

To The House Committee on Business and Labor:

Like many Oregonians, I feel as though I have been left to die by the lack of social safety net, and specifically cash assistance, during this global crisis. I do not mean to come across as entitled. I have never relied on any social services previously, and never thought I would have to. But I do not look down on others for accessing those services, and the percentage of my paycheck that I have paid towards supporting those services was always an amount I was proud to give. As workers and residents of Oregon, that pool we built with our tax dollars is our financial commons.

The denial of these benefits to hundreds of thousands of Oregonians during a State shutdown and pandemic is an act of violence. It is siege warfare, a medieval tactic to suppress an enemy through starvation. You have completely ignored and refused to triage the most vulnerable Oregonians first - People of Color, undocumented workers, single mothers, people with no savings or who are facing housing instability, people with disabilities. To add insult to injury, there has been absolutely no accountability or transparency. Until Wyden and Merkley's letter and the subsequent reporting on it, constituents have been ignored.

I am one of the more fortunate people, at least for now, because I own my home and had a few financial resources at the beginning of this pandemic. But I am still being forced to choose between buying food and buying medication this week. I have a very manageable autoimmune disease, but without medication, the damage my immune system does to my body could become permanent. I also have experience navigating these very systems. I used to work in the Legislature as a Legislative Aide. I know what it is to do casework for constituents. I know how easy it is to open doors to other agencies with just a phone call. And yet the system is so absolutely user-hostile that it is not navigable to anyone without special powers.

I have been waiting on an unemployment payment for 12 weeks. In those 12 weeks, I have spent countless hours dialing and redialing the Employment Office's phone number. I have gotten through on two occasions. On the first, I spoke with a friendly claims handler who had no knowledge of PUA and said they would have to call me back about my claim and never did. On the second, I got a vindictive claims handler who laughed at me and everyone who calls about PUA after telling me that "this wasn't the phone number for PUA", and then swiftly hung up. After reporting this act of systemic abuse to the Oregonian, I heard back that they were investigating several similar claims. In an attempt to aid their investigation I completed a FOIA request for my phone call to be given to a reporter at The Oregonian, but the request was denied. I wonder how many others have been traumatized by the same person at the Employment Department, after waiting weeks for an answer, and spending hours on hold? I wonder how widespread the abuse is, and what culture creates and enables abusers to be in this position.

I have reached out to Wyden, Merkeley, Dembrow, and Kotek and not received any assistance other than a guarantee to look into this, with no follow up. I do believe that you looked into it, Senators and Representatives. But I believe you hit the same wall I did, and didn't realize that it was on you to tear it down.

I hope it's clear to you now what you have to do, and I hope that you will do it, even though elections are past. I support Wyden's call for Kay Erickson to resign. She is a disgrace and incapable of leading.

Thank you for hearing my testimony. Please do something.

Sasha Burchuk  
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