



April 2021

PA Hour Majority Policy Committee

My name is Mary Malone, and I am here to testify before you today on behalf of two different entities, that are partners through our programs and missions. I am currently the Vice Chair of the Luzerne Schuylkill Workforce Development Board and President of Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce. The Luzerne Schuylkill Board sent a letter to all of our Legislators in the service area regarding the continued suspension of work searches and the intensifying challenges of employers who are seeking to fill positions at their companies. It is through this letter that Representative Aaron Kaufer extended an invitation for a member of the Board to appear hear today. I appreciate the opportunity.

I am the President of Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce with over 650 members for the last 7 years. The Chamber's membership is made up of a variety of businesses from large manufacturers, hospital and health care businesses as well as small professional accounting firms and the local mom and pop businesses. The mission of the Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce is to contribute to its members' business success by providing them valuable information, services and networking opportunities, and by taking active measures to help them improve the business climate and quality of life in Greater Hazleton. This is at the core of all we do. My job allows me the opportunity to interact and hear from the "frontline" what is happening in our business community at any given time.

The varied needs of our membership is as diverse as the business models and industries they represent, but one thing in last few months has been a resounding issue for all, acquiring a workforce necessary to run their operations. This issue keeps plant managers and business owners up at night for both the present and their concerns for the future survival of the business. The information I would like to share with you today are first hand encounters and conversations I have had with these members. The Chamber hosts an annual job fair with an average of 35 employers. We were able to recently host a socially distanced and safe job fair at the Lauren Mall with record attendance by employers with over 46 employers.

The issue was participants, or job seekers. A very well published, accessible location had extremely limited workforce participation. A local manufacture with long history in our community as an excellent employer, had recently raised starting wages by \$2.00 for no experience and paying a sign on bonus, another manufacturer has increased pay, a new hire immediately starts with benefits day one. A note that we have seen the start of pay in our area go from \$15 pre pandemic to over \$17. These historical changes still have not yielded an increase in applications or interest in good jobs. The local family owned restaurant that provided lunch that day for the employers explained about changing the business model of when the restaurant was open, losing 28 hours that the operation was open to the public. This restaurant is in our downtown business district that has many offices open and working in socially distanced or hybrid fashion. This closure is not because of pandemic but because after various ways of searching to fill positions, they could not find the workforce to staff the restaurant. Human Resource managers shared stories with each other about individuals telling them that they had no need to work in the current environment. We are headed into summer months so many seasonal employers are also searching for available workforce. After being restricted due to Covid impact last summer, the survival of these businesses is in question and they too are finding no one interested in applying. The theme of all of these employers in their quest for potential workforce is the changes to the Commonwealth 's unemployment requirements.

We understand that the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) extension is up to 88 weeks, but the halt on Pennsylvania Unemployment System work registration and work search requirement are now acting as an incentive for workforce to not re-engage and continue the recovery processes. We feel strongly that the current system is acting in reverse of its original intention. We have multiple employers with over 30 job openings, and considering halting expansion plans for fear of not having a workforce to meet the demands of their customers. This is having ripple effects in the economic engine of our area both now and into the future. The current workforce is being fatigued by mandatory overtime, and raises a health and safety concerns as the workforce shortage continues.

We urge the Commonwealth to re consider the reinstatement of job search requirement immediately. This will also assist residents of the Commonwealth to have a proactive plan in place as the benefits will expire. The Greater Hazleton Chamber and the Luzerne/Schuylkill Workforce Development Board and others stand ready to assist both employers and job seekers in finding a match that provides a sustainable living wage and moves our area forward after the challenges of the Pandemic. Thank you again to the committee and Representative Kafue for the opportunity to testify today.