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To Whom It May Concern,

As requested, I am writing to explain my recent experience with the Ohio unemployment system, in hopes it will help the committee make upgrades to the system to better serve Ohioans throughout the state. After speaking with several coworkers and others deeply affected by the health and economic devastation of COVID-19, I have found my experience is not unique.

I work for the City of Cincinnati, where over 500 employees were furloughed effective Sunday, April 5th. I filed for unemployment the first week I was eligible using the mass COVID code, as instructed by my employer. Though the application process detailed on the cheat sheet my employer provided directly from the unemployment website was not the same as the process I walked through, the online prompts were fairly straightforward, and I experienced no issues making my initial claim. My first two weeks of payments were approved and paid immediately, and I was relieved I was experiencing none of the issues we had all heard about on the news and during Governor Dewine's press conferences.

Unfortunately, when attempting to file a weekly claim on April 18th, my experience went awry. This was the same weekend the State elected to make updates to the website, which resulted in the website being down for almost all of Sunday, April 19th. I either wasn't able to log into the system at all, or when I was able to get in, the system was extremely glitchy, timed out in the middle of trying to file countless times, and kicked me out completely. I tried to call for assistance, but after several failed attempts to make contact past the automated system, I started scouring social media to verify if others were having the same experience. I found hundreds of complaints from other Ohioans having the same issues with the website, and decided to table it for the day and try again on Monday, April 20th.

I would like to note, it took the State a full 24 hours to put out any widespread notification the website was down, which seems unfortunate on the one day of the week most everyone was attempting to file at the time. Since then, we have been asked to file on certain days based on the first letter of our last name, which seems to have helped. However, the communication, as throughout most of my experience with this process, has been very poor and lagging severely. The messages the system generates are often conflicting. I have, on several occasions, received back-to-back notifications sent minutes

apart with conflicting information, and it is very unclear which messages we should be heeding and which we should be ignoring.

I was finally able to log in on Monday, April 20th. but my claim for the week of April 18th was no longer showing as able to be filed, and the status for the week showed Break in Claim. After searching the internet further to find what this may mean because the information on the website at the time was very sorely lacking, I again found numerous others having the same issue. Some had been lucky enough to get through by phone, and were told the issue could only be cleared by making contact with a representative at ODJFS. Until the message was cleared, I would not be getting paid for that week, and possibly the weeks that followed. That week and the following week, I spent several hours every day calling any ODJFS number I could find, never once succeeding in making contact with a representative. It is not an exaggeration when I say I called upwards of 800 times over 10+ hours within two weeks. I was completely consumed with trying to make contact, and my mental wellness was greatly impacted at that time. I have three children, ages seven and under, and the stress of not knowing if I would be able to provide for them was often overwhelming. My entire world had unexpectedly been flipped upside down within a matter of weeks through no fault of my own, but I trusted the process while we were reassured repeatedly we would be taking care of. As time went on, the words being spoken and what I was actually experiencing felt like very different things, and I experienced a feeling of growing desperation that was a nightmare.

In trying to be proactive, I reached out to the City of Cincinnati's HR Department, as they had instructed us they had access to view the system. Unfortunately they were unable to assist and advised they had heard of the same issue from several other employees, and recommended I keep calling. I reached out to my State Representative's office as well as to an individual my husband knew from high school who works for the State, both of whom were swamped with requests similar to mine, promising to pass the information along and help any way they could. I tried to leverage social media to reach anyone at the State level or at ODJFS, as well as submitting requests online on the State's website. It was an endless loop of dead ends, where the online chat feature simply sent you to a FAQ sheet, which confirmed I needed staff intervention to clear my issue, the phone lines going nowhere, and anyone wanting to help feeling totally helpless from the lack of resources provided to them as well.

When it came time to file for April 25th, I had to reopen my claim and provide an explanation as to why I had a break in claim the week prior. There was a significant delay in having that application approved, as it appears those applications must be approved manually, which held up my payment for that week for almost a full additional week. By this point, I had received notifications on my account that advised I indicated I was unavailable for work. To be clear, I filed no differently than I had the first two weeks, nor did I indicate I was unavailable. I believe the glitches in the system during the update that was, for whatever reason, scheduled on the heaviest filing day of the week forced hundreds, if not thousands into claim statuses they didn't file under, and overwhelmed the phone lines further when those individuals were desperate to fix the issue.

My claims did restart after my application was reopened and approved manually, but I was not paid for the April 18th filing until Tuesday, May 12th. I cannot express the helplessness I have felt at this process and trying to make contact with a single individual at unemployment for weeks to discuss any of this delay. Correcting an issue from a website glitch should never take almost four weeks. Even after all this time, I have still never heard from anyone at the State. I am very anxious at the thought I may run into another issue in the future that will be equally as challenging to resolve.

While it is admirable the State wants to preserve the integrity of the filing system and prevent scamming, almost a million Ohioans thrown unexpectedly into the system seems to call for unprecedented solutions. The weeks/months of delays for tens of thousands of filers have severe consequences in our daily lives. With the mass COVID filing code in play, I humbly suggest a solution that allows those filing under the code to skip filing weekly. While the code is in play, rather than indicating claims are still needed, it may be helpful to provide a claims section on the website where filers can indicate when to STOP claims. The job statuses of many of us are not expected to change until mid-to-late June at the earliest, and possibly longer, especially if the next relief package extends the additional CARES funding for unemployment. As long as the job search request is suspended, it doesn't seem efficient to continue overloading the website and phone lines with claims when it is evident nothing is changing in the near future.

I know the State has been working to address the issues, but it is clear there is still a lot of progress to be made. I recognize there are no easy solutions, but I cannot stress enough that my experience is not unique, nor even the most severe of cases. Thank you Representative Abrams and your staff for doing everything you can to ensure our issues are addressed and heard. My experience with your office is the only time throughout this process I have felt seen and treated as though I am a mother doing my best to provide for my family, and not just a number in the system. I am hopeful the committee will make strides in improving the process and system for many still struggling.

Respectfully,

Carrie Howell