

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor
Office of Governor Ron DeSantis
400 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

May 4, 2020

Dear Governor DeSantis,

As members of the Clearwater City Council we are writing to urge you to address Florida's inadequate unemployment benefits program and make significant improvements to both the application process and the administration of earned benefits.

Tourism makes up a significant part of Clearwater's economic base. Because of this and COVID-19, we are now experiencing record unemployment in our city. As Councilmembers, we are speaking on behalf of over 25% of our residents who work in our food/hospitality and retail establishments.

As you know, Florida has one of the weakest unemployment compensation programs in the country. Florida's \$275 per week allowance is severely inadequate and one of the lowest of any State. Just as concerning is Florida's 12-week cap on benefits matching that of North Carolina's as the lowest number of weeks of eligibility in the nation.

Additionally, we continue to hear from constituents that the website where all applications must be completed continues to malfunction, making it extremely difficult for individuals to even file a claim for unemployment benefits. Last week, two of the three help numbers on the Department of Economic Opportunity's (DEO's) website were not taking calls. Instead, a recorded message suggested callers visit a DEO website. Often, people experience frustration interacting on the website and moving forward to process a claim.

On April 28, the *Tampa Bay Times* reported that the DEO is informing people who were deemed "ineligible" that they might indeed be eligible; they are telling people to reapply online. As of

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Tuesday, April 28, the state had processed 664,158 of 1,941,807 claims, just 34% - one of the slowest rates in the nation. Over a million Floridians are still waiting for their unemployment checks, and that means they are waiting for the \$600 per week from the Federal stimulus program as well.

We realize that the COVID-19 pandemic is a colossal challenge. We know we are all in this together-- working to provide necessary services to our residents, as well as doing all we can to restart our economy. However, it is imperative that change happen at the state level. We urge you to:

1. Increase the maximum amount for payments and duration of unemployment benefits;
2. Update the formula to determine eligibility and consider a worker's most recent quarter of earnings to calculate the benefits;
3. Investigate and mitigate challenges with the website, and
4. Provide additional ways for individuals to apply for unemployment insurance.

We appreciate your prompt attention to this matter. The physical, mental and economic health of our residents is at stake.

Respectfully,

Clearwater City Council