Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515–1013

May 25, 2021

Mark Butler, Commissioner
Georgia Department of Labor
148 Andrew Young Intl Blvd, NE
Atlanta, GA 30303

Dear Commissioner Butler,

We write today with serious concerns over the Georgia Department of Labor's (GDOL) ability to adequately address the ongoing backlog of benefits claims precipitated by COVID-19. There is no question that the pandemic placed an overwhelming amount of pressure on your agency to deliver the necessary relief to the more than 650,000 Georgians who found themselves out of a job. While we acknowledge that factors such as initial understaffing and limited technology may have prevented GDOL from processing claims, there remain questions for how your agency plans to identify solutions to address the backlog that currently exists.

In accordance with GDOL's recent recommendations, effectively ending the state's participation in the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC), Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC), and Mixed Earner Unemployment Compensation (MEUC) programs, over 220,000 Georgians could soon find themselves unemployed and without the benefits they filed for months ago. Even with a recovering economy, the state has processed about 140,000 new jobless claims every month since March, exceeding pre-pandemic levels. Recent reports also place the GDOL backlog of benefits claims at around 80,000 that have yet to be decided.

The mission of the GDOL is first and foremost to help Georgians who have lost their job, income, financial security, and are desperately trying to provide for their families. As you know, Georgia does not provide workers with paid leave from work or universal childcare. The state has a minimum wage of $5.15 per hour – more than $2 below the federal minimum wage of $7.25 – and ranks last among all 50 states in increasing wages year after year. In the last year alone, food banks reported a 60 percent increase in distribution as the need for food skyrocketed. Similarly, childcare in the state costs $1,324 (18.4%) more per year than in-state tuition for a four-year public college—making Georgia one of 33 states where childcare is more expensive than college. A system that penalizes workers by preventing them from accessing federally guaranteed unemployment benefits will plunge families across our state further into poverty.

The GDOL has a responsibility to do everything in its power to ensure that the citizens of Georgia receive the assistance they applied for in times of hardship. To that end, we respectfully request answers to the following questions no later than May 31, 2021.

1. What is the name, phone number, and email address for the individual or individuals responsible for addressing casework inquiries from elected officials?

2. What is the most recently updated number of unemployment benefits claims currently on backlog at GDOL, and on average, how many backlogged unemployment benefits claims are being processed each day?

3. What steps has GDOL and your office taken to address gaps in technology and staffing since March 2020, and how many new employees have been hired by GDOL to process the number of unemployment benefits claims on backlog?

4. What do you anticipate will be the number of backlogged unemployment benefits claims that will not meet an eligibility decision by GDOL on, or after, June 26?

5. What recourse will individuals have to appeal a backlogged GDOL claim that is denied on, or after, June 26? Particularly for those who may initially be designated by GDOL as individuals who either quit their job or were terminated for cause, but have yet to receive a hearing?

6. What is GDOL's plan for implementing long term mitigation tools, to better inform the citizens of Georgia who have filed valid unemployment benefits claims, of the status of their claims?

Georgians who lack access to affordable childcare, have lost employer-sponsored health insurance, and have concerns for the health and safety of their families, are entitled to the benefits they applied for. They are also entitled to complete transparency and accountability from their government. We must do more to help our constituents during these uncertain times. Thank you in advance for your attention to this important matter and we look forward to your response.

Respectfully,

David Scott
Member of Congress

Nikema Williams
Member of Congress

Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress

Lucy McBath
Member of Congress

Carolyn Bourdeaux
Member of Congress

Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.
Member of Congress