

Low-income Ohioans at risk from unemployment fraud

Legal Aid advocates stress call to action

Among the hundreds of thousands of identities stolen to make fraudulent claims for unemployment benefits, Ohio's most vulnerable populations may experience the greatest harm.

More than 760,000 victims of widespread fraud have had their identities compromised. This means their personal information could be used to open credit accounts and make other fraudulent claims.

And all victims carry a potential tax liability, since unemployment benefits are considered taxable income. The IRS and the Ohio State Department of Taxation will act as though benefits were received, unless they are notified otherwise.

But according to Jennifer van Dulmen, deputy director at Community Legal Aid, the fraud carries another risk for Ohio's poor.

Unemployment benefits can be considered income when agencies determine eligibility for public assistance programs like food stamps, Medicaid, daycare assistance, and subsidized housing. They could also impact income based Social Security benefits, such as SSI.

“If these agencies believe you received this income, it may result in your benefits being stopped or reduced,” explained van Dulmen, adding that the fraud could also result in overpayment notices, causing people to be told they owe money back to the agency that issued benefits.

Spreading the word for victims to report fraud

Legal Aid has planned a series of events to help spread the word about signs of fraud and what people should do if they are affected.

Advocates will share information with the general public during Legal Aid’s weekly “Ask a Lawyer” live event, this Wednesday, February 10th at 5:00. Anyone can attend by visiting the nonprofit’s Facebook page, www.facebook.com/CommLegalAid. Audience members will be able to get their questions answered by an attorney live during the presentation.

Legal Aid also will hold online training sessions for community advocates this Thursday and Friday.

“We want our community partners to understand how this issue may impact the clients they serve,” said attorney Michelle Wrona-Fox, adding that she hopes the information spurs agencies to create their own action plan should a client’s benefits be impacted by fraud.

“Some federal agencies, like the Social Security Administration, are taking proactive steps to avoid penalizing clients who are victims of fraud,” she explained. “By having these plans in place, agencies can limit the harm their clients could

experience while reducing their own case work.”

Long-term plan to support fraud victims

Much of Legal Aid’s current efforts to address fraud centers on minimizing potential harm.

van Dulmen explained that fraud victims often receive unsolicited communication about unemployment benefits, even though they didn’t apply for help. She stressed that Ohioans should take notice if they receive a 1099-G tax form or any other communication regarding unemployment benefits.

“It may be tempting to dismiss it and throw these things away, or delete an email, but this is a sign that you could be a victim of fraud,” she explained. “We want to stress that you need to take action - report the fraud and hold on to all records, in case you need to prove you reported it in the future.”

The law firm believes that even with it’s best efforts to limit the harmful impact of fraud, some Ohioans may not know they are victims, or they may not act in time.

Anyone whose public benefits are affected because of fraud, or anyone who receives a notice from the IRS or Ohio State Department of Taxation that they owe taxes on benefits they never received, should reach out to Legal Aid for help. Learn more about the signs and impact of unemployment fraud at www.communitylegalaid.org/unemployment/fraud.

Sidebar One:

Report fraud by contacting the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services

By phone: (833) 658-0394

Online at: unemploymenthelp.ohio.gov

Sidebar Two:

Legal Aid Presentation for the General Public:

Wednesday, February 10th at 5:00 p.m.

“Ask a Lawyer” live - Facebook event

Learn about unemployment fraud and other issues related to unemployment benefit

www.facebook.com/CommLegalAid

Advocate training: Learn about the impact of unemployment fraud on low-income Ohioans

Attend one of two available sessions -

Thursday, February 11th from 11:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

or Friday, February 12 from 3:00 - 4:30 p.m.

Learn more and sign up at www.communitylegalaid.org/events

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