

# Memo

To: Department of Labor  
From: TELI Team Maple: Chuck Borges, Alyssa Harvey Dawson, Linda Lannen, Ashley Llorens, Tim Reilly  
CC: White House  
Date: November 6, 2020  
Re: The National Unemployment Crisis Playbook

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The United States of America needs a playbook for national unemployment crises. Team Maple assembled a first draft of such a playbook based on research and interviews with stakeholders from several state unemployment agencies, NASWA, the federal government, and technology or policy professionals with extensive government experience.

## **Background**

In the past 15 years, there have been two major economic crises that resulted in wide scale unemployment amongst the US population. 2008's financial crisis caused several years of high unemployment before the economy eventually recovered. In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a rapid set of layoffs starting in March 2020, resulting in a massive spike in unemployment. In both cases, the US federal government passed emergency legislation to assist unemployed individuals.

The CARES Act of 2020, along with the subsequent Lost Wages Allowance executive order signed by President Trump created new temporary payments to unemployed individuals, covered new categories of workers, and extended the amount of time that individuals could receive unemployment benefits. However, this legislation was passed without considering the implementation challenges of making these payments at the state level, resulting in huge backlogs of claims and long wait time by individuals who desperately needed unemployment assistance.

The National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA) played the essential role of intermediary between the state UI agencies and the federal stakeholders in Congress and the Department of Labor (DoL) in the 2020 crisis and has a variety of processes in place to funnel information and communications to the right people. Those processes work well in normal times, but unemployment crises are not normal times, and the speed at which

legislation is proposed and passed and the willingness of legislators to incorporate input can be challenging during a crisis.

### **Why a playbook?**

Many government entities and private companies use “playbooks” to plan for emergencies so that when a crisis happens, it is addressed in a prompt and coordinated fashion. A playbook details, in advance, what steps to take in preparation for, during, and after a major event or undertaking. Using information gleaned from previous efforts, it provides a roadmap so that the team in the middle of a crisis is starting with a baseline of information and procedures.

In the recent unemployment crises of 2008 and 2020, there was no “playbook” to refer to. As a result, there were meaningful gaps in communication between the federal government and state unemployment agencies and/or lack of responsiveness to state agencies’ input, resulting in legislative mandates that had no viable way of becoming reality at the state level.

### **Our solution**

In this playbook, we define a National Unemployment Crisis (NUC) as an incident that requires swift action by the federal government in order to address extraordinary unemployment. This playbook defines a procedure to follow for responding to future such crises; a critical part of this is to incorporate lessons learned from each crisis - not coincidentally, the last step in the playbook is updating the playbook itself with learnings from its use. This will help ensure alignment between the Federal government and state agencies and enable these government stakeholders to respond increasingly adroitly to each crisis as it happens.

The NUC Playbook is comprehensive yet unfinished. We expect that federal and state government entities and their partners can use our baseline work as a draft, completing a thorough and comprehensive Playbook in time to react to the next unemployment crisis.