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Four Months on the Job Answering Thousands of Covid-19 Related Calls for Dept. of Health, Yet No Pay

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Dept. of Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion told the Consortium Monday that she has apologized to D.O.H. employees on the job for up to four months, taking Covid-19 related calls and relaying information to health officials vital to the success of combating the virulent disease, but have yet to be paid.

"It's been a long time and it's unfortunate that it has taken that long and I'm sorry. I've said to them that I'm really sorry that the process has taken long, but we are really trying to work with everyone to make sure that we deliver all the information that we're supposed to deliver, and that they get their payment as soon as possible," the commissioner told the Consortium as she expressed regret over the matter.

The Consortium on Monday received a call from one of the employees, who called on behalf of colleagues. This employee said the decision to call was a last resort because nothing else has worked. These employees are on the frontlines working the Covid-19 hotlines. They take a myriad of calls — from individuals who want to get tested for Covid-19, to collecting information on close contacts and other details indelible to the success of combating the disease. They also field calls from travelers seeking information on the territory's Covid-19 status.

"We have not received not one paycheck yet," said the frustrated employee, who spoke of hardships some colleagues have been through trying to survive while working months without receiving pay. "[The Dept. of Health] is receiving all of its health information from all of these individuals who may or may not have Covid-19. We're the ones answering the hotlines and giving them the information so that the epidemiologist can make contact with these people, and information can trickle down to contact tracers so they can do their jobs." The employee spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak freely on the matter.

"I have bills that are canceling out. Some of us, this is our only job right now. I really want them to understand what they're doing to people. And I was hesitant about calling, but it's ridiculous; I have bills to pay like everyone else. And then on top of that, they're still saying that they're trying to find the funds from somewhere else... What are we supposed to do?"

The employees are calling on D.O.H. to pay extra for the time the department has not compensated them. "This has been really, really stressful for some people. They've ran through their savings and really have nothing," said the employee.

Ms. Encarnacion said she held a virtual meeting with the employees last week to express gratitude that they have stayed on the job. "We're very, very grateful for that. It is taking us longer than I would have liked to see them get paid, but we're working with all the entities responsible for processing their pay," the commissioner said, adding the Dept. of Health has been providing information these other agencies need to pay the employees.

The agencies responsible for the payment of these employees are the Dept. of Health, the Division of Personnel, the Office of Management and Budget and the Dept. of Finance, Ms. Encarnacion said.

"This is a pandemic, we're trying to make sure the processes go the way they're supposed to go. We have to make sure that we cross our t's and dot our i's, so we're doing whatever we need to do to get them paid," she said. "It's no finger-pointing; it's us having to work together to make sure these individuals get paid."

Other than stating that D.O.H. has been working collaboratively with the other agencies, Ms. Encarnacion said there wasn't much else she could say. She also decided not to provide a solid date relative to when these employees would be paid, stating, "We're pushing hard for as soon as possible, but if I give you a date and it doesn't come through..."

"It's an issue that's a concern to me as well because it's a concern to them and their families," the commissioner concluded.

Ms. Encarnacion said the department is seeking to hire additional individuals for the Covid-19 hotline.