

Sam Epps's Testimony Before the Committee on Labor and Workforce Development Wednesday, September 16th, 2020.

Good morning Councilmember Silverman, thank you for arranging this hearing. My name is Sam Epps and I am the Political Director of UNITE HERE Local 25. Over the last six months, almost all of our members have come to depend on the Unemployment Insurance system. Over 90% of Local 25 members are laid off – down from a peak of 98% in July -- and in general the hospitality industry in DC has been devastated.

For at least a portion of our members, Unemployment Insurance has been a lifeline. We would especially like to thank Alan Karonosky and Sara Herron Case and staff over at DOES for helping with weekly problems beginning in March. Because of their assistance, hundreds of our members have started receiving paychecks, and can stay afloat as a result.

But unfortunately, for many other members, serious problems remain. As a result, a significant portion of the Local's staff time is now dedicated to helping members with UI issues.

You will hear in detail from our panel about some of these cases. But I want to offer a few observations generally about what our staff has seen, and areas where we think there is room for improvement.

First of all, it is clear that DOES Staff is overwhelmed and understaffed on a system that is inadequate to handle the demands and volume of claims. This was crystal clear in the first few weeks of the pandemic, when members couldn't get through to officials, but even as the volume of cases has leveled out, it's clear DOES isn't equipped to handle the demand. This is not the fault of any individual staff member, all of whom we know are working extremely hard.

Second, the infrastructure of the online apparatus needs to be upgraded and optimized. In addition to an outdated and clunky interface, it relies too heavily on applicants having computer access and being tech savvy. Especially for our older members, that has presented significant challenges. With phone lines overwhelmed, applicants were told to use the online portal instead, but that led to more confusion for many individuals we spoke with.

The fact that the system is hard to access on mobile devices is also a major problem for our members who don't have computers. It's gotten even worse since school started, as many of our members only have one computer in their household, which their children need to use for school.

Finally, DOES needs to do a much better job of informing public and UI recipients about how to navigate the website, upload documentation, and changes they are making the unemployment program. It relies too heavily on email and information that's not presented clearly.

That said, we continue to appreciate the hard work DOES is putting in to making this heavily burdened program work. When it does, it literally saves lives. That's why we want to be partners in making sure it works even better. Thank you.