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Economic Matters Committee Hearing

HB4 - Unemployment Insurance - Recovery of Benefits - Refund of Payments

**Position: Favorable**

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Chair Wilson, Vice Chair Crosby and members of the Committee  
Thank you for the opportunity to provide a perspective on HB4.

When Speaker Jones and President Ferguson issued the directive for staff to leave the legislative complex on March 12, 2020 due to the pandemic, none of us knew what to expect. An immediate result of the pandemic was that unemployment began to soar, causing the number of unemployment claims to reach unprecedented levels.

Working remotely, we began to hear from constituents about problems trying to obtain their unemployment benefits. As is normal for legislative staff, we began to reach out to the Labor Dept. for help. The Labor Dept. was understandably overwhelmed and set in place various processes for staff to follow.... from sharing databases, to the use of special forms to fill out and eventually access to a liaison assigned to our district.

As the pandemic deepened, we could sense a growing desperation among more and more constituents.

Descriptions of their attempts to obtain unemployment benefits included being physically and mentally drained, losing all hope, waiting months for answers, being on hold on a phone for hours only to be hung up on, struggling, battles.

We heard from single moms, students, restaurant workers, senior citizens (70 and a heart patient), medical professionals, technology company employees and hundreds of others since March 2020. Almost every single one of our constituents was civil and patient, hopeful in their requests for help. We heard that the lack of benefits was causing hunger and other problems so we shared food bank locations, rent and business grant information and other helpful resources. I know your office staff was doing the same thing.

The Veronica C case rose to the top of the list as the most challenging case we had. When Veronica C contacted Delegate Watson in mid-August, 2021, it seemed like such an obvious problem to solve. She came to us after trying for nine months to get the \$3440. back that the state owed her. We immediately contacted the Labor Dept. using their form, and contacting our Liaison. I remember thinking this shouldn't take too long.

As Delegate Watson noted, Veronica C did not get a check issued until November, 2021, three months after contacting our office and a full year since the overpayment occurred.. Between August and November,, 2021, we sent dozens of emails back and forth with Veronica and the Labor Dept. What I called the looping nightmare of a phone system that Labor encouraged us to use, left me scratching my head.

Veronica C. spent the entire year either trying to get her money back or worrying about whether she would get it back. She was enormously patient but frustrated and incredulous that the matter was taking so long. From our perspective, we were flummoxed by the inability of the department to return the money. We told her that we would not let her down, that we would stick with her until she received her money but we joined in her frustration especially when she was told to continue to "just wait."

Our liaison told us the case was closed, the Benefits Control Unit (BPU) was the only unit who could assist, BPU told our constituent, "Just wait. We know we took your money, but we can't find it."

The requirements embedded in HB4 will allow claimants to get an answer in a timely manner, to help ease their concerns and to get them the money they are due, their own money back. The reporting mechanism will help members of the General Assembly to see how widespread the problem is and decide if further action is required.

Shellie L wrote "We need a voice." I'd like to express my appreciation to Delegate Watson for being that voice. I ask that you lend your voice on behalf of countless residents who have found themselves in the same vulnerable position as Veronica C, by finding a Favorable report on HB4.

Thank you for your time and consideration.