

BRIEF TO HUMA COMMITTEE

REVIEW OF THE EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE PROGRAM

SUBMITTED JOINTLY BY:

**COMMUNITY UNEMPLOYED
HELP CENTRE
WINNIPEG, MANITOBA**

**UNEMPLOYED WORKERS
HELP CENTRES
REGINA AND SASKATOON, SASKATCHEWAN**

APRIL 8, 2021

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The Community Unemployed Help Centre and the Unemployed Workers Help Centres welcome the opportunity to make a joint submission to the HUMA Committee, Review of the Employment Insurance Program.

Since 1980 the Community Unemployed Help Centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba and since 1995 the Unemployed Workers Help Centres of Saskatchewan in Regina and Saskatoon have provided information, advocacy and appeal representation for UI/EI claimants in our provinces. Our agencies have a combined experience of 67 years representing and assisting workers to ensure they receive the Unemployment/Employment Insurance benefits they are entitled to.

We will be focusing our comments and recommendation in two specific areas of concern for our agencies. The governance of the new EI tripartite appeal system which is currently in the last phases of development and the return of the position of the regional Public Liaison Officers/Agents to allow for the provision of enhanced service delivery within Service Canada.

We believe at this point in the administration of the EI program the only way our concerns will finally be addressed is if the committee supports their inclusion in your committee report. Your recommendations are necessary to fulfill long standing promises and commitments made to us in the EI help and advocacy community across this country. Commitments which have been made to us by the government and senior officials in the past but not acted upon. We fail to understand the reason for the resistance within the Department to act in a positive fashion on both these issues.

We commend the Government for their commitment to return to the first level, three-person, EI appeal hearing system which reflects the tripartite structure of the EI Program. The changes were a response to the recommendations of the Employment Insurance Recourse Process Working Group, October 24-25, 2018. We were a member of the Working Group which was composed of labour and employer group stakeholders.

The members of the Working Group are very concerned with what we have been hearing in regards to the proposed governance structure of the new appeal boards. We have been advised by the Commissioners for Workers and Employers that the governments plan is to have the Appeal Boards administered by a new, GIC appointed, executive director who would report directly to the Chair of the Commission. This administration structure is not what we had expected based on our participation and our recommendations detailed in the Report On The

Outcomes Of The Employment Insurance Recourse Process Working Group.

In the report from the Recourse Process Working Group Meeting, Hill and Knowlton Strategies wrote in the Key Takeaways and Conclusions:

“Participants highlighted several key takeaways from the working group meeting, including recognizing that this session in and of itself, is a tripartite model of co-development and encouraged the Department to introduce this within their governance structure for the recourse process”.

In a recent letter to Minister Qualtrough from the EI Worker and Employer Commissioners regarding the administration of the new Board of Appeals they make the point clearly that in their view **“the promised and much anticipated accountability linkage to the tri-partite Commission, appears to have disappeared”**. This is not acceptable for those of us who contributed to the review process, made recommendations which the Minister clearly accepted and were looking forward to the long anticipated improvements to the EI Recourse Processes.

We respectfully request that the HUMA Committee make a recommendation that there is accountability, reporting and participatory requirements of co-management and oversight of the new EI Appeal Boards to the Commission as a whole and particularly in respect of the Commissioners who represent Workers and Employers.

Our second recommendation to the Committee is the restoration of Public Liaison Officers/Agents within the administration and service delivery structure of Service Canada. The restoration of the PLOs has been advocated for by EI stakeholder parties across the spectrum for years. In your hearings to date you have consistently heard witnesses call for the restoration of this position. Many of the submissions you have received have also called for their return.

A significant and fundamental problem for us in doing our work as EI help agencies was the discontinuation of our direct access to Liaison Officers, Business Expertise Officers and regional managers within Service Canada. For years we had worked as collaborative stakeholders with ESDC and Service Canada to assist EI claimants to access benefits until our recognized working relationship was

abruptly ended in 2014. Service Canada prior to that time referred many claimants directly to our offices but that also ended after the 2014 letter.

You, Committee members, as Members of Parliament have access to specialized liaison enquiry agents that your offices can contact to get information or assistance with your constituents EI claims. We at the CUHC and the UWHC had access to those same agents for assistance with our clients until July 7, 2014 when we were informed by letter from Service Canada that our direct access was to end for the following reason.

“the direct phone service you have previously received from the EI Liaison Enquiry Team has been discontinued due to our commitments to provide equal service to all clients. As a result responses to your enquiries will not longer be accessible via this channel.”

We were directed to use the 1-800 enquiry line which at the time was basically dis-functional and not orientated or directed to work with us in any constructive fashion. It is really only in the last couple of years that the 1-800 call agents became more functional in providing information and assistance to us and our clients. But this is still a far cry from the assistance we accessed through the Liaison Enquiry Team or the PLOs in the past.

For the purposes of your review we think it would be useful to provide a description of the PLO position. The description of the role of the Liaison Officer below was taken from the 1999 and 2000 EI Monitoring and Assessment Reports.

