



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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Ritchie: State's Broken Unemployment System Needs to be Fixed Immediately

PATTY RITCHIE May 7, 2020



It has been nearly two months now since businesses across the state were forced to shut their doors due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since that time, my office has received thousands of phone calls from people struggling to file for unemployment.

I fully understand these are unprecedented times, the demand for assistance is overwhelming and that the New York State Department of Labor is under tremendous pressure. However, it is unacceptable that people who filed for unemployment in mid-March

still have not seen a dime. To say these people are struggling would be an understatement. Most who reach out are in tears, cannot buy food to feed their families, can no longer afford the medications they need to stay healthy and in many cases, are seeing the small businesses they've worked so hard to build being destroyed.

This week alone, my office has heard from nearly 500 people who have found themselves in these situations, through no fault of their own. Many of these applicants have been left hanging with no way to check on the status of their claim. When they do receive a call from the Department of Labor, they cannot get any direction or answers and instead are told to be "patient." Simply put, this is a slap in the face to these individuals who have been waiting weeks, and in many cases, close to two months for the benefits they are entitled to.

Just as concerning is the fact that my office has heard from a number of people who have received via mail the personal information of other applicants—including their Social Security number. This is putting added stress on people who are already at their breaking point and now have to worry about their identity being compromised. My staff and I are doing all we can to be helpful to those who are in these very serious situations. In fact, we have gone so far as to volunteer to be trained to help process claims at the Department of Labor, however, we were not taken up on our offer.

It has become abundantly clear in recent weeks that the system to file for unemployment is beyond broken and that steps taken to address the issues within the department are not working.

The issues relating to the unemployment system have not received sufficient attention. In recent days, the Governor has enlisted the help of industry titans such as Bloomberg, Gates, and Schmidt to address issues relating to health care, the economy and education. Meanwhile the unemployment system falters, leaving people to languish—in many cases for

nearly two months—without receiving a dollar.

As such, I am calling for the Department of Labor Commissioner to step aside and for the administration to appoint an individual with a similar cache to lead an effort to address the backlog and get money in the hands of hardworking New Yorkers immediately. Clearly, this system needs to be re-imagined and the state cannot wait any longer to do so.