

Testimony of Shelby Meyenburg  
Member of Washington Federation of State Employees / AFSCME Council 28, Local 443  
Before the  
Ways and Means Subcommittee on Work and Welfare  
U.S. House of Representatives  
For the Hearing on  
“Time’s Running Out: Prosecuting Fraudsters for Stealing Billions in Unemployment  
Benefits from American Workers”

February 6, 2025

Good afternoon, Chair LaHood, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the subcommittee. My name is Shelby Meyenburg, thank you for the opportunity to talk to you today about my experience as an Unemployment Insurance (UI) worker in the state of Washington. I am also a proud Member of AFSCME Council 28 and the Washington Federation of State Employees, Local 443. I have held a variety of positions in the Washington state workforce system. I appreciate the opportunity to share my experience administering the UI system during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. My job allows me to help workers as they navigate losing a job and then applying for UI benefits to support themselves and their families. I also provide re-employment services to get them back into a good job. As a UI worker, I both help Washingtonians receive the unemployment insurance benefits they need but also help safeguard the UI system against fraud. My goal is to get the right benefits to the right people on time.

I am here today to share my experience as an Unemployment Insurance (UI) Ambassador for the state of Washington and the lessons I have learned through the pandemic and after. In April 2020, I was transferred into the UI claims center as “non-permanent staff” from a training position. As a reminder, the unemployment rate in the state of Washington was 5.1% in March 2020 and tripled to 15.4% in April 2020. Some workers were transferred into non-permanent staff positions to process UI claims with very little training — at most, two weeks of training. The standard training for the UI program is six to eight weeks but, at that time, we needed to address the urgent needs of workers who had lost their jobs and were facing an unprecedented crisis.

In September 2020, I applied to an opening to work in the UI claims center full-time as a UI Specialist because I saw the need to help workers during the ongoing pandemic. I moved up in February 2021 and became the Unemployment Intake Lead Agent, again as a non-permanent staff. I was laid off from my non-permanent staff position in the spring of 2022 and had to file for unemployment insurance myself. Very soon after my layoff, I applied for a permanent position under the state’s merit-based personnel system and was hired back to work in the UI program full-time in July 2022 in that permanent position.

It was a humbling experience to go from processing UI claims to applying for UI myself. While Washington state is among the more generous states for UI benefit levels, we also have a high cost of living. I went from receiving about \$1,500 after taxes per pay period to receiving \$480 after taxes each week in unemployment benefits. My income was cut by one-third. Even though I keep my living expenses low, I could not afford both my rent and car payment with two weeks of unemployment benefits. This experience hit home for me the importance of helping people access

these benefits even if it was not enough. We needed to provide people with the benefits they need when you lose your job and your income.

I hope that when Congress considers reforming the UI program or addressing UI fraud, you see the value in merit staffing in the UI system. We are the foundation of a strong and secure UI system. In my current role, one of the critical ways we safeguard the system is with identity checks. I review documents, including a UI claimant's driver's license, Social Security card, passport, and birth certificate. UI Ambassadors send copies of these documents through our secure portal both to ensure that the claimant's personally identifiable information (PII) is protected and to expedite the claim. Safeguarding a claimant's identity prevents fraud and is one of the trusted responsibilities of a UI Ambassador.

Another vital role of a UI Ambassador is to fix errors and address more complex claims. In a recent case, a UI claimant had reached out to one of our U.S. Senators to help resolve an unemployment insurance claim. This worker had filed for unemployment during the pandemic but had made an error in declaring whether they were "able or available for work," a requirement in the UI program. Because of this problem in a four-year-old UI claim, this worker could not receive UI benefits for a subsequent job loss in 2024. I helped resolve the error made in 2021 so that this worker could receive the UI benefits she qualified for and very much needed in 2024.

This case is just one example of UI workers ensuring that people who qualify for benefits receive those benefits. We help jobless workers make sense of the sometimes-confusing language in the UI program. We let them know when in the process they should file an appeal and more. The problems we saw during the pandemic continue to come up in the UI system. It is my job to make the process of filing for and receiving unemployment benefits straightforward and fair. Resolving claims like this in a timely manner takes training, a deep knowledge of the program, persistence, and dedication to our mission. This is the important work that highly skilled and well-trained UI workers do every day. Though I had been laid off by the UI program and the early days of processing UI claims in 2020 were hard, I reapplied in 2022 to work in the UI program because I wanted to help people when they need it the most. I knew that my experience could help people during one of the toughest times in their lives. It also made me a believer in having a skilled group of workers administering claims because these UI benefits keep families afloat. Claimants and their families deserve a UI workforce that knows the program and can solve problems.

My evolution in the UI program from a non-permanent staffer to a permanent staffer hired under the merit-based personnel system has helped me see the value in highly skilled staff members who understand the complexities of the UI program. We learned a lot from the pandemic. People like me are the first line of defense protecting hard-earned UI benefits from fraud. UI workers hired under a merit-based personnel system, as required under federal law, ensure that the services provided to jobseekers and employers across the country are unbiased and high-quality. UI workers cannot have any other interests at play other than serving that worker and maintaining the integrity of the UI program.

While Washington state did not outsource UI work during the pandemic, the temporary privatization of UI administration — allowed only during the pandemic — caused serious problems nationwide. Many states outsourced UI administration to companies that hired low-paid,

poorly trained staff to administer traditional and new temporary UI programs. This led to poor service and long payment delays for claimants. It was a tough time for our country but the inadequate investments in the UI system over decades preceding the pandemic and the temporary privatization in the early days of the pandemic set states up to fail. UI workers serve people who may be in crisis. Many UI applicants and claimants have lost everything in their lives and are desperate for help. To do our jobs effectively, we have to be highly skilled and well-trained. This work is critical to our economy and our country. It should not be automated, assigned to staff with substandard training, or outsourced.

Looking forward, one solution to prepare for future recessions is to cross-train existing staff from other programs within the state government workforce to assist in UI work. This practice was a critical part of the UI-Employment Service partnership for decades but has diminished over the past 20 to 30 years. With cross-training, the states will have access to a pool of potential UI workers who can come in to help on a temporary basis when a surge of unemployment claims affects a state. Cross-training other state employees to handle UI claims allows a state to meet the merit-staffing requirements under federal law and serve the jobless workers who need the UI system to work efficiently. These cross-trained merit-staffed state employees would receive a brief refresher training and then — when necessary — would hit the ground running to work on cases that otherwise might have brought an American Job Center to a standstill. With these cross-trained workers, we maintain a high quality of staff working in the UI program, beneficiaries receive their needed benefits on time, the local economy continues to run, and workers have the support they need while they look for a new job.

As you work together to fund the UI system and consider needed reforms, I urge you to support greater investment in the UI system. I also urge you to talk to UI workers around the country. We administer the system and see the challenges day to day. We want the UI system to work well for everyone and to protect the system from fraud. We can accomplish all of these goals with increased funding and cooperation between the state and federal levels—not by outsourcing the work of skilled, merit-based UI staff.

I thank the Chairman, Ranking Member and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify today.