

State of Kansas



Susan Wagle
Senate President

Testimony on the Current State of Kansas Unemployment

**Presented to the Senate Committee on Commerce
By Senate President Susan Wagle**

May 14, 2020

Vice Chairman Alley and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the committee with a look into the work I have been doing on behalf of the people of Kansas who were, quite simply, failed by the unemployment system in our state. You will hear from several of those Kansans throughout the course of this hearing, and my testimony is meant to be a supplement to theirs.

On April 13, I posted to my office Facebook account asking to hear stories from Kansans who were attempting to file for unemployment yet locked out from the website and left on hold by the phone system. I vowed to deliver those emails to the unemployment office, hoping to be a voice for those rendered voiceless by the state's ineffective unemployment system.

The next day, I had received over 200 emails. I printed each and every one, highlighted the sections which were most concerning, and attempted to deliver them directly to the Department of Labor. However, when I arrived at the DOL, I found the doors locked and a sign posted on the door, instructing me to call a phone number, which wasn't answered. Then, I changed course and delivered those emails directly to the Governor, still keeping in mind my mission to be a voice for the voiceless. I wanted someone to read the heartbreaking stories of government impotency that I was reading.

I anticipated a high volume of emails, but I never could have predicted the absolute deluge of communications I would receive from that date, continuing up until this very day. Kansans are still not being heard, and I am still working directly with the Department of Labor to forward on the responses from those with the most complicated situations. To date, I have received over one thousand emails from Kansans from all walks of life. Those with high-level corporate jobs who never thought the company they worked for over many years would leave them out in the cold; unemployed hair stylists and barbers who have waited weeks and weeks for the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program to be deployed, only to be told, week after week, "Maybe

next week,” by Labor Secretary Delia Garcia and even Governor Kelly; mechanics, independent photographers, daycare providers, and even nurses and doctors.

I brought those emails with me today, and I invite the members of this committee to simply look at this massive stack of paperwork and consider the lives and livelihoods it represents. Some of these people have lost or will lose their homes or vehicles. Some have depleted their savings or wrecked their credit, just trying to feed their family, all while we were told to stay home, shelter in place, keep our business’ doors closed at all costs.

I delivered hundreds of emails to the Governor’s office, which detailed the various issues Kansans were facing while applying for unemployment. While each story was unique, a recurring theme eventually emerged: the website kept crashing, and when you tried to call the unemployment line, you were met with a robotic message, simply instructing you to call back in an hour.

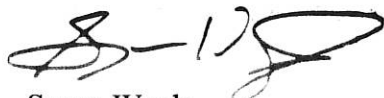
Hardly anyone was given the ability to wait on the line, staying on hold until someone answered. Yet Governor Kelly, even up until last week, kept offering the same advice to unemployed citizens of our state: “Stay on hold. Be persistent. Put the phone on speaker and do something else,” when the entire time her office was flooded with emails telling her that option was not available.

To put it quite simply, I am appalled by the absolute failure I have witnessed during this pandemic. The administration has blamed nearly everyone, except themselves.

I applaud this committee for looking into this matter. I pray a pandemic of such a level never impacts our state again, but I also pray our state learns a lesson from this catastrophe, and never fails our citizens in this way again.

I will stand for questions at the appropriate time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Wagle', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Susan Wagle
President, Kansas Senate