To find Mainers with unclaimed unemployment benefits, groups launch new ‘helper’ tool with Dept. of Labor

AUGUSTA – AUGUSTA - Together with the Maine Department of Labor, legal and labor advocate groups Maine Equal Justice and the Maine AFL-CIO launched a first-of-its-kind online form to help people who haven't been able to start an unemployment claim.

Many Mainers are eligible for unemployment benefits but, for different reasons, they haven't been able to contact the Department of Labor to start a claim. Unemployment benefits, including both state and federal pandemic support, can mean tens of thousands of dollars to a household when the unemployment period stretches over months.

“Some people with low income may not have a computer or consistent internet access or even enough phone minutes to start an unemployment claim,” said Sue Hamlett of Maine Equal Justice. “Others do not speak English as a first language or face other barriers that make a complex, multi-step application like the one for unemployment benefits difficult and frustrating. We know that there are people who just give up or don’t know who to ask for help.”

“We want to make sure everyone who is eligible can receive this critical support,” said Deputy Labor Commissioner Kimberly Smith. “If you have been
unable to file your initial claim for benefits, we would like to hear from you. Please fill out this form so we can help you get a claim started.”

Even if someone has returned to work, they may still be able to get unemployment benefits for weeks they weren't able to work due to the pandemic, advocates stressed. They're hoping that Mainers will reach out to their family, friends, and neighbors who have been unemployed but might have had trouble starting a claim and help them fill out the form.

“You probably know someone who has lost their job during the pandemic, and now is a good time to reach out and see if this form could help,” said Andy O’Brien of the Maine AFL-CIO. “This could be anyone you know who worked in the last 18 months and couldn't work or earned less money due to Covid-19, and has not yet applied for unemployment benefits.”

The form consists of three questions and asks for the respondent’s contact information. It has been translated into Arabic, French, Khmer, Lingala, Portuguese, Somali, and Spanish. When speaking with the Department of Labor, applicants can request an interpreter in any language.

Advocates also clarified that the form is not intended for Mainers who have started a claim already, and that the best way to check on the status of their claim is to reach out to the Department of Labor directly.

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