

# The Diocese of Southeast Florida

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May 5, 2020

The Honorable Ron DeSantis  
Office of Governor  
State of Florida  
The Capitol  
400 South Monroe Street  
Tallahassee FL 32399-0001

Dear Governor DeSantis,

As Bishops of the Episcopal Church in Florida, who exercise both spiritual oversight of our respective communities and also a collective pastoral concern for all the people of our State who live in our dioceses, we are encouraged by the investigation that you ordered yesterday (May 4) into the current difficulties in our State's unemployment benefits system. We share your judgement that the system is "broken," and while we understand that there have been problems with the system that pre-date your administration, we urge you to give this matter the highest possible priority so that the State may fulfil its obligation of care for our unemployed sisters and brothers in our communities.

According to a recent survey conducted by Florida Congresswoman Stephanie Murphy, access for unemployed workers to the State Unemployment Insurance Benefits, a State-federal program, varies from State to State depending entirely on how well the program is being administered. She went on to report that 93% of respondents have reported a very negative experience in the application process, while only 1% of applicants responded favorably. Applicants report website crashes, freezes, or failures to load properly after hours of unsuccessful attempts to complete the application process.

One citizen, laid off in early March, noted that her problems with receiving any benefits or talking to a representative at the Department of Economic Opportunity were thwarted due to the unavailability of the callback feature. This is but one example of the unacceptable situation that is being repeated over and over and across our State, and about which we are hearing every day. We are also deeply concerned that communities of our black and brown fellow citizens are suffering at a disproportionately higher rate from this inaccessible unemployment benefits system.

The current pandemic has brought these difficulties into high relief and has made their resolution all the more urgent. Both the foundational documents of our nation, as well as the social teachings of the Church, place the dignity and well-being of the human person at the heart of our common concern, and both the tradition of the Scriptures and the social teaching of the Church insist that the care for the neediest among us is a defining mark of an ethical society and a moral measure of any economy.

The Church teaches that the State has an obligation to do all in its power to ensure the best possible environment for employment for all those who can, want, and need to work. The support of a stable and growing job market is of prime importance, but in an economic system in which there will always be unemployment and underemployment, the State also has a moral as well as a financial obligation to support those who may at any given point in their lives be out of work, or not have sufficient work to support the basic necessities of life. In addition, this support must be made readily and quickly available to the unemployed and underemployed, without undue hindrance or difficulty in circumstances where they are already under pressure.

In the light of the obligations of the State in this matter, and consonant with the social teachings of the Church, it follows that a statewide system of unemployment insurance must be (a) easy to access; (b) efficient and responsive to changing needs; (c) inclusive of all people but prioritizing those in the greatest need; and (d) prudent in the extent and duration of allocated benefits. Such an unemployment insurance program promotes the common good, reflects the preferential option for the poor and those in need, protects the dignity of the human person, and secures the State's function as a limited, yet principal and necessary, agent overseeing an economy that is to be ordered to the benefit of all people.

As bishops and pastors, every day we see and know the cost of unemployment at the individual and local level, as well as the chronic problems that are caused by a system of inadequate benefits and impeded access. We are also acutely aware of the economic crisis that is a consequence of the current pandemic, as it is affecting our church communities as much as it is affecting our fellow citizens.

While we recognize the challenges that the pandemic is presenting across the board, we do however remain firm in our conviction that the present system of access to unemployment benefits in our State is unjust, if not in its intention, then certainly in its consequences, and the swift and effective resolution of these problems must be a matter of expeditious action. The ability of our citizens and our communities to recover from the cost that the coronavirus pandemic has exacted from us all depends in large measure on the support of our unemployed and underemployed sisters and brothers until such time – may it be soon – that they can return to full employment. This is a matter of common, bi-partisan concern, and we look to you for clear and unequivocal leadership in this matter. We affirm our support as your administration addresses quickly and effectively the problems that exist and finds ways to deliver immediate aid

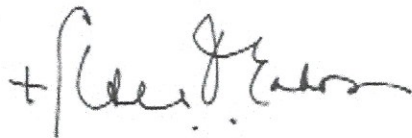
to those who, for some weeks now, have been living without the means to support life and subsistence.

Thank you for your public expression of care for our people, and especially for those underserved people who are our friends and neighbors. Let us outdo ourselves in this State in compassion and mercy.

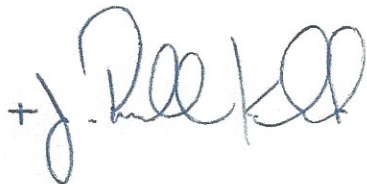
Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and followed by the name 'Gregory Brewer' in a cursive script.

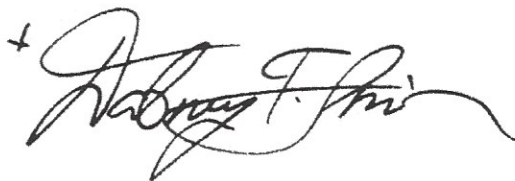
The Right Reverend Gregory Brewer  
Bishop of Central Florida (Orlando)

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and followed by the name 'Peter Eaton' in a cursive script.

The Right Reverend Peter Eaton  
Bishop of Southeast Florida (Miami)

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and followed by the name 'Russell Kendrick' in a cursive script.

The Right Reverend Russell Kendrick  
Bishop of the Central Gulf Coast (Pensacola)

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and followed by the name 'Dabney Smith' in a cursive script.

The Right Reverend Dabney Smith  
Bishop of Southwest Florida (St Petersburg)