

# **Ronnisha Martin's Testimony Before the Committee on Labor and Workforce Development**

## **Wednesday, September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020.**

Good morning. My name is Ronnisha Martin and I am the intake officer at UNITE HERE Local 25. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March, I have led the Union's efforts to help our members secure Unemployment Insurance. While we have good relationships with many DOES staff, hundreds of our members have struggled because of dysfunction in the UI system. I would like to address some of these today.

As you've already heard, one of our biggest ongoing issues is that we have members not getting paid. Some of them, like Robert, still haven't been paid at all. Others, like John, still have weeks-long unpaid gaps that have left them in terrible debt.

For the first few months of the pandemic, it was almost impossible to reach anyone in the UI office. If members couldn't get through for the first 2-3 months, they are often denied backpay. They can't get it unless they can prove it, and proving it is almost impossible. Why should our members have known then that they needed to keep perfect records of every interaction with DOES officials, especially during the chaos of the spring and early summer?

We know that many DOES staff are doing their best, every day, but these issues are more than any one staff member can fix. They are about how the whole program is administered, and the burden it places on applicants.

In addition, people miss deadlines for certain requirements, and then can't get paid. It's very common for our members, especially older members and those who are not as tech savvy, to run into this issue. To get their back-pay, they have to go through an appeal. It takes 15 days to see if the appeal is approved, and if it's not it takes another 15 days to resolve. Basically, people -- whose families depend on them -- sometimes make minor mistakes which result in them having to wait a month to get UI.

One way to solve this is better communication. Every effort should be made to alert people of deadlines -- direct mail, texts, and email -- to help applicants who struggle with computer or Internet use. I can't count the number of members I've spoken to who don't check email regularly and missed a deadline because no one told them to.

Another common issue is people reporting their pensions and getting denied as a result, because they did not provide documentation in a timely fashion. Simply putting the request for documentation about pensions on the application is a simple way to make sure this happens less.

Badly designed applications, lack of follow-up, a long appeal process, and crazy expectations for record keeping all result in the same thing: people not getting paid. And people need to, desperately. The stories we hear every day about the impact this is having on peoples' lives is devastating. It is not our members' fault that the Coronavirus has done so much damage to their industry. But, it is our government's job to stop them from starving or becoming homeless as a result. That's what UI is meant to do, and it's why our members need this program to work better. Thank you.