**A person wearing a suit and tie smiling at the camera

Description automatically generated**Editor's Note: This editorial is available to all newspapers to reprint.

**As Sunshine Week drew to a close, an order of secrecy from the U.S. Labor Department**

**From America's Newspapers**

The economic toll from the COVID-19 pandemic is open and obvious all around us: The shuttered restaurants, closed department stores and malls, empty schools and universities, and public transit trains and busses pulling up to deserted stops.

And then there is the personal economic catastrophe: Your neighbor, your relative, your spouse, son or daughter, perhaps you yourself are suddenly jobless with no clear outlook for a return to work.

How many other Americans are in that same boat? The U.S. Labor Department doesn’t want you to know just yet.

In a Wednesday, March 18, email to state labor officials, the administrator for the Labor Department’s Office of Employment Insurance, Gay Gilbert, instructed them not to release precise numbers of the unemployed in their states.

Instead, Gilbert said they should “provide information using generalities to describe claims levels (very high, large increase)” until the Labor Department makes public the total number of unemployment applications on March 26 — more than a week later.

A Labor Department spokesperson later claimed that these numbers are “regularly embargoed,” though at least one state unemployment agency was so taken aback by the demand that it consulted the state’s attorney general on the matter.

All of us should be similarly disturbed by this attempt to delay the release of public information collected with the public’s tax dollars.

The fact that this demand from the federal government came during Sunshine Week, the annual initiative to raise awareness of the importance of open government to all Americans — a week that was celebrated in a ceremony at the U.S. Justice Department two days before — makes it all the more galling.

The official justification is that the release of state numbers would roil the markets even more, as if investors would be spooked even more than they have been already as they drove the Dow into bear market territory and beyond. The Labor Department itself had already reported that, in the second week of March, 281,000 Americans had filed for their first week of unemployment — a surge of 33% from the week before.

Now Labor Department administrator Gilbert is a civil servant who has worked for both Republican and Democratic administrations, and there is no apparent indication she was under political pressure to make the demand on the states.

But it is disturbing that in a crisis that entangles public health, macroeconomic cratering and personal financial tragedy, the federal government reflexively chose secrecy, however temporarily, over transparency in a matter of overwhelming public interest.

As we enter into a new era with the conoravirus pandemic, it is more important than ever to maintain an open government and for the news media to be vigilant in protecting this important right.

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