

Youthprise Joins High School Workers Suing State for Unemployment Benefits

Denial of benefits from CARES Act funding leaves youth, families struggling

Youthprise joined a group of Minnesota high school students in announcing on October 1, 2020, that they are suing the state of Minnesota over being denied unemployment benefits after they lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. [You can read a copy of the complaint here.]

What Does the Lawsuit Allege?

A 1939 state law makes high school workers ineligible for unemployment benefits despite employers paying into the system on their behalf. The CARES Act established a special program to cover employees like these students who are normally ineligible for unemployment benefits, but the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) continues to deny students who contribute their income to household expenses and others access to their rightful benefits.

On behalf of the plaintiffs and youth across the state, Youthprise has organized the suit being brought in Federal court. The suit points out the following facts:

- The CARES Act defines “covered individual” for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) to mean an individual who “is not eligible for regular compensation or extended benefits under State or Federal law or pandemic emergency unemployment compensation under section 2107.”
- To the extent that an individual otherwise qualifies for PUA benefits, the fact that the individual is a high school student does not disqualify him or her from receiving those benefits.
- A state entering into an agreement to administer PUA benefits is entitled to payment from the federal government in the amount of 100% of benefits paid pursuant to the agreement, plus administrative expenses that the state incurs, meaning there would be no cost to the state if the youth plaintiffs are successful in securing PUA benefits for high school students.

What are the Students and Youthprise Seeking?

The lawsuit seeks two forms of relief for impacted high school students:

1. A temporary injunction preventing DEED from continuing to deny PUA benefits to otherwise qualified high school students, pending the conclusion of this case on the merits; and
2. A permanent injunction enjoining DEED from denying PUA benefits to otherwise qualified high school students.

What is the Impact on Minnesota Youth?

DEED estimates that if high school students were eligible for unemployment insurance, they would be collectively entitled to \$13.7 - \$27.9 million in benefits between the start of the pandemic and the end of 2020.

“The income from my job helped my family pay the rent, and feed our family,” plaintiff Roosevelt student Cole said. “We are over six months into the COVID-19 pandemic and the state is still asking me to pay back the benefits I earned.”

“When I lost my job, my mom also lost her job and together we were supporting my younger brothers and sisters,” said Spring Lake Park student Hayat. “I haven’t been able to find similar work that is close to my home and school, and gives me the flexibility I had.”

“Too often we dismiss the rights of young people, it’s disturbing that we would do that during a public health crisis when housing and food contributions from these students are critical to family stability,” Youthprise President Wokie Weah said. “Equity and representation for all of Minnesota’s youth is critical. Unfortunately, we know the denial of these benefits is impacting low-income and racially diverse students more than others.”

Meet the Youth Plaintiffs

Cole

Cole (he/him) is a recent graduate of Roosevelt High School in Bloomington, MN. In late April, Cole was laid off from his food service position at The Grind Coffee and Creamery in East Bloomington. Since his sophomore year of high school, Cole has played a critical role in paying household bills and expenses. He is participating in this lawsuit because his inability to collect unemployment benefits has made it a struggle for him and his father to meet their basic needs. Further, the law blocking high school students from receiving federally funded COVID-19 benefits disproportionately affects black and brown students who are significantly more likely than white students to be a necessary source of income for their families’ basic needs. Cole likes to create and produce music in his free time and is very passionate about equitable entrepreneurial opportunity.

Hayat

Hayat (she/her) is a senior at Spring Lake Park High School in Spring Lake Park, MN. In March, Hayat was furloughed from her job at Caribou Coffee. She is participating in this lawsuit because she believes that the government should be offering the same benefits to everyone, regardless of age. Young people are a demographic that matters and denying youth unemployment benefits is inequitable and creates more problems than it solves. She is fighting for all other underrepresented young people who are denied benefits to show that their livelihoods matter. Hayat loves reading anything from non-fiction history books to young adult dystopian fiction. She is passionate about education reform and leveling the education playing field for everyone regardless of background and socioeconomic status.

Lincoln

Lincoln (she/her) is a recent graduate of Venture Academy in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Lincoln was working at Sebastian Joe’s when she was laid off due to COVID-19. When she found out she and her friends weren’t eligible for unemployment benefits because they were high school students, she started working with other young activists to take legislative action to give high school students access to the benefits they deserve. Lincoln had to forego college this fall due to her inability to work and save money this summer. Her passion and future career interests lie in the transformation and rebuilding of the public school system by both students and teachers.