

Since the coronavirus pandemic began throwing tens of thousands of Iowans out of work starting in late March 2020, Des Moines Register jobs and economy reporter Tyler Jett has doggedly investigated instances where desperately needed unemployment benefits were delayed or denied in error.

After hearing about dozens of cases in which readers described confusing and seemingly arbitrary decisions about their eligibility, and getting equally confusing explanations from Iowa Workforce Development, Jett decided an investigation was warranted. He devised a painstakingly thorough method: He would obtain all of the appeals decisions for cases during the busiest period of hearings during the summer and review each one. After examining 525 cases and conducting dozens of interviews with appellants, lawyers, state employees and ultimately the director of Iowa Workforce Development, Beth Townshend, he wrote a three-part series about his findings.

His reporting exposed a pattern of some Iowans who matched the criteria for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance – the federal program for people, such as contract workers or those who quit jobs for safety or health reasons – starting to get unemployment payments, then being cut off and told they had to pay back thousands of dollars. His series showed that Iowa Workforce Development employees had changed rules governing the program without notice, and in some cases incorrectly signed up people for standard benefits, which they didn't qualify for, instead of PUA. In some cases, the recipients could have been switched over to PUA, but were so confused by the communications they received from Iowa Workforce Development, and their appeal decisions, that they instead believed they had to pay back benefits. Hundreds of out-of-work Iowans faced bills they couldn't afford to pay.

Jett's December 2020 series built on months of work. In early May 2020, he had shown how snags in the unemployment benefits process were delaying payments for weeks. That same month, he documented how the state had shifted what it had been advising employees regarding eligibility for unemployment benefits if they left jobs for fear of contracting COVID-19. In September 2020, he reported that it took weeks for Iowa to begin delivering the additional \$300 a week in benefits that the federal government had approved. And in November 2020, he dug out the head-scratching possibility that the source of some of Iowa's delays in paying benefits may have been its 48-year-old computer system.

People who are unemployed don't necessarily want to share their troubles publicly. But Jett's stories are filled with authentic voices because he conducted dozens of interviews and took the time to build sources' trust.

In February 2021, state Rep. Mary Wolfe introduced a bill that would require Iowa Workforce Development to forgive debts owed by the unemployment claimants who were the subject of Jett's series. "It's not fair," she told him in an interview published in the Register. "They did everything right. All of a sudden, they should be required to reimburse the state for thousands of dollars? Had the state been doing its due diligence, it wouldn't have been paid out. Mistakes were made, but it wasn't the people applying for unemployment benefits."

Jett's work is a classic example of the kind of watchdog journalism readers expect from newspapers, and with thousands of Iowans suddenly on unemployment because of the pandemic, it could not have been more timely or vital.