

Dem lawmakers unveil legislation to overhaul state's unemployment program

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Dem lawmakers unveiled legislation aimed at overhauling the state's overwhelmed unemployment program by removing obstacles in the application process and broadening access.

Meanwhile, Department of Administration Secretary Joel Brennan announced that 100 state employees are being temporarily reassigned to help the Department of Workforce Development with unemployment insurance processing. That comes on top of the Evers administration's earlier moves to dedicate more state employees and vendors to help the UI program.

Yesterday's moves come one day after the Legislative Audit Bureau report that found DWD made a series of incorrect payments at the end of April. The agency has also come under fire from Republicans for delays in paying out claims. DWD is currently working to clear a backlog of roughly 141,000 applicants.

Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke criticized the "tired proposals" that he said would "only serve to expand eligibility to an already-strained system and fuel the flames of the problem at hand."

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"It's clear that after months of failing their constituents and the thousands of Wisconsinites awaiting unemployment benefits from the Evers administration, Wisconsin Democrats are feeling the heat of Tony Evers' failures," the Kaukauna Republican said in a statement.

Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, was also critical of the package.

“Democrats are trying to reinstate failed policies when their elimination contributed to record low unemployment and prosperity while eliminating fraud,” he said in a statement. “Democrats simply want to make it easier to stay on unemployment and cheat the system.”

Dems countered the package seeks to undo the hurdles Republicans put up to make the UI process more difficult.

“This pandemic is revealing that the challenges within the Wisconsin unemployment system are the direct result of the Walker Administration’s efforts to make collecting unemployment benefits harder,” Senate Minority Leader Janet Bewley said in a statement.

The eight-bill package features 20 Dem cosponsors — including Assembly Minority Leader Gordon Hintz, D-Oshkosh, and Bewley, D-Mason.

Hintz is listed as a cosponsor for one proposal. That bill would lower the threshold for the number of work searches a UI claimant is required to complete from a minimum of four per week to two per week and repeal a provision that DWD could require more.

Bewley signed on to cosponsor two bills from the package. One seeks to repeal a provision barring claimants from receiving both federal Social Security disability benefits and Unemployment Insurance benefits in the same period while the other allows DWD to establish waivers to work search and job registration requirements in some cases.

Other bills from the package aim to:

- *allow those participating in extended occupational training to file for UI benefits;
- *temporarily suspend the \$500-per-week wage threshold to receive UI benefits;
- *grant authority to DWD to determine what constitutes “suitable work,” which a UI claimant cannot reject if offered without losing access to benefits;
- *permanently eliminate the one-week waiting period before receiving benefits;
- *remove the concept of “substantial fault” as a disqualifier to receive UI benefits.

A COVID-19 bill signed into law this spring suspends the one-week waiting period until early 2021.

DWD Secretary Caleb Frostman in a statement praised the package, saying it would

“help ensure Wisconsinites who lose work through no fault of their own will experience economic stability sooner.”

“The unprecedented economic ramifications of COVID-19 have brought the complexities of Wisconsin’s Unemployment Insurance system to the forefront of the state conversation,” he said in a statement

The additional 100 administration employees now working on unemployment claims is the latest shift of resources toward the program.

DWD said it first moved agency employees from other divisions to UI on March 16.

It then received its first batch of employees from other agencies on April 13.

With the additional 100 announced yesterday, a total of 289 administration employees have had a temporary assignment with DWD.

A DWD spokesman said 18 of those employees have since gone back to their regular jobs in other agencies.

Adding in the employees of vendors brought in to help the agency, there were 1,884 people working on UI as of Monday. That’s compared to 504 within the division as of March 14.

See the package:

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See the DOA statement:

<https://www.wispolitics.com/2020/dept-of-administration-more-state-employees-reassigned-to-support-dwd-in-processing-unemployment-insurance-claims/>

See Steineke’s statement:

<https://www.wispolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/200716-Steineke.pdf>