

Thousands of Ohio workers stagnant in overwhelmed unemployment system

Legal advocates offer advice, help for those facing loss of income

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit Ohio in early spring, most residents couldn't have predicted the economic impact it would have.

Like many others, Mark Coffman lost work when the state shut down and immediately applied for unemployment benefits.

But after months of waiting, he still hadn't received his benefits.

Coffman's application had been denied -- twice. First, he was rejected by the traditional state program for not meeting the criteria. Then, he was rejected by the special federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program. But because he was an independent contractor and his loss of work was directly related to the pandemic and state shut-down, he couldn't figure out why he had been denied.

After immediately filing an appeal, Coffman reached out to Community Legal Aid. His advocates recognized a flag on his application that looked similar to others they'd seen. It appeared to be caused by a glitch in the system.

Coffman's attorney reached out to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, which runs the state's unemployment program. The issue was finally resolved, and he was paid the \$7,500 in back-pay he was owed and was able to catch up financially.

Coffman's story is not unique. Thousands of Ohio residents have outstanding or pending unemployment applications -- many relying on that money to pay for necessities like food, rent, and medication.

“We know the system is overwhelmed,” explained Steven McGarrity, executive director of Community Legal Aid. “Unfortunately, though, people’s lives are dependent on these benefits, from life-saving medicine, to buying food for their kids, to keeping a roof over their heads. How many people do you know who could go four months without any income and not have it affect their lives?”

Ohio’s unemployment system has seen unprecedented numbers of applications since the pandemic began. More than a million Ohio residents filed for unemployment benefits in the wake of the state’s shutdown order issued by Governor DeWine.

This issue has been further complicated by the complex system of multiple layers of programs being offered right now by both the state and the federal government.

Legal Aid is encouraging people who have been waiting for four or more weeks to contact them. The nonprofit law firm has already seen a surge in requests for help related to unemployment, with applications growing more than four times since March.

“We have advocates who can act as a kind of liaison between people and the unemployment office,” McGarrity explained. “A lot of times, all someone needs is a staff member to touch their application. And a call or letter from an attorney can help make that happen.”

The organization is also available to help anyone who may have been denied benefits.

“The appeals process can be intimidating, and sometimes, people can be wrongly denied because of technology glitches, as we’ve seen,” he said. “Our team can help people through that process.”

For more information, visit www.communitylegalaid.org/covid19/unemployment.

Anyone interested in applying for help can call (800) 998-9454 or apply online 24/7 at www.communitylegalaid.org/apply.

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