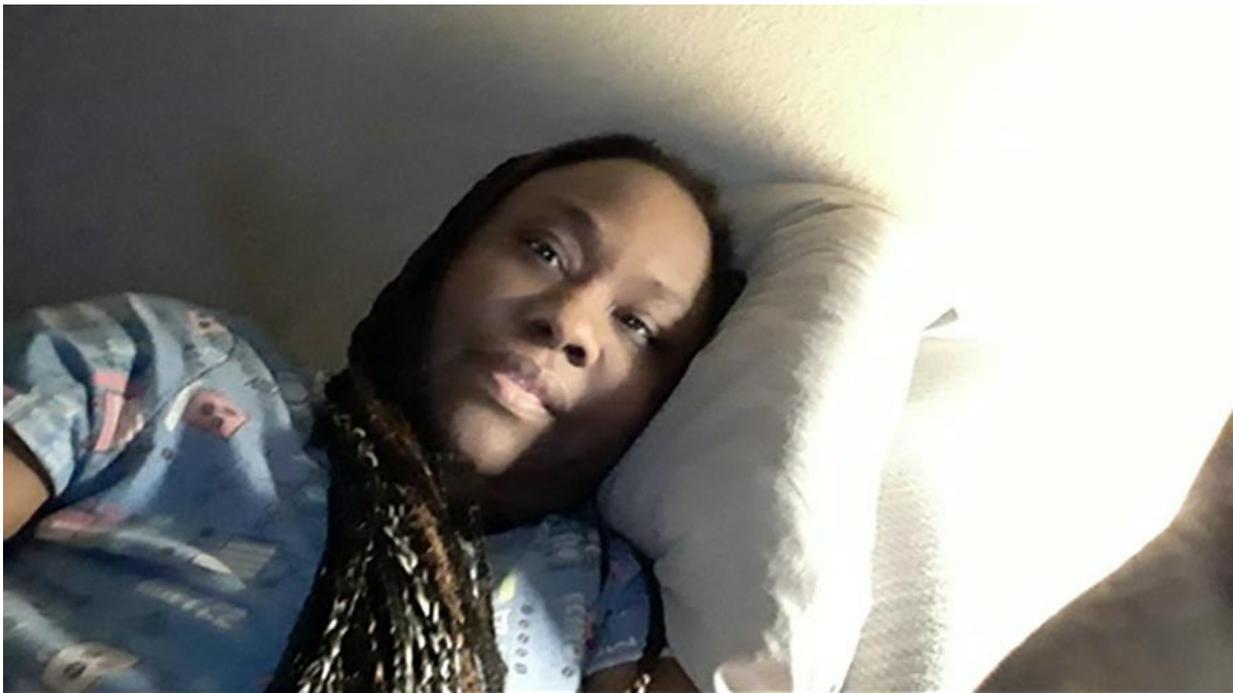


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## Betty Long, Utah



Betty Long. Photo by Zala Long.

by Lori Teresa Yearwood

**TO FALL ASLEEP**, Betty Long knows that she must first relax. Problem is, when COVID-19 hit this country in March, the 47-year-old lost her job as a food and beverage manager of an upscale Salt Lake City hotel, and despite applying for countless jobs, she hasn't worked since.

“I’m always thinking, what’s my next move?” Long said. “Do I stay in the industry? Or do I start over and do something else? This is what I contemplate at night.”

Long, who was making \$54,000 a year and living in a gated apartment complex, has been receiving less than half that amount in unemployment benefits. In April, she moved into a three-bedroom apartment with family members who have also been financially set back by COVID.

Every day, she watches the news to see if the restaurants that she might be able to work in are still open.

“Suddenly your job is based on the news of, is your city open?” she said. “Can people travel to your city? Everything has completely changed.”

Every night, to drown out the news of what she can’t control, Long turns up the noise on the devices she wants to see and listen to: her television, her phone, her computer, even her bedroom light.

“It’s hard to sleep because it’s a helpless feeling,” Long said.

During the first six weeks of the coronavirus pandemic in the US, [5.9 million workers](#) in the restaurant industry lost their jobs, the industry publication *Restaurant Business* reported. That made the industry [the hardest hit](#) by unemployment, according to *Forbes*.

Meanwhile, according to [Utah’s coronavirus dashboard](#), Utah County, which is where Long lives, has a seven-day rolling average positivity rate of more than 31 percent.

“It’s not like you can move to another state or even country,” Long said. “All the restaurants are either closing or barely staying open. A lot of chefs I know have lost their jobs as well.”

Long earned her associate's degree in 2015 in culinary arts from Salt Lake Community College while raising her daughter, Zala, as a single mother. She described the current job-hunting scene as "cutthroat," because it feels as if "everyone is suddenly and collectively" applying for a job, she said.

When she's made it past the online application process and into the job interviews, Long said, she is usually told that the position isn't actually what it was billed to be.

"The job says general manager, but they want you to manage and cook and bartend—on top of everything else because there is less money out there," Long said. "I'm like 'That's not what the agreement was.'"

Still, her experience in the field gives her an open-minded perspective. "You're talking about restrictions forcing restaurants to go from 100 percent open to 25 percent open," Long said. "How can they keep staff with that? Everyone in the food industry got hit at the same time."

In the end, the advertised job titles haven't mattered, as Long said she hasn't been offered any jobs yet. Thus, Long, a chef who specializes in cooking for hundreds, if not thousands, at a time, has expanded her job search to the realm of the fast food industry. But those fields are clogged with applicants, too.

"They keep telling me I'm overqualified," Long told me.

Long once oversaw food operations in a Utah prison, and said she'd thought about working in one again, though prisons are known hotspots for COVID transmission.

"But then I realize that I would be putting my life at risk, as well the lives of those I live with," she said. "And I ask myself, is it worth it?"

As far as she knows, Long's unemployment benefits—which come to less than \$2000 a month before taxes—ended on Tuesday. Congress has been debating a second stimulus package for months, with no result.

Long is having a difficult time unwinding, as normal activities have fallen by the wayside, including karaoke and hanging out in person with friends. She still takes walks, but even that activity has taken on an additional stress, as so many more people are also outdoors these days, she says. And while she wears a mask, not everyone else does.

“Relaxing is a totally different situation that it used to be,” Long said. “I don't relax as easily during the day as I used to. And that's what I need to be able to fall asleep more easily at night. So I never feel fully rested.”

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Lori Teresa Yearwood. Photo: Cass Studios of Salt Lake City

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*Lori Teresa Yearwood's work can be found at [loriyearwood.com](http://loriyearwood.com)*