Written remarks of
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Representative Frazier and members of the Ways and Means Committee, my name is Sarah Sheehan. I lead state and local public policy for the State of Ohio at Amazon Web Services (AWS). On behalf of AWS, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony to the Committee outlining our assistance to the State of Ohio with unemployment insurance and the technology that supports this vital benefit.

I suspect you all know Amazon.com well. Our retail operations have been vital during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have been focusing on high-priority items to ensure the fastest delivery of household staples, medical supplies, and other high-demand products as well as reserving the first hour of grocery pickup at Whole Foods Market stores nationwide for customers 60 years and older, those with disabilities, and those whom the CDC defines as high risk. As Amazon continues to react to the pandemic, we have also instituted over 150 process updates in our warehouses to keep our workers safe.

You may not be as familiar with Amazon Web Services (AWS). Just over 14 years ago, Amazon began offering access to cloud-based infrastructure services based on our expertise in building and running highly scaled technology infrastructure and service-oriented software. Today, AWS provides agility, cost-savings, and security benefits to millions of active customers in 190 countries, including tens of thousands of customers in government organizations, educational institutions, and nonprofits, including here in Ohio with engagements at the Department of Public Safety (DPS) and the Department of Administrative Services (DAS).

Ohio has also welcomed several investments by our company to support our customers. Amazon has invested over $5b in infrastructure investments and employs over 8,500 people in Ohio. The state is home to one of our AWS regions, a cluster of resilient data centers that provide cloud computing services or IT over the internet with pay-as-you-go pricing for customers around the world to build and run highly scalable, secure, and cost effective applications.

The State of Ohio, like many others across the country, is experiencing tremendous public health and economic tragedy due to COVID-19. A very pressing need has been to quickly scale up the capacity of unemployment insurance systems to meet the very high number of claimants. As is the case across the country, the State of Ohio maintains a 15-year old mainframe system and call center capabilities are limited to an in-person model dating to the time of rotary phones.

In addition to traditional unemployment claims, the federal government created a new program to provide unemployment assistance for contract employees, such as ride share and third party delivery drivers, called Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA). This new program created a class of employees that had never before been eligible for assistance. This not only resulted in increasing numbers of callers into state call centers, but presented a challenge for how the existing mainframe system would both handle the volume of new claims, as well as establish system rules for those claims.

Working with the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services (ODJFS), AWS immediately began work on deploying a digital call center to support remote, work from home agents through Amazon Connect for new PUA claimants. Additionally, based on ODJFS challenges with traditional UI callers experiencing dropped calls, AWS built cloud-based overflow capabilities to support the existing infrastructure to prevent calls from being dropped.

AWS began working the week of April 20th with ODJFS to quickly standup the new PUA call center capabilities. The system went live at 7am EST on Friday, April 24th and logged over 155,000 calls by 5pm that same day. This level of activity points to the unprecedented demand for benefits in Ohio. The AWS team continues to expand functionality of this new call center with additional chat bot and voice command functionality.

In addition to the state of Ohio, AWS has assisted states such as Kentucky, West Virginia and Rhode Island with their unemployment claims challenges by building scalable, cost effective solutions in a secure environment. In addition, we have worked with school districts, such as the Los Angeles Unified School District, to provide online learning support and elected officials in the States of Michigan and New York to connect citizens to free mental health applications. As we continue to face the multi-faceted challenges of this pandemic, we also continue to build solutions in the cloud that help keep people safe and connected.

The AWS team continues to be a dedicated partner with the State of Ohio during this challenging time. We are here to provide guidance, share our customers experiences from across the country and problem solve with you.

Thank you for your time today and please reach out to me if you have questions. I can be reached at Sarahshe@amazon.com