

Artists too frank for CRB

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in Ottawa

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Although performances did not fully resume after the COVID-19 pandemic, professional artists suddenly lost their federal benefits in July, penalized for being too honest in ensuring their ineligibility for employment insurance.

"I think there's a lack of understanding of our craft," sighs Nasim Lootij, after making countless inquiries and spending many hours on the phone trying to understand why the federal government suddenly cut off her Canadian Economic Recovery Benefit (CERB) three weeks ago.

The Montreal-based choreographer and contemporary dance artist fears that she has fallen through the cracks of the program, which was designed to provide financial assistance to self-employed workers like herself who are affected by COVID-19 and ineligible for Employment Insurance.

It's this last detail that's wrong. *Le Devoir* spoke with four artists who were surprised in July to see their file blocked by the Canada Revenue Agency, which manages the ERCP, for a file that had been opened with Employment Insurance, which is under the jurisdiction of another department.

They all said they had followed the instructions to the letter. At the request of the Agency, they filed an EI application to ensure that they were ineligible. This criterion was introduced last year when Ottawa transformed the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) into the EI program, in part to encourage the return to work of the unemployed.

Since each of them had the ambition to continue their artistic practice as freelancers, they admitted to EI that they were not looking for full-time paid work. In short, they had no intention of turning the occasional livelihood they found during the pandemic, or part-time work, into a career, preferring to aim for a return to their passion.

Ms. Lootij, for example, has no intention of giving up her long dance studies to return to her part-time job during the pandemic as a receptionist at a car dealership. "I did what I was told word for word. I did exactly what was asked of me. [I said I wasn't looking for full-time work, since I'm an artist, self-employed]," she says.

Ineligible for employment insurance since the spring, she was able to collect a few benefits from the EI program until everything stopped in July. After approaching the two government agencies and speaking with a total of 12 officials, she concluded that there was a new procedure that only EI knew about, but she was unable to solve her problem. She now has to dip into her savings because she has no benefits and no imminent return to performing.

Misunderstood

"Every time, I have to re-explain my situation... Really, it's about re-explaining my place in society," says singer Pascale Brigitte Boilard, who can't stand the bossa nova song that plays on a loop while waiting on the government line.

Employed by Cirque du Soleil before being laid off due to COVID-19, the artist had a run-in with the system that directed her first to EI for a few months of 2020, and then to the ERCP after it was determined that her small singing contracts put her in the self-employed category instead. The complexity of the case was compounded in July, when her "open file" with EI suddenly blocked her from receiving any benefits. She says she is now caught in a "telephone ping-pong match" between the agencies responsible for the two programs.

"It's bad enough that our whole job is useless [during the pandemic]... Emotionally, it's hard. What's the point of providing these benefits if the people they were created for aren't entitled to them?" she asks. She says the government simply doesn't understand how arts jobs work. "There's no such thing as a salaried singing job in real life."

Freelance guitarist Simon Legault also has no intention of changing jobs, even though shows have not yet resumed at the same pace as before the pandemic. Despite his many efforts, he could not get the system to understand that his employment insurance file should have been closed following a refusal this spring. On the last call, the government agent suggested she reapply.

"I can't tell them [EI] that I'm looking for a full-time job. That would mean I'd be leaving everything I've worked for for 20 years. I don't want to do that," says the musician and part-time guitar teacher during the school year. At the end of the summer, he has only two upcoming shows on his calendar.

Franchise

All of the artists in this situation interviewed by Le Devoir felt that they could have continued to receive either benefit if they had been less forthcoming. Some freelancers could, for example, have avoided worries about EI by ignoring the request to apply for EI that they knew was unsuccessful; others could have claimed to be looking for full-time work.

The Canada Revenue Agency did not respond to Le Devoir's questions about its management of the Canadian Economic Recovery Benefit. It left the drafting of a response to Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), the department that manages the Employment Insurance program. They were not prepared on Friday, Monday and Tuesday to provide a full response.

The terse response sent by EDSC to Le Devoir said it needed more time to go into detail. It did not explain the sudden freeze on benefits for old EI cases. However, it was recalled that

EI claimants must certify that they are actively looking for work and have not refused a reasonable job offer.

"A person who establishes a period of EI benefits with Service Canada is not eligible with the CRA [to receive the RCP] for the same period, even if they are not receiving EI payments. In addition, the EI Act has specific criteria for when a benefit period ends," they say.

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