“This role was first introduced in the late 1980s. The three main functions of a PLO are (1) providing service delivery advice, (2) improving public knowledge and awareness, and (3) providing specialized services. In general, PLOs assist clients with the EI program.

Public Liaison Officers play an important role in providing quality services to Canadians by putting a human face on the EI program. The PLOs represent the EI program in the community, through contacts with employers and claimants...clients with the most difficult problems are sent to the PLOs for detailed explanations of decisions, or referred to other agencies that may help with a particular problem. It is also part of their role to monitor how the office provides services and suggest improvements”.

In 1999 there were 135 PLOs across the country. Our offices had extensive working relationships with the PLOs. They referred claimants with problems to our offices and our work on claimant's claim files were facilitated and assisted by PLOs. We worked collaboratively with the PLOs to deliver EI program information to the community. They were a key communication link to the Commission for our agencies.

Frankly, it appears to us that EI/SC wanted to cut off all direct access to agents, business expertise officers, managers, etc. For long standing advocacy agencies like ours even after the elimination of the PLO, we still had access to specialized Enquiry Liaison Agents who provided information and assistance with our client's claims. These were typically claims which required more interaction, information or communication with Service Canada to have decisions made on eligibility. Many of these claims are often far past their policy mandated due dates for completion by Service Canada.

Because we no longer have access to Enquiry Liaison Agents we are often in contact with MP offices requesting their assistance with claimants we are assisting. This is because enquiries from MP offices ensure a relatively prompt and fulsome response as to what is going on with an individual's EI claim. And will often trigger an almost immediate response by Service Canada to the claimant in an attempt to resolve their claim issue.

The PLO position has been a live issue for several years between the representatives of workers, employers, unions, EI help agencies and the administration of Service Canada. Discussion and reviews of the PLO position have occurred in many forms over this period. That has included annual stakeholders meetings with senior officials of Service Canada and the Commissioners, informal meetings and discussions with Service Canada officials and formal EI Review Committees, Panels and Service Quality Reviews over the last five years.

We would remind the Committee of the Recommendations of the 2016 Report of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons With Disabilities Exploring the Impact of Recent Changes to Employment Insurance and Ways to Improve Access to the Program.

Recommendation 12 of the Report states: "The Committee recommends that the federal government reinstate the system of regional employment insurance agents to improve support for unemployed individuals who wish to apply or have applied for benefits"

We would also refer the Committee to the Employment Insurance Service Quality Review Making Citizens Central Report, 2017, page77.

Recommendation 3: The Panel recommends Service Canada identify and address access issues facing Canadians and develop service delivery strategies such as enhanced assistance for citizens who face similar access challenges to ensure their needs are addressed and positive outcomes and satisfaction achieved.

The Panel made this recommendation based on the fact that they: “heard from many stakeholder groups, namely employer associations, claimant interest groups, and advocacy groups for vulnerable populations, that desired a more enhanced option in terms of accessing information and services. They also said, “the Panel also believes that the Government should continue to engage citizens and third parties to find novel and innovative ways to address the needs of those who require enhanced services”.

In their report, on page 76, the Panel makes reference to the Best Practice: Quebec Region Enquiry Unit, to deal with third party, designated representatives contacts seeking information on an individuals EI claim.

“To answer Member of Parliament questions on the program, Service Canada provides a special hotline to provide quick responses. Responding to a need from stakeholder associations, the Quebec region of Service Canada now provides the same hotline service to designated representatives from third-party agencies to answer questions on the program and make enquiries on a claimant’s behalf without additional consent or authorization requirements. This is an example of the kind of enhance service that could be applied more broadly by Service Canada across all channels to those clients and citizens who want it.”

We, advocates outside of Quebec, have been asking for the same consideration, service and policy to be applied to us. For the last five years our agencies, unions and others across the country have pleaded for the return of our access to specialized enquiry agents and some line of direct communication with regional management typical to what we used to have. We lack any formal communication link with our regional Service Canada offices as is the case for other EI help agencies across the country except it appears those in Quebec.

For years now commitments to do something for third party representatives have been made by senior officials in the Department. The last commitment, “to do something for us” was the response of senior officials of Service Canada to us, worker representatives and stakeholders, in the EI Worker Commissioner Forum almost a year and a half ago. To this point in time nothing has been done for us.

Obviously Service Canada has had a priority and overarching need to provide a rapid and ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic over the past year. We applaud the Government and Service Canada for the admiral job they have done to protect the financial security of workers through the pandemic response Emergency and Recovery Benefits Programs and the amendments made to the EI program.

But having said that, the direct access we are requesting and had in the past, would have greatly enhanced our ability to assist unemployed workers contacting our offices needing assistance during the pandemic.

The bottom line is we are tired of unkept promises and commitments by Service Canada to deal with our access issues. Our agencies mandates are to ensure that citizens receive the EI benefits they are entitled to and we are simply asking for restoration of tools and resources which are critical to us in meeting our mandates.

We thank the Committee for your review of our brief and doing your important work of reviewing and reporting on the Employment Insurance System: a foundational component of Canada's social safety net and a national fiscal stabilizer program.