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July 10, 2020

The Honorable Greg Abbott  
Governor of Texas  
P.O. Box 12428  
Austin, Texas 78771

Dear Governor Abbott,

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has been one of the most grueling challenges Texans have faced from both a health and economic perspective. Thousands of El Pasoans have lost their jobs through no fault of their own because of stay-at-home orders and other factors related to the pandemic. For many, this means losing the ability to make ends meet for their families and loved ones. Congress took action and appropriated over \$1 billion to support state unemployment agencies in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which was followed by the creation of a federal pandemic unemployment program in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. These actions were taken to ensure Americans who lost their jobs or were furloughed because of the pandemic would have access to unemployment benefits to pay their rent or mortgage, utilities and groceries, medicines, and other necessities.

Since then, I have been dismayed to hear from my constituents who have shared an array of problems they have faced since March when trying to access unemployment benefits through the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC). In order to better understand what patterns were emerging, I sent out a community survey to gather more information about the issues El Pasoans have encountered while trying to access benefits that are meant to help them during this health and economic crisis.

What we knew from the calls we received from constituents, and what was confirmed in the survey is that each time they tried to either access the TWC website or call the Claims Assistance Call Center, they were met with nothing but roadblocks. About 46% of survey respondents reported having to call or use the online portal more than 10 times to receive the answers they were looking for. These same El Pasoans said the biggest problems they encountered were either having the online portal crash or not being able to reach someone at the call center for hours. It is appalling that at a time when the public needs answers and reassurance that the TWC is unable to provide either.

Even when El Pasoans were able to successfully submit their applications for unemployment benefits, many waited weeks until they received their first unemployment check. About 40%

surveyed said it took a few weeks after the completion of their application to receive a check, while an additional 39% said it took more than a month. That means that there are potentially hundreds of El Pasoans who had to come up with money to pay their bills from somewhere else or were simply unable to pay them.

When Congress initially passed the CARES Act, we included the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation Program with the intention of sending these crucial funds through the states and into the pockets of unemployed Americans as soon as possible. Instead, the TWC has shown a pattern of inaccessibility and delay.

While this survey asked participants to talk about their experiences with the TWC since March 20<sup>th</sup>, it is clear that the same issues that were present at the beginning of this crisis have not yet been addressed. One constituent responded by saying she called the TWC up to 50 times per day over a two-week period and had not yet received help with her application at the time they answered the survey. This is alarming because El Pasoans who went back to work after the state's decision to reopen too early are again losing their jobs in the wake of new safety restrictions. They will need to rely on the TWC to provide their unemployment benefits and should not have to make dozens of calls or wait weeks to speak to someone at the TWC for help.

El Pasoans deserve to have an agency that meets their needs. With daily confirmed cases of COVID-19 reaching new highs recently, it is clear that this pandemic will not be over any time soon. Just like a comprehensive testing and contact tracing program is necessary to ensure the health and safety of Texans, an aggressive improvement plan is urgently needed for the TWC so Texans can get financial help sent by Congress as we continue to address their needs during this pandemic.

I have included a copy of the survey results for your review. I hope that you will take the necessary steps to improve the TWC to meet Texans' needs during this national emergency and be transparent about how you will achieve that end.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Veronica Escobar". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Veronica Escobar  
Member of Congress