of those responsible should be a top priority for that investigation.

Thank you for your time, I am available for any questions you may have.