



Sponsor Testimony: Sub. H.B. 614

State Representative Tracy Richardson, District 86

Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee

July 21, 2020

Good morning Chairman Coley, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Craig and the members of the Government Oversight and Reform Committee. Thank you for allowing me and my joint sponsor the opportunity to provide testimony on Sub. H.B. 614. This bill was drafted with a single vision and purpose...to help Ohioans! We recognized the overwhelming need to identify the problems associated with the Unemployment Compensation Application Process and decided to pursue solutions that would ease the frustration of Ohioans.

COVID-19 has had a widespread and dramatic impact upon all of us. Since March, more than 1.3 million residents of our great state have filed for unemployment. This staggering number has led to countless calls and emails from our constituents expressing difficulties in applying for and receiving unemployment compensation. Quite frankly, Ohioans have been crying out for our assistance during these difficult times in order to support themselves and their families. Sub. H.B. 614 is our response to their pleas for help.

An example of a call for help came from my constituent Lia. Lia explained that she started filing for unemployment in March when the restaurant she manages furloughed her. Lia told me she had been unemployed for over 2 months battling the system and was barely getting by with money provided to her by friends via PayPal. She was dependent upon donations from friends and family to survive for months because our government closed businesses due to COVID19. Her experience with the application system was and currently is unacceptable. Something needs to be done!

The introduced bill presented before the House Ways and Means Committee expressed the intent to study and reform the application, processing and administration of Ohio's unemployment compensation system. With the help of the committee, we listened to compelling testimonies detailing the difficult process of navigating the cumbersome and often broken unemployment website. We heard about the almost non-existent customer service, hours of wait times, lack of information, disconnections and the weeks of anticipating compensation with none received. Employers shared how tedious and inflexible the verification process is and technology experts offered their recommendations to make the system more efficient and effective. You should also know that we listened to 6 hours of testimony from the Director of Job and Family Services.

During the testimony, many committee members asked detailed questions and expressed stirring concerns on behalf of their constituents. The result of the study led to a clearer picture of the compelling need for improvement. Contained in the current version of Sub. H.B. 614 are our recommendations on how to address the undeniable need to improve the Unemployment Compensation Process and to make a difference in the lives of struggling Ohioans.

While the unemployment rate is getting smaller, we continue to hear from applicants that things are not improving for those who are still struggling to contact someone for answers. Per data provided to us by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, there are currently more than 220 thousand Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) applications pending and 83 thousand Traditional applications still pending. Moreover, the uncertain future has the potential to generate an unpredictable increase in new applications to process. Sub. H.B. 614 is a meaningful and necessary bill that provides the urgent opportunity to address application problems and ensure that the improvements are effectively implemented.

As I close, I earnestly remind you that hardworking Ohioans can't work when the government shuts down businesses, schools and the means to earn a living. The General Assembly has the opportunity with this bill to ensure claims for unemployment compensation are accurately and efficiently processed in a timely manner for deserving citizens.

On behalf of those who require our assistance, I respectfully ask for your support of this greatly needed and conscientiously created Sub. H.B. 614. Ohioans are counting on us! Senators, thank you again for hearing our testimony this morning.

I will be followed by Representative Fraizer who will provide a detailed summary of the Sub. H.B.