



THE GENERAL COURT OF MASSACHUSETTS
STATE HOUSE, BOSTON 02133-1053

April 6, 2020

Governor Charles D. Baker
Massachusetts State House
Boston, MA 02133

Secretary Marylou Sudders
Executive Office of Health and Human Services
COVID-19 Response Command Center
Boston, MA 02108

Dear Governor Baker and Secretary Sudders:

Thank you for the significant and swift actions your Administration has taken to limit the spread of COVID-19 in the Commonwealth and keep our communities safe. We appreciate your responsiveness and the work you and your team are doing to protect our constituents during this crisis.

While we appreciate the Department of Unemployment Assistance's responsiveness in processing a flood of claims, there are improvements that could benefit many of our constituents. **We respectfully ask you to take action to address the gaps in language and access for people applying for unemployment assistance.**

As legislators, many of us have heard from constituents about particular challenges in applying for unemployment benefits due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For those who do not speak English as their primary language, struggle to read or write in their primary language, or have no access to technology at home, applying for benefits is very difficult. And given the importance of social distancing, these individuals are unable to access support from their communities.

Many residents currently do not have the option of calling the Department of Unemployment Assistance to complete their unemployment applications. Upon dialing the TeleClaim number, an automated message in English instructs a person to either complete their application online or fill out a contact request form in English on the Mass.gov website to speak to someone over the phone. For those with limited English proficiency, these instructions are often confusing. Requiring applicants to fill out a form online to request a call from the Department of Unemployment Assistance presents a major obstacle to filing a claim, particularly for those without access to the internet or proficiency in the use of computers, and especially when call centers are short-staffed.

Additionally, being directed online has posed a number of challenges for members of the immigrant community with technological barriers and limited English proficiency. The online application is only provided in English, requiring those with limited English proficiency to rely heavily on others to file a claim. Furthermore, some residents struggle to read and write proficiently in their primary languages, highlighting the need for assistance by phone. Many people are only able to access the internet through their phones, making it difficult for them to complete an application online.

Many members of the immigrant community have no option but to seek help from friends, relatives, or community groups to complete the contact request form and the online application for unemployment benefits. Since many organizations have closed their offices to ensure social distancing, there are fewer places where people can seek assistance. This delays their ability to file a claim and submit responses to determine their eligibility. In instances where people are unable to find others able to help, technological barriers and a lack of language accessibility prevent them from filing claims altogether.

We respectfully request a number of changes to aid people with limited English proficiency in applying for needed unemployment benefits during the COVID-19 crisis:

- Translate the online unemployment insurance application into the non-English languages most commonly spoken in the Commonwealth. It is important for residents to be able to fully read and understand the personal information they are providing.
- Make the online application mobile-friendly. This will help to ensure fewer mistakes are made.
- Clarify the option to apply via telephone, and make it easier to access this help, for those without computer access or with literacy limitations.
- Add multilingual staff and consider partnering with community organizations with translation expertise to add capacity and reduce wait times.

Again, thank you for the work you have done to protect public health and safety in the Commonwealth. To continue to respond to our constituents' needs, we respectfully ask that you make changes to aid those who are vulnerable due to their immigration status, language, or access to technology.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

State Representative Christine P. Barber, 34th Middlesex District
State Representative Maria Duaine Robinson, 6th Middlesex District
State Representative Adrian C. Madaro, 1st Suffolk District
State Representative David Henry Argosky LeBoeuf, 17th Worcester District
State Representative Jay D. Livingstone, 8th Suffolk District
State Representative Nika C. Elugardo, 15th Suffolk District
State Representative Tricia Farley-Bouvier, 3rd Berkshire District
State Representative Lindsay Sabadosa, 1st Hampshire District
State Representative David M. Rogers, 24th Middlesex District
State Representative Denise Provost, 27th Middlesex District
State Representative Joseph W. McGonagle, Jr., 28th Middlesex District
State Representative David Allen Robertson, 19th Middlesex District
State Representative Kay Khan, 11th Middlesex District

State Representative Natalie M. Blais, 1st Franklin District
State Representative Ruth B. Balsler, 12th Middlesex District
State Representative Steven Ultrino, 33rd Middlesex District
State Representative Jack Patrick Lewis, 7th Middlesex District
State Representative Christina A. Minicucci, 14th Essex District
State Representative Tram T. Nguyen, 18th Essex District
State Representative Peter Capano, 11th Essex District
State Representative Mindy Domb, 3rd Hampshire District
State Representative Tackey Chan, 2nd Norfolk District
State Representative Mary S. Keefe, 15th Worcester District
State Representative Natalie M. Higgins, 4th Worcester District
State Representative Marcos A. Devers, 16th Essex District
State Representative Frank A. Moran, 17th Essex District
State Representative Patrick J. Kearney, 4th Plymouth District
State Representative Liz Miranda, 5th Suffolk District
State Representative Peter Capano, 11th Essex District
State Representative Joan Meschino, 3rd Plymouth District
State Representative Marjorie C. Decker, 25th Middlesex District
State Representative Stephan Hay, 3rd Worcester District
State Representative Susannah M. Whipps, 2nd Franklin District
State Representative Tommy Vitolo, 15th Norfolk District
State Representative Alan Silvia, 7th Bristol District
State Representative Tami L. Gouveia, 14th Middlesex District
State Representative Mike Connolly, 26th Middlesex District
State Representative Gerard J. Cassidy, 9th Plymouth District
State Representative Patricia A. Haddad, 5th Bristol District
State Representative Carole A. Fiola, 6th Bristol District
State Representative Antonio F. D. Cabral, 13th Bristol District
State Representative John H. Rogers, 12th Norfolk District
State Representative Kevin G. Honan, 17th Suffolk District
State Representative Carmine Lawrence Gentile, 13th Middlesex District
State Representative Daniel Cahill, 10th Essex District
State Representative Richard M. Haggerty, 30th Middlesex District
State Representative Andres X. Vargas, 3rd Essex District
State Representative Paul W. Mark, 2nd Berkshire District
State Representative Aaron Vega, 5th Hampden District
State Senator Rebecca L. Rausch, Norfolk, Bristol, and Middlesex District
State Senator James B. Eldridge, Middlesex and Worcester District
State Senator Brendan P. Crighton, 3rd Essex District
State Senator Patrick M. O'Connor, Plymouth and Norfolk District
State Senator James T. Welch, Hampden District
State Senator Michael J. Barrett, 3rd Middlesex District
State Senator Joanne M. Comerford, Hampshire, Franklin and Worcester District
State Senator Joseph A. Boncore, 1st Suffolk and Middlesex District
State Senator Sonia Chang-Díaz, 2nd Suffolk District

CC:

Speaker Robert A. DeLeo
Massachusetts State House
Boston, MA 02133

Senate President Karen E. Spilka
Massachusetts State House
Boston, MA 02133

Secretary Rosalin Acosta
Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development
Boston, MA 02108