

Testimony of Gaela Solo on
How New York's Partial Unemployment Insurance Rules Are Hurting
Part-Time Workers Like Me During the COVID-19 Crisis

Before the Joint New York State Senate and Assembly Public Hearing on
the Impact of COVID-19 on the Workforce

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My name is Gaela Solo. I live in uptown Manhattan and until mid-March 2020 I worked two jobs as a bartender and a server at a bar and restaurant, both located in midtown near Times Square. I worked over 40 hours each week and earned between \$800 and \$1000 a week. However, when the COVID-19 crisis hit, the restaurant and bar both shut down, and neither has reopened.

I filed for unemployment with the New York State Department of Labor, and began receiving unemployment benefits from the state, plus the additional \$600 a week that the federal government has been providing during the COVID crisis. Together they replaced my missing income and allowed me to continue paying my rent and other bills.

In early July, however, I had an opportunity to return to work part-time – not at my old jobs which are still shut down, but at a new job working part-time from home helping to staff a help-line providing peer support for persons needing assistance during the COVID crisis. I started my new job in early July after the 4th of July weekend. However, the help-line job, which pays about \$17.25 an hour, offers me just 15-16 hours a week spread over four days a week.

I appreciated getting back to work, and I enjoy the new job and being paid to help others when so many are going times of personal, economic and health crisis. But the new job provides less than half the hours that I used to work and pays me only about \$260 to \$280 a week. I had thought that after taking this part-time job I would be able to keep receiving some of my unemployment benefits – although I thought they would probably go down somewhat, which would make sense.

But when I certified for unemployment on the NYS DOL website the week after I started my new job, I was shocked to learn that my \$260 earnings spread over four days made me ineligible to continue receiving any unemployment benefits at all. As a result, in July I stopped receiving both my New York State unemployment benefits – which had been about \$504 per week – and I also stopped receiving the \$600 per week additional federal unemployment payment.

Because of losing unemployment, my weekly earnings have been slashed from around \$1,104 each week, to just \$260 now.

That doesn't come close to enabling me to cover my basic living expenses – even after cutting back. My rent alone is \$1,025/month. My other basic expenses like food, cell phone, utilities, health insurance, medication and credit card bills add up to more than \$450 per month. My student loans after the stop-payment ends on September 30 will add an extra \$150 per month.

I was fortunate to have a small amount of emergency savings so I'm now living off of that and my part-time job. But it will not last me that long and when it's gone I don't know how I'm going to be able to keep paying my rent and other expenses.

I know there are many other New Yorkers in the same situation as me: people who lost full-time jobs and have been able to find part-time replacement work – but then lost their unemployment insurance cushion when they accepted the part-time work and are now facing extreme economic crisis.

My understanding is that other states allow unemployed workers who return to work part-time to keep some or all of their unemployment benefits – and that the New York legislature could change New York's unemployment laws to do the same. I strongly urge you to do that. If that doesn't happen, I just don't know how I and the thousands of others like me who have returned to part-time work are going to survive the coming months until the economy reopens and we can find full-time jobs that pay our bills.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share my experiences with you today.