

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 1, 2020

The Honorable Eugene Scalia
Secretary of Labor
U.S. Department of Labor
200 Constitution Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20210

Dear Secretary Scalia:

At a time when the coronavirus pandemic has forced businesses to shut down and has brought our economy to a virtual stand-still, it is absolutely imperative that the millions of Americans who are eligible for unemployment benefits receive every dollar to which they are entitled as quickly as possible. These benefits are absolutely essential to ensuring that families all over this country are able to feed their families and keep a roof over their heads.

As the scale and scope of the economic fallout stemming from this horrific pandemic comes into focus, it is abundantly clear that programs overseen by the Department of Labor (the Department) will be stressed as never before. This past week alone, a record-breaking 3.3 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits, and it has been estimated that the unemployment rate could reach as high as 30 percent by the end of June.

To address this national emergency, Congress passed the bi-partisan Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (H.R. 748, the CARES Act) that includes the largest expansion in unemployment benefits in our nation's history. This legislation includes an additional \$600 to every weekly unemployment benefit and the expansion of eligibility so that the self-employed, gig workers, independent contractors, and workers with irregular work histories are entitled to benefits for the first time in history.

That is the good news. The bad news is that due to the unprecedented increase in demand, there are increasing reports of jammed phone lines and crashed websites at unemployment offices across the country.

During these incredibly stressful times, it is our obligation to make sure that every eligible American is able to apply for unemployment benefits as efficiently as possible and that their benefits are sent to them as soon as possible.

Financially stressed Americans should not have to spend hours on the phone waiting for someone to process their application or answer their questions. People who have lost their jobs during this pandemic should be able to successfully apply online without technical difficulties or websites crashing.

As you know, Congress recently provided substantial funding to hire workers and improve technology in order to get unemployment benefits out as quickly as possible. In that regard, we

urge you to make sure that every unemployment office in the nation has the necessary staffing and technology to address the unprecedented number of requests for benefits that are coming in each and every day. We understand that implementing the CARES Act will require a joint effort between the Department and the states, and we expect the Department to do everything within its power to support states in quickly getting benefits to eligible Americans.

We appreciate your taking the time to speak with us about some of our concerns on March 30, 2020 and the commitment you made to working closely with states to quickly get them the funding and administrative support they need to implement the CARES Act and to process the new influx of claims. To continue that conversation, we would like you to respond to the following questions no later than April 3, 2020:

1. What is your plan to ensure that eligible Americans can apply for expanded unemployment benefits quickly, applications are processed quickly, and checks are sent quickly? How are you supporting states in their efforts to do this?
2. Please inform us as to the level of new staffing you are bringing on board to the Department in order to make sure that unemployment checks go out as quickly as possible.
3. Do you have a plan to make sure that eligible Americans are able to receive their benefits within two weeks of applying? If yes, please share your plan with us. If no, please let us know how long you expect it will take for eligible Americans to receive their benefits and what Congress could do to speed up the process.
4. What actions are you taking to prevent unemployment websites from crashing, and how are you supporting states to improve their technology systems to prevent website crashes?
5. What are you doing to substantially reduce wait times for unemployment benefits over the phone and to prevent busy signals at state unemployment offices, and how are you helping states to expand their capacity to process claims?
6. How long will it take for the Department to distribute federal funding for unemployment benefits to the states under the Families First Act Coronavirus Response Act and the CARES Act?
7. Please provide an update on which states have made agreements with the Department to access the funding and programs authorized in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act and the CARES Act.
8. Will the Department of Labor establish a federal Unemployment Insurance webpage with a FAQ for applicants and recipients, an explanation for applicants and recipients on their benefits package, and information on how to apply in each state, including links to states' online applications? If yes, how long will this take to complete? If no, please explain why.

9. What is your plan to ensure that unemployed workers, no matter their computer literacy level, English proficiency, or disability, can readily access their benefits?
10. When do you expect the Department to issue guidance to clarify how self-employed individuals, including independent contractors and gig workers, can access benefits?
11. How is the Department working to ensure that the Unemployment Insurance Interstate Connection Network (ICON) has the necessary capacity to support the increased number of claims and to process them quickly?

Thank you in advance for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Charles Schumer
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator