

From: Lori Bullis

To: Senate Committee on Labor and Business, Senator Lynn Findley

30 August 2020

On July 31st, after paying our August household bills, *only* \$45.00 remained to buy food, medication, and household necessities. It was a soul-crushing day.

How could this happen when I, and my coworkers were promised that a 20-percent furlough would *not* be a budget deficit for our families because, thanks to SEIU 503's pursuit of a Letter of Agreement, our employer, WOU, would participate in the OED Workshare (WS) program? A bonus is that we would qualify for the Federal \$600.00/month unemployment assistance program.

May 8th, I received the email *employment notice* to be furloughed from June 1st to August 31st from WOU HR. In addition to a reduced work week and pay, our leave accrual would also be reduced by 20-percent, unlike OSU, OIT, UO, SOU who continued to provide 100-percent leave accrual.

My coworkers and I were assured WS was a 'breeze', seamless. WS is a living hell.

Friday, August 14th was the first day I received any WS unemployment benefits. Even then, I was still owed 8-plus weeks. This 10-week delay was despite OED's approval of WOU's timely WS application, my on-time submission of my initial WS paperwork and weekly claims,

Between May 8th and August 14th, as my WS benefits continued to be delayed and my frustration and distress progressed, I reached out to the very people who were *supposed* to be in position to help me. Instead of receiving concrete answers, I encountered numerous people helplessly flailing their arms.

Our WOU HR contact who had no answers, could not receive answers from OED. I joined several Facebook Oregon Unemployment Support pages that held one horror story after another. I contacted my residential Oregon Senator, Sara Gelser, who referred me to Oregon Senate President Peter Courtney, whom I did contact. I submitted opinions and concerns to Governor Brown. I contacted my Federal legislators, Senators Wyden and Merkley, Representative DeFazio. I repeatedly called OED WS only to receive busy signals, hang ups and hours on hold. Via the OED webpage I submitted an email to only receive the reply:

"Thank you for emailing us. This autoreply is to let you know that we are no longer monitoring this inbox. This means that your message will not be read. The number of emails to this inbox was too much to manage..."

On July 23rd, in desperation and determination, I put my library research skills to work and found, I hoped, David Gerstenfeld's email address (Interim OED Director) and contacted him. EUREKA!! My email to Mr. Gerstenfeld found its way to a Benefit Services Manager who replied within three calendar days.

On July 26th this manager wrote:

"Unfortunately, your school applied for Work Share in the fourth week of May and that is why you have not heard from us. We are currently processing applications submitted the third week in May."

July 28th, an OED caseworker called me who *finally* provided plausible and concrete answers. Answers that, while not satisfactory, were something I could work with. This caseworker explained that I, we, were misled as to when we would receive our WS benefits. That:

- OED had hired 80 WS employees who had *just* completed their mandatory 8-week training
- All initial and weekly WS claims are individually hand-keyed (data entered) into the OED system

- The caseworker anticipated WS to process WOU's WS claims within two weeks (it took three (3) weeks)
- Initially we would receive the OED *wages and potential benefits letter*, then
- We would receive paper checks
- The waiting week still applies (and to date, continues to apply even though we were told it would not)
- To ignore the OED *school recess letter*, we did receive one and initially the letter did hold our benefit payments
- To not expect taxes to be withheld because that form is processed at a 2nd OED location and there is a HUGE backlog
- To not expect direct deposits because that form is processed at a 3rd OED location and it too has a HUGE backlog
- Instead, we would receive a US Bank Reliacard that we are to activate so we could withdraw or *easily* transfer funds, NOT!

US Bank Reliacard = more frustration:

- I visited my credit union with the understanding I could easily transfer funds from my Reliacard to my credit union account. NOPE! Transferring funds is not easy or seamless.
- There is a \$1,025.00/day withdrawal cap.
- My credit union suggested I visit a US Bank to withdraw the remaining funds. NOPE!
- The drive-up teller told me US Bank limits Reliacard withdrawals to \$1,000.00/day. While I hold a US Bank Reliacard, I am *not* a US Bank account holder.
- As a result, daily, my husband (for protection) and I visit US Bank ATM's withdrawing \$1,000.00 until the Reliacard balance is less than \$10.00.
- This week I will carry thousands of dollars in cash to deposit at my credit union, which is *extremely uncomfortable*.

Daily I speak with coworkers who were initially laid off in March 2020 then transferred to *extended leave without pay* and *still* have not received one-penny of their unemployment benefits. Some coworkers I have talked down from suicide.

To date, I continue to wake in the middle of the night due to nightmares, stress, in tears fearing we will not be able to keep our home, the lights and water on, put food on our table. My emotions fluctuate between frustration, determination, curling up into a ball of tears, and anger. I have a constant headache and my stomach hurts every time I eat, and I eat Tums just so I don't vomit.

To close, I would like to thank Senator Findley, Senate President Courtney for this opportunity to share my OED WS experience. Interim OED Director Gerstenfeld for forwarding my email to the Benefits Services Manager (Mr. Serratos) and all the OED caseworkers who patiently and truthfully answered my questions, and when they did not have answers, sought those answers and followed through with calling me back with those answers. I am thankful to Jessica Wangler of Senator Courtney's office and Mia of Senator Wyden's Portland Office for advocating for me, for us. I am grateful to my union, SEIU 503 and my campus union leadership and organizer (Mr. Stalley, Mr. Kavanagh, and Ms. Burke) for tirelessly acting on my, and my coworkers' behalf. Most important of all, I am thankful for my husband, for his ongoing compassionate support and patience. In him, I have a partner, a teammate, a supporter so I can carry on.

Lori Bullis