

On March 24 2020 I was furloughed from my job in New Hampshire due to the COVID-19 Global Pandemic. I worked that job 32 hours per week, and it made up half of my weekly income. I continued to work for a Vermont non profit 20 hours a week.

At that time I opened an unemployment claim with the state of New Hampshire. I was awarded a weekly benefit amount based only on my New Hampshire income. Vermont was not reporting wages, and No explanation was ever given as to why my Vermont wages were not being shared with New Hampshire. Over the course of the next months, I spoke with many and National Guard members who were answering the phones, as well as managers, in effort to get closer to an understanding, and fix what most certainly was a mistake. It was not until August that I learned the reason Vermont was not sharing my wages is that those wages were deemed “exempt” due to the fact that I worked for a non-profit employing less than 4 people.

Between March and August I continued to file claims at the recommendation of everyone I spoke with in New Hampshire. Mostly I was speaking with National Guard members, but I also spoke with NH legislators, NH Unemployment Commissioners, my NH employer.

When I was told that the issue was on the Vermont side, I turned my attention to Vermont, and began writing Vermont legislators, commissioners, Peter Welch, you name it.

With countless programs created to assist unemployed workers around the country, I happen to have worked in a sector that was seemingly forgotten when making provisions to provide unemployment benefits to those not usually covered. I have been told by the state of Vermont that they have no idea how many people are in my situation, that they have no idea how to determine that, and, that they cannot make any adjustments without creating legislation to do so, but because they don't know how many people work for exempt non-profits in Vermont and were denied benefits, they don't know how to proceed.

I have also been told that the reason independent contractors were included in pandemic unemployment assistance is because they had data on those numbers. I struggle to digest that because it is unknown how many people are in my situation, that we are unable to create a solution. I suggest that the legislature create a fund with their federal pandemic monies, that is held in reserve while they figure out how many people were impacted by being employed for an exempt non-profit.

I am no less valid a worker than one who works for an employer that stands up for their employees by paying into the unemployment insurance program.

During the pandemic, the states of Vermont and New Hampshire rested on non-pandemic time rules when it came time to decide not to approve my Unemployment Insurance claim, all while the US government created new rules to get help to the unemployed. I studied different Pandemic Unemployment Assistance and various federally funded programs that were built to protect those not eligible for regular unemployment. To me, that exactly describes my situation. However, while policy makers were thinking of some sectors of the working class, they entirely forgot about mine, the Vermont exempt non-profit.

What has continued to perplex me is that Vermont was not sharing my wages with New Hampshire, considering them exempt, whereby the original claim was with the State of New Hampshire, who would have paid the Unemployment Benefits.

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At the end of the day, that process was so thoroughly draining. I feel like fighting to keep my family financially solvent dominated my pandemic experience. Sheer terror at income instability. It was draining to say the least. My most recent attempt at righting this barrier to unemployment benefits was to speak with the State of Vermont's lawyer, who told me if the non-profit I worked for would file back payments of unemployment insurance payments as amended returns, I would be eligible for benefits. I spoke with the non-profit's director, the only employee of the organization, who agreed to get that in motion. I have not followed back up with her, as she fights to carry out the mission of her organization on a slim budget and never enough time.

What I think is missing, from my understanding of reading the bills, is how the State intends to create a system for non-profit employees to file for back unemployment benefits, had they been eligible but for State Law being a barrier during the height of the Pandemic.

Thank you for your time today, and for your continued attention to this matter. It will mean something to non-profit employees moving forward.