

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 22, 2020

Secretary Jonathan Satter
Office of the Secretary
4050 Esplanade Way
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0950

Dear Secretary Satter:

As you begin your new role overseeing Florida's unemployment insurance program, we urge you to prioritize the following pressing matters: to recognize the serious implementation issues that have led to the overall failure of the unemployment insurance program in Florida, to address these issues immediately, and to be transparent with your plan of action.

As you are aware, tens of millions of Americans are filing unemployment claims as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Worry is intensifying across the country for those who have lost their incomes in the recent weeks, and often the only real relief available to families is the promise of unemployment benefits and assistance expanded and extended by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. In Florida alone, as of April 21, over 1.5 million Floridians have filed unemployment claims since mid-March.

The CARES Act significantly expanded eligibility for unemployment compensation, increased benefits by \$600 per week through July 31, and extended the duration that workers can claim benefits to a maximum 39 weeks. The legislation also importantly qualifies self-employed workers, part-time workers, employees without paid sick leave, other workers known as "gig workers", as well as those with insufficient work history for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) if COVID-19 causes them to become unemployed. These benefits are fully federally funded and are seriously needed by Floridians who have unexpectedly lost their jobs and livelihoods to the pandemic through no fault of their own.

Congress passed the *CARES Act* including these provisions on March 27, yet for weeks Florida Congressional offices have been inundated with desperate phone calls and emails from thousands of individuals across the state who are struggling to make rent, pay their medical bills, and feed their families. These individuals are shamefully being ignored and dismissed by the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO). Concerns from Florida residents include the application website continuously crashing, eligible workers under the CARES Act being denied their benefits outright, and applicants being unable to access the status of their request or told to resubmit their claims after weeks of patiently waiting. Floridians have been attempting to apply for unemployment since March – but with no website and dead phonedlines at the DEO, it has been nearly impossible.

Yesterday, we were incredibly disturbed to see newly-released U.S. Department of Labor data that discloses that nearly 3 of every 4 Floridians who managed to file claims between mid-March and early April are still waiting to have them processed. This is one of the worst rates in the entire country. We are sure you realize that this is unacceptable and negligent of the Florida state government and the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO), and something must be done about it immediately.

As the newly appointed overseer of the deeply flawed unemployment system in Florida, we urge you to prioritize implementing the critical changes needed to improve the state's unemployment benefits program. Floridians must receive this aid to survive. Without critical unemployment assistance from the state, communities will suffer, and the state economy will expeditiously falter.

By taking the following recommendations and others, the significant backlog in cases can be addressed. We urge you to increase the pace of hiring additional staff to process this unprecedented leap in unemployment claims. You must also update and increase the capacity of the outdated Florida unemployment benefits portal, CONNECT, to handle the increased traffic from unemployment claims. During this time of dire economic uncertainty, Floridians must not be forced to wait for weeks before receiving a response, or spend hours calling the DEO without the ability to speak to a representative for assistance, or spend significant time applying for benefits only to be continuously disconnected and forced to restart the process.

We recognize that Florida's state unemployment system was plagued with serious issues long before the coronavirus crisis, many of which were reportedly done to intentionally limit earned benefits and publicize deflated unemployment rates to misleadingly portray a strong workforce. However, it is time for the DEO to turn over a new leaf and begin supporting Floridian workers with consistent transparency.

Given the dismal performance of unemployment benefit processing and distribution in Florida up to this point, we ask for immediate response to the following questions:

- How many unemployment claims have been processed in Florida thus far?
- What is your expectation for when Pandemic Unemployment Assistance will be implemented in the state of Florida?
- When can you assure that any Floridian who has applied for unemployment compensation will receive their payments in a timely and regular manner?
- What is your expectation for when the DEO will pay eligible candidates their assured \$600 benefit? Will these payments be simultaneously delivered with the standard unemployment insurance benefit?
- Are you going to permit retroactive payments for all unemployment benefits for Floridians who have not yet filed for unemployment compensation because of the archaic application system?

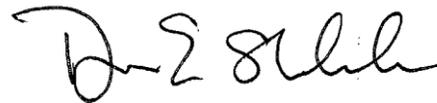
- What steps are you taking to improve the unemployment application process? What additional staffing are you bringing on to process the spike in claims, and what improvements are you making to the web application to apply for claims?

Again, it is critical that the DEO work to address these matters in a timely manner as the crisis continues to impose day-to-day struggles on working families who find themselves filing for unemployment to simply stay afloat. We look forward to productively working with you in the future to ensure the protection and security of Floridian residents across the state.

Sincerely,



Debbie Mucarsel-Powell
Member of Congress



Donna Shalala
Member of Congress



Kathy Castor
Member of Congress



Stephanie Murphy
Member of Congress



Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress



Ted Deutch
Member of Congress



Lois Frankel
Member of Congress



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