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**Office of the Lieutenant Governor**

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*David Zuckerman, Lieutenant Governor*

April 15, 2020

Commissioner Harrington,

I am writing to you regarding the unemployment insurance issue. I know you and your team have been trying to find a way to make it work better. I greatly appreciate that. But we must do better to get money into people's hands so that they do not go hungry. Our food safety net is strained and the burden on those volunteers and donors should not be exacerbated by the State's inability to do its job.

Our office is receiving an unprecedented number of constituent calls and emails from Vermonters who are desperate, anxious, and frankly in disbelief that the system is as broken as it is. People are running out of money and they need to know when they can expect help. I know that all of our Senators and Representatives are also receiving these desperate calls. I expect you and the rest of the Administration are hearing this as well.

I understand the computer system has not been updated in approximately 30 years, however for Vermonters living paycheck to paycheck that is not an adequate response.

It is unacceptable that four weeks after folks were laid off, so many still have not received their UI compensation. I have had people reach out to me, who are at wits end, indicating they are down to their last \$30 for groceries and do not know what they are going to do.

The fact that many calls end with no clear path for Vermonters is one of many things that must be fixed immediately. For people to hold on the line for 30 or 40 minutes or even longer, only to get to a dead end with no option for leaving a message is just incredible. Please do everything possible to create a system where people can leave messages, and ensure you have the staff to reply to them.

This is a humanitarian crisis that warrants use of the national guard. What if the temporary hospital at the Champlain Valley Expo were used as a call center staffed by guard members? Could we collect the most basic data (Name, address, SS #) and get interim checks distributed, maybe \$500 or so, with a plan to "square up" with folks in future disbursements. Considering the situation will easily warrant 4-6 weeks of compensation for many people, it will clearly be a down payment. If we had 200-400 Guard taking such calls, and at least getting those checks out the door, it would allow for the more experienced state employees to address the more complicated scenarios. I recognize this may not be the right solution, but we must think "outside the box" in order to make sure Vermonters do not suffer unnecessarily. The consequences of financial stress also manifest in other ways such as increased potential for child abuse, domestic violence and possibly even suicide. We must do everything we can to reduce this potential.

With the system currently unable to handle the capacity, I am quite worried about what happens next week when the untested new software is unveiled for self-employed Vermonters to apply for benefits. Is there a backup plan if that new software crashes as the old system has?

I recognize this is an unprecedented and extremely stressful time for all State Agencies. I commend you for putting the Virtual Town Halls together; they are good sources of information. But people need more than information at this point. They need money to put food on the table, pay their rent, or mortgage and utilities. The state is not allowing evictions, but we are also requiring people to pay their obligations. It is time for the state to pay our obligation as well.

As Lt. Governor I can help disseminate information about how to ease the strain on our system and provide needed information to Vermonters who are desperate right now. I look forward to working with you on this. I hope to hear from you soon and I would be happy to work with you to identify or help implement this or other solutions to this crisis.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David Zuckerman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lt. Governor David Zuckerman