

Testimony of Breanna Holland Ways and Means Committee

Chairman Merrin, Vice Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Rogers, members of the House Ways and Means Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience with Ohio's unemployment process in the wake of the COVID-19 health crisis as part of your fact-finding process under House Bill 614.

My name is Breanna Holland. I am 23 years old and a resident of Marysville, Ohio. I come to you today not only on behalf myself, but several members of my immediate family and the hundreds of thousands of Ohioans struggling through Ohio's frustrating unemployment application process. When Ohio issued its stay-at-home order in mid-March, I was unable to work as a server at the Half Pint in Marysville and lost the only source of income I had to provide for myself and my 3-year old son, Jaxson. And while the overburdened system seems to have, at times, ground to a halt, myself and hundreds of thousands of out-of-work Ohioans must be able to have the minimum resources to feed their families, pay their essential bills and maintain a roof over their heads. As such, I thank you for taking the important steps to identify and fix Ohio's unemployment application process.

My experience with Ohio's unemployment system started the day before Ohio's restaurants were officially closed to dining by Order of the Ohio Department of Health. At the time, I learned that my restaurant would be closed due to COVID-19, and I would not be making an income. I was not officially terminated, but I simply could not work because my employer could not operate under the constraints of ODH's order.

I immediately applied for unemployment. ODJFS denied my unemployment benefits under the apparent argument that I had not "lost" my job and that I could still work, even though my place of employment was closing, and has remained closed throughout the last couple of months. The system simply does not account for the loss of employment income due to the State's ODH order.

For three weeks, I proactively tried to reach someone at ODJFS to work through this issue by both phone and through the website. I spent all day everyday calling and calling and calling ODJFS. I could not reach a person. I could not leave a message. There was no call queue. The message to me, and many of Ohioans, was simply that the agency was experiencing too many calls and to try again later. While I tried to reach the agency by phone, I also simultaneously tried unsuccessfully to reach someone through the chat feature on ODJFS's website. The chat feature was not available no matter how many times I refreshed my browser. Another challenge I experienced with ODJFS was with the notifications to my profile on the ODJFS website. You can only read these notifications once, and if they ask for additional information, it gives you a very short window (about 2 days) to respond with follow-up information, or you have to start the whole process over again.

After spending countless hours, every day for three weeks in this futile effort, I desperately reached out to my state representative for help. Thankfully, she was able to help me get through

the initial logjam, and I started receiving payments. The fix was not permanent, however, and I've experienced more payment interruptions.

But not every Ohioan can reach out to their state representative to assist them with unemployment application processing, and that cannot be, and should not be, a fix for our broken system. I am one of the lucky few who could engage my state representative, but my sister, countless friends, family members, and thousands of Ohioans have not been so fortunate. I applaud your bipartisan efforts to fix this unemployment application process, and I thank you for considering my testimony.

Respectfully,
Breanna Holland