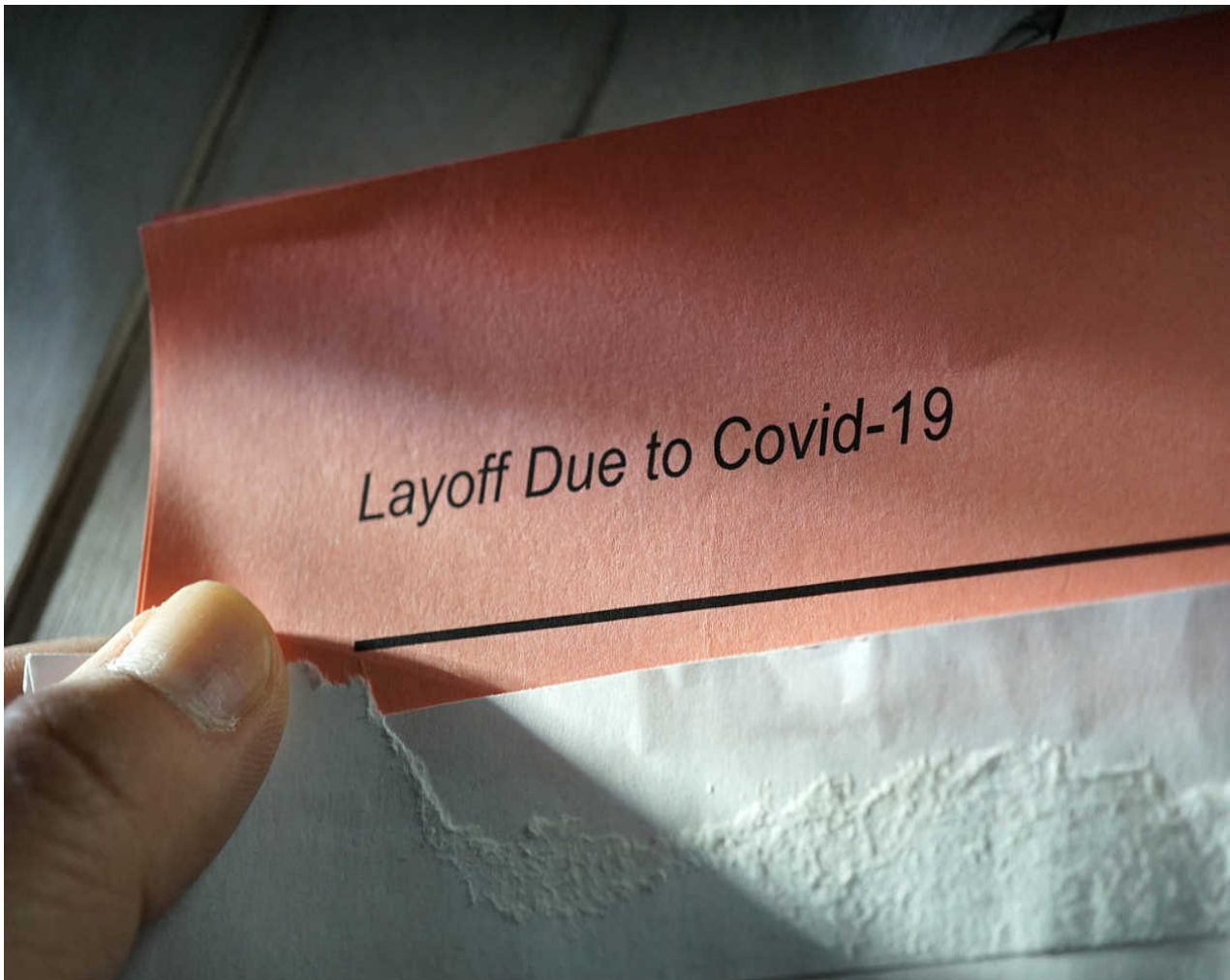


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Labor Commissioner Now Says Notices for Dec. 2020 \$300 Unemployment Payments Will Go Out May 10; Senators Press for Answers on Delays

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Senators in the Committee on Education and Workforce Development on Friday expressed frustrations with the Department of Labor on behalf of Virgin Islanders that have shared difficulties in receiving unemployment benefits. They also pressed Dept. of Labor Commissioner Gary Molloy for answers.

Senator Janelle Sarauw sought to understand why in May 2021 Virgin Islanders had yet to receive payments from the Consolidated Appropriations Act, which was signed into law by former President Donald Trump in December 2020 and provides \$300 of extended

unemployment benefits — down from \$600 months before from the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) program, which expired in July 2020.

"The delay has been that when the laws are passed, the United States Department of Labor has to provide us with unemployment insurance program letters which give us the guidance. In the guidance we received, the law changed the implementation of the program, so while they are built as extensions they are really four new programs that require different programming from us to be able to implement," Mr. Molloy explained. He said each new program requires a different scope of work for Dept. of Labor programmers, and if that scope of work is different from what the programmers were doing at the time, new programming is needed.

Relative to payments on the extension of the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (P.U.A.), made available through the Consolidated Appropriations Act of Dec. 2020, Mr. Molloy stated D.O.L would begin to send notices out on May 10 along with information on the documentation needed to submitted.

The commissioner previously told the Consortium that payments for the program [were already rolling out](#).

Ms. Sarauw pressed for urgency within D.O.L. "I am a bit frustrated because we have a program that we have to program and this and that, and people need their money point blank period... we need a sense of urgency." The senator pointed to a recent court ruling that threw out the rent moratorium contending it was [illegal and unsupportable](#).

"W.A.P.A does not give you the leeway, the bill collectors isn't giving you the leeway, the federal courts are simply saying this can't happen anymore. Rents are going to be owed and then you have a D.O.L. that's just... it's inhumane," Ms. Sarauw said.

Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory asked Mr. Molloy to share the true challenges and solutions of the program. He said volume was an issue along with "the myriad of programs that have to be implemented." He added, "The only way to do this is to move from the manual process that we have and to automate. We have already done that for the regular unemployment process; we are now doing that for all the other extension programs."

Asked by Ms. Frett-Gregory for a timeline, Mr. Molloy said such could not be provided because the guidelines for unemployment were constantly changing — including as recently as a week ago — however, he expressed hope that "everybody" will be online and have the direct deposit option "by the end of this year."

Senator Milton Potter sought to learn whether other jurisdictions were facing similar charges. "Every state and territory is experiencing the same thing," Mr. Molloy said.

The Department of Labor, through its Facebook page provided a link of a [Bloomberg law article](#) during the livestream of the hearing that highlights unemployment delivery issues faced nationally.

Senator Kurt Violet asked whether D.O.L.'s system was configured to start making payments to individuals once notices are sent out on May 10 and information received by residents are inserted into the system. Gary Halyard, acting director of Unemployment

Insurance and director of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, confirmed that the system was ready.

Ms. Frett-Gregory said Virgin Islanders have also expressed the issue of not getting the information needed from D.O.L. Mr. Molloy concurred and vowed to do better. "We have not done a very good job in making sure the information is accessible to everyone and we are rectifying that," he said. The commissioner said D.O.L. goes live every Monday after the governor's press briefing and that more information would be forthcoming.