



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA
Virginia Employment Commission

Demetrios J. Melis
Commissioner

Post Office Box 26441
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October 11, 2024

TO: The Honorable Glenn Youngkin
Governor, Commonwealth of Virginia
P.O. Box 1475
Richmond, Virginia, 23218

The Honorable R. Creigh Deeds
Chair, Senate Commerce and Labor
Senate of Virginia
P.O. Box 396
Richmond, Virginia 23218

The Honorable Jeion A. Ward
Chair, House Labor and Commerce
Virginia House of Delegates
P.O. Box 7310
Hampton, Virginia 23666

The Honorable Adam Ebbin
Chair, Commission on Unemployment Compensation
Senate of Virginia
P.O. Box 396
Richmond, Virginia 23218

FROM: Demetrios J. Melis, Commissioner

RE: Update on the Office of the Unemployment Compensation Ombudsman

Dear Governor, Chairmen, and Madam Chair:

Per the 2024-2025 Budget of the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) is required to provide a quarterly report updating the General Assembly on the Unemployment Compensation Ombudsman, to the Governor, House Labor and Commerce Committee, the Senate Commerce and Labor Committee, and the Commission on Unemployment Compensation. This letter serves to meet that requirement.

As of July 2024, the VEC has a new Ombudsman, more commonly referred to as the Chief Customer Advocate. The Chief Customer Advocate plays a key role in engaging with customers, community partners, businesses, and other interested stakeholders. They ensure the needs and interests of those relying on the VEC for services and assistance remain front and center working directly with the Commissioner's office, the Unemployment Insurance (UI) and Benefits

Division, and work collaboratively with VEC's communications director to promote and improve the public's knowledge of Virginia's unemployment insurance program and the appeals process.

Additionally, the Chief Customer Advocate along with complimenting VEC staff, and customer advocates serving on VEC's escalation team can provide front line "on the ground knowledge and assistance." Throughout this past quarter the Chief Customer Advocate's office has worked with dislocated and other impacted workers and multiple employers to provide assistance with navigating through furloughs, layoffs, and other unique workforce issues.

A newly formed customer escalation team combines customer advocates who provide support to individuals with barriers or other unique circumstances, along with specialized customer service representatives, all integrated in a cross-functional specialized team with advanced expertise and greater autonomy to resolve issues for faster resolution. We've developed a centralized customer contact management system, providing a single inquiry point for the public, those with complex situations, and legislative staff, enhancing tracking and response time for customer inquiries.

Additionally, the agency is currently redeveloping our website to improve the customer experience. As our primary public touchpoint, the new site will feature improved navigation, better accessibility, and plain language for easier use. The website will go-live in January of 2025.

On September 13, 2024, Boars Head shut down its Jarratt, VA plant, impacting numerous employees. The Chief Customer Advocate engaged with Boars Head's corporate HR team to guide them on effective communication regarding the affected workers and provided information on how the allocation of severance pay can impact unemployment claims. Over a two-week period, the Chief Customer Advocate's office provided in-person assistance at the Emporia local office, helping approximately 250 claimants with their initial filings and educating them on the claims process.

A Customer Advisory Council meeting was scheduled for mid-September. However, because of multiple incidents requiring the Chief Customer Advocate's involvement, the CAC meeting was canceled and will be rescheduled for a later date.

The Chief Customer Advocate's office responded to Southwest Virginia on September 30 to provide assistance to the areas devastated by the remnants of Hurricane Helene. Staff provided assistance to dislocated, self-employed, and those otherwise unable to work. The teams were equipped with laptops, mobile hotspots, and paper applications to help individuals file claims and address questions related to Unemployment Insurance and Disaster Unemployment Assistance eligibility. Furthermore, customer advocates working out of our customer contact center worked extended hours, weekends, and holidays, to be available and provide assistance to impacted residents.

We are extremely proud of the efforts underway to ensure Virginia's Unemployment Insurance program and benefits are easily accessed and understood by all. Please do not hesitate to contact me at demetrios.melis@vec.virginia.gov or 804-786-3001 with any questions.

Sincerely,

Demetrios J. Melis
Commissioner