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Adventures in State Bailouts

By *james.abels*

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Or, how New York directed my business to a massive hole in the ground.

 [090528_TBM_hole.jpg](#) [1]

Two months after being laid off by *Forbes*, I discovered New York's [Self Employment Assistance Program](#) [2]. The problem was getting the state itself to discover it.

The program is offered by New York to help entrepreneurs launch new businesses while refunding tax dollars (the state calls them unemployment benefits). I learned of it on the 14th page of an instruction manual that was sent to me when I applied for unemployment.

The SEAP program sounded like a good deal to help me launch myself as a Web video news anchor covering media news. It's been my beat for a while. I felt good about it. This is the era of government bailouts and stimulus packages, after all. I couldn't know that my first significant interaction with government would lead me on a series of adventures involving baffled state employees and a constant sense of amazement.

I had my first adventure with New York on a Thursday afternoon in mid-March. I called the number listed for SEAP and learned the state had created the world's premier choose-your-own-adventure series using a voice mail messaging system. There was a dizzying array of options to choose from, each one leading to more options. It had no end. I cycled past level after level about filing new claims, frequently asked questions, and how part-time work affects benefits.

I hung up once, redialed, and started again (I had gotten lost), and just when I had lost hope, I met Charles. He had to go ask his manager about SEAP. I waited on the phone until he came back to explain I had to go to an unemployment office to apply. Once there, I would be given a quiz, and my answers would be scored to see if I qualified. Charles then gave me two addresses, one in Midtown Manhattan and the other in Harlem.

The next day, I set off for 247 W. 54th St. to take my quiz. That's when I experienced my second adventure. Charles had sent me to a hole in the ground. It was a massive two-story pit that stretched along one-third of the block. To clarify, that's three full-length buildings. I did the only thing I could. I

tried calling a new number in the instruction manual for help.

A man at Manhattan's Board of Elections picked up and promptly hung up on me when I insisted he not give me the automated phone number for the Department of Labor that I'd tried on Thursday. He didn't seem to know or care about SEAP.

Then I tried a police station near the hole. The precinct gave me a telephone number that was disconnected. The automated message instructed me to call a third number, which is how I came to talk to someone at the Department of Labor's fraud division. It was early afternoon.

Unemployment: That building was knocked down two years ago.

Me: So it seems.

Unemployment: Who sent you there?

Me: Your office—the Department of Labor in Albany—yesterday afternoon.

Unemployment: Who?

Me: Charles.

Unemployment: Charles? What was his last name?

Me: I didn't ask.

Unemployment: Why not?

Me: I didn't think he'd send me to an empty lot.

There was a pause. Not only had the woman never heard of SEAP, but she clearly doubted it existed. Apparently, no one ever used it to defraud New York state. That would have made me feel good if I hadn't begun doubting whether anyone ever used it. Eventually, she gave me some more Department of Labor offices and phone numbers in New York City. None of them matched Charles'.

For some reason, I decided to give him another shot. What were the chances of being sent to two holes? On Monday morning, prepared for my third adventure, I trekked back to the West Side and up to 215 W. 125th St. Workforce (that's what New York calls the unemployment division) was on the sixth floor. The receptionist behind the counter was very friendly. I asked for SEAP, prepared to explain what it was. "Oh, SEAP! You have to come back on Friday at 10. That's when we do that."

I looked at her. Then I told her I'd just been sent to an empty lot on Friday. "Would you like to talk to someone about that?" she asked. Why, yes, I would. "Just have a seat and wait for the next Workforce orientation session. Afterward you can talk to a manager." I left.

I was back on Friday at 9:30 a.m. The receptionist was delighted that I was so early. At a quarter to 10, Simone emerged from the back and called my name. I could just feel that this was to be my final adventure with New York state. Surely, victory was at hand. As we walked to her desk, she explained

she only did SEAP at 10 and didn't normally start early. I thanked her. The office was a beehive of activity—it looked like the trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange. Workers were everywhere, talking with one another excitedly about how to get people back to work. I felt really good about my taxes.

Simone explained SEAP as we walked. It sounded nothing like Charles' description. I would fill out a paper form at her desk that she would submit to Albany. If I was lucky, that form would trigger an invitation that would be mailed to me within the next two weeks. I should then attend one of the regular orientation meetings for SEAP, where I would be given a folder. In the folder would be an application, which I should fill out and submit to Albany. At some point—Simone didn't know when—I'd receive word if I qualified. I'd have to wait to start my media business until after this process was complete. I smiled and thanked her. I left and prepared to go it alone.

Postscript: Two weeks later, I got a letter in the mail about SEAP. I was invited to attend an orientation meeting on April 27. Following the invitation was a note: "One of the criteria to qualify for SEAP is a worker re-employment score of 70 or higher. Your score is 66."

Photograph of the hole at 247 W. 54th Street by James Erik Abels.

Author:

[james.abels](http://www.thebigmoney.com/users/jamesabels) [3]

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