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To: Joint Interim Committee on the Second Special Session of 2020
From: Alicia Temple, Oregon Law Center
Date: August 10, 2020
Re: Unemployment Insurance Benefits, SB 1701, 1702, 1703

Co-Chairs Courtney and Kotek, and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the urgent needs of Oregon Law Center clients who are still waiting for their unemployment insurance benefits.

OLC is a non-profit organization that provides free legal help to people struggling to make ends meet. Our mission is to achieve justice for low-income communities in Oregon by providing a full range of the highest quality civil legal services. We advocate for our clients and for the services and programs that help them to overcome poverty. The last few months have hit OLC clients in devastating ways. Unemployment insurance benefits is a lifeline to individuals who have lost work and the only way many of them can pay rent or provide food for their families.

Too many Oregonians are still waiting for their UI or PUA benefits to be paid, or officially denied so that they can challenge an erroneous denial. The system has not worked, and while the agency has made adjustments and tried to improve the processes during this unprecedented crisis, urgency remains to get people benefits. This is especially true for non-English speakers who were not provided the same options to apply as English speakers, and who are faced with sometimes insurmountable barriers to accessing this benefit.

Senate Bills 1701, 1702, and 1703 are designed to facilitate the processing of claims and to increase access to benefits. We support these bills. However, these proposals do not accomplish the kind of structural and administrative reform needed to ensure that our unemployment insurance program achieves its goals.

Our offices across the state are overwhelmed by calls from people who are financially, emotionally, and physically desperate because COVID took away their livelihood and OED has not paid out their benefits. OLC clients have now lived through more than four months without the promised unemployment benefits: Four months of rent and utility costs; four months of needing to feed themselves and their families; four months of car insurance and medical bills; four months of sleepless nights, worry, anxiety, and fear.

We are in a humanitarian crisis that has been exacerbated by the fact that the State of Oregon is still not paying people the benefits they are due, over 20 weeks after they applied. The agency must enact significant change to ensure that our state benefit program can meet immediate needs both in this time of crisis, and on an ongoing basis.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.