

Testimony of Thomas Kennerly
Before the Committee on Labor and Workforce Development
Council of the District of Columbia
Public Hearing Regarding:
Oversight of the Department of Employment Services
September 16, 2020

Good morning/afternoon. My name is Thomas Kennerly, and I am here today because I would like to share my story about applying for unemployment benefits.

I first applied for unemployment insurance on April 22, 2020. I did not hear anything until May 3, when DOES told me that they had received my application and would be in touch if they needed any other information. I then entered a pattern with DOES where they would request additional documents from me and I would promptly provide those documents.

I did not understand why DOES kept requesting additional paperwork and yet would still not release my benefits, so I began calling them. I had to call over 20 times before someone responded to me. I then entered a new pattern of DOES representatives reaching out to me to ask for more paperwork and documents, but never providing clear information about why I wasn't receiving funds. On June 2, someone from DOES told me that I had claims open in Maryland and Virginia as well as DC. I told her this is not true, and she said she could clear this up and I would receive funds by the end of the week. I wouldn't receive my funds for over one month after that. I then began receiving e-mails from a different DOES representative with yet another series of document requests. I was asked to provide a W2 that doesn't exist, and at one point was told that if I didn't provide requested documents within 20 minutes of receiving an e-mail, my unemployment claim would be closed.

I did not receive a break until I attended a Facebook webinar with the DOES director in late July. I asked her how DOES is supposed to treat cases that have been escalated multiple times and explained that this had happened to me, but my funds were still being held up. Several days after the webinar, Randy Mills at DOES called and said he would resolve my matter and release my

funds. This was the best news I received in months, and I finally began receiving money about three months after I initially applied. This was a huge weight off my shoulders. I am very grateful to Mr. Mills, Legal Aid, the Washington Post and MSNBC for helping me get something that I was entitled to.

My experience with the Department of Employment Services has been demeaning and degrading. I was entitled to unemployment benefits and was humiliated and made to suffer. I still suffer financially because of this. Applying for unemployment insurance was a humbling experience. I would take a job at DOES to ensure that no one has to suffer the way I did.

The Department of Employment Services can improve its services to workers, like me, by listening to what people are actually saying when they apply for unemployment. Don't promise that you will escalate or call someone back within 24 to 48 hours and then not follow through on that. I ask DOES representatives to think of the people applying for unemployment as their family members and to treat them accordingly. No person should ever have to suffer the way I did. Always peace and blessings wishing everyone well.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony about my experience with the Department of Employment Services.