

Testimony of Laura Gardner
Oversight Hearing of the Committee on Labor and Workforce Development
District's Unemployment Compensation Program During the COVID-19 Pandemic and B23-500, the
Unemployment Compensation Employer Classification Amendment Act of 2019
September 16, 2020

Good morning all,

My name is Laura Gardner. Thank you for allowing me to share my experience with DC's unemployment system today. I hope that all of our comments will help improve the system.

I've lived in DC for 14 years and have been a freelancer for the past 3 years. Things actually went quite well for me at the beginning of my unemployment journey! I applied for PUA on the first day it was open in April and believe it or not, I received my first payment only 5 days after I had applied. Great job to DOES on that! I was happy to receive the funds, but could not figure out how they had come up with \$779. I spoke with someone in the unemployment office, but they had no idea.

Luckily in early May, Freelance DC and Elissa Silverman put on a Facebook Live session that explained it all. We'd get \$179/week (plus the federal \$600) until someone reviewed our case and adjusted our amount accordingly. **Yet as of today, nearly 5 months later, I've never heard back with the results of my PUA application. I believe I am owed quite a bit of money!**

I'd like to also speak about the process of filing my weekly claims. I always struggle with the online form because **it doesn't make sense for freelancers**. The instruction sheet says "Gross Wages must be reported during the week you perform the work, even if you have not been paid yet." Immediately, I had – and still have – the following questions:

1. What about the projects I have where I'm paid for by the deliverable and not by the hour?
2. What about all of the hours I work that are not directly billable, such as when I work on designing an online course that I'll later sell?

At some point, I attempted to fill out the form in such a way that made sense to me and it triggered a phone call from the unemployment office. The lady I spoke with was nice, but she had absolutely no understanding of the life of a freelancer. We went in circles. I tried to explain that I had worked the previous week but hadn't actually made any money. She listened...and then repeated, so how much money did you make? She couldn't wrap her brain around my situation. She talked to her supervisor who also "didn't get it." I've always filled out the form to the best of my ability, **but to this day, there is no information on the instruction sheet that's specific to freelancers.**

The last thing I'd like to discuss is what's happened to me for the past 7 weeks. I have not received any pay during this time. I'm stuck in limbo land where I see a weekly note that says "Your claim has been received as of DATE. DOES will contact you if we need any additional information." Someone from DOES emailed me on August 18 with a form to fill out that was dated August 5. I completed the form immediately, emailed it back to her, and twice asked for confirmation that she received it, but never heard back. Just last week a letter appeared with the same form that I already filled out included!

In conclusion, based on my experiences, I would like to suggest that:

1. **Additional staff** be brought on to respond to all the PUA applications that have been filed since April.
2. **Additional guidance and instructions be provided to freelancers** for filling out the weekly claims form.
3. **Increased and improved communication.** I've never once received an email back from DOES throughout this process. I've appreciated the Facebook posts from the DOES, but there does not appear to be any staff to respond to the questions and comments raised in response to those posts.

Thank you for your time today.