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'He Died Waiting': Grieving Widow Says Dept. of Labor Owes Deceased Husband \$20,000, and B.I.R. Has Yet to Pay \$600 Stimulus

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The late Jason Connor, who died on February 9, 2021 due to medical complications, waited in vain to receive \$20,000 owed to him by the V.I. Dept. of Labor, and \$600 owed to him by B.I.R.

ST. CROIX — Jason Connor had struggled for years with his health even as he continued to provide for his family, including his wife, Kathleen McGuire. His first surgery took place at the University of Miami after Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017, when Mr. Connor was placed on a Jetblue flight used to transport displaced Virgin Islanders to Florida. Since then, Mr. Connor, who passed on February 9, 2021, had made twenty trips to the hospital for health reasons.

His health condition, however, did not suppress his work ethic, as Mr. Connor continued working in the construction field. In 2020, he was laid off and he immediately filed for unemployment benefits from the Covid-19 federal programs and for his regular payments, hoping to buffer his wife's salary even as he continued to seek medical attention. However, the Dept. of Labor, blaming glitches, an archaic unemployment system whose programming was ill-prepared for a flood of claims, "took several months to issue a first payment" to Mr. Connor, said his widow, who stated that the first unemployment payment was made in June 2020.

It was also the last payment until January, and soon after, on February 9, Mr. Connor passed. Since then, his widow has been in a battle to collect the \$20,000 owed to her late husband by the Dept. of Labor, but has been stonewalled and made to go through a probate process. "I went there in person, I spoke to several people and they say, 'well, we'll look into that.' It's going to have to go to probate to get a payment but they agreed that it was owed," she said.

Three weeks ago, Ms. McGuire received a check from the Dept. of Labor for approximately \$4,232, less than a quarter of the total sum owed to her husband. The check, which was seen by the Consortium, represented payments from August 15 through Oct. 30, 2020 for regular unemployment benefits but nothing for federally issued pandemic payments.

"I thought, why are they sending me a check for \$4,000 when they owe \$20,000. And I felt like they were saying, 'okay, this is our deal, get off our back,'" Ms. McGuire said. She told the Consortium the matter had gotten bigger than her own issues, as she began thinking about others who have suffered similar experiences with the labor department.

Ms. McGuire's attorney advised her not to cash the check and instead allow the probate process to continue.

"How many people have passed away and they died waiting? That's the big picture," she said.

The Consortium since last week reached out to Dept. of Labor Commissioner, Gary Molloy on multiple occasions for comment on Ms. McGuire's case. At time of writing, however, the commissioner had not responded.

A similar situation occurred with the federally issued \$600 stimulus payment made through the Bureau of Internal Revenue. Referring to her deceased husband, Ms. McGuire said, "He would call, I would call and ask where is our \$600 stimulus check time and time again to the point where you get transferred to a supervisor, someone answers the phone and you hear a click."

Neither Ms. McGuire nor her deceased husband were able to get paid for several months, and Ms. McGuire said three weeks ago she was told that the bureau had stopped issuing \$600 checks because B.I.R. shifted focus to the \$1,400 payments. "I said what about my husband's \$600 check and my \$600 check? She said, 'I'll ask but I don't think you're going to get it and your husband definitely won't get his check because we don't write checks to dead people,'" Ms. McGuire said she was told by a B.I.R. employee.

"I said but you have to realize you were holding our money. If you would have released that money in a timely manner he would have had that check," Ms. McGuire told the B.I.R. employee.

On Wednesday, she finally received her \$600 payment, "so I'm thankful for that but they didn't give him a check," she said.

"How many that have passed away and died waiting?" the grieving widow asked again. She said she was told by the B.I.R. employee that the bureau has received "numerous requests from people whose spouses have passed and they're not going to honor those payments."

Correction: May 3, 2021 at 8:07 a.m.

A previous version of this story stated that Mr. Connor was transported to Florida following the 2017 storms on a cruise ship. He was, however, transported on a Jetblue flight. We've updated the story to reflect the correct information.

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