

# Dept. of Workforce Development: Triples unemployment staff, resulting in more claims processed and better customer service

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MADISON – The Department of Workforce Development (DWD) today announced that by significantly adding staff, it has markedly improved its customer service to unemployment insurance (UI) claimants, increased the rate at which UI-related calls are answered and the number of outbound/scheduled calls that are made, and is steadily processing and adjudicating more claims each week.

“For the past three months, DWD has prioritized expanding our human resources through internal transfers, hiring new team members, and bringing on vendors to answer calls, process claims, and distribute funds to those who are eligible,” DWD Secretary Caleb Frostman said. “We have long felt incredible urgency to deliver financial relief to claimants and expanding our UI team by over 1,000 people was the most important step needed to make that happen.”

## **Increased Staff:**

Combining internal transfers, intergovernmental transfers, new hires, and contracted vendors, DWD has more than tripled the total number of UI resources from roughly 500 people as of March 14 to more than 1,700 as of July 7.

Secretary Frostman emphasized the importance of training the new hires.

“Training our new staff and vendors has taken some time, but it’s been time well spent,” Secretary Frostman said. “It’s one thing to answer a call, but it’s another to

be able to actually assist claimants and resolve complicated eligibility issues. We have appreciated the public's patience as we have worked to onboard staff who have received anywhere from one to four weeks of training so that they can provide value in assisting claimants across Wisconsin throughout this unprecedented challenge."

### **Increased Call Center Hours:**

With the additional staff, the Department has again expanded its help center hours to 6:15 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. The help center will also now be available Saturdays from 7 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Staff continue to answer any remaining calls in the queue that come in before the closing time.

### **Increased the Number of Calls Answered[1]:**

In 11 weeks (May 20 to July 3, 2020), DWD and its vendors answered 240,864 calls. The number of calls answered the week of June 29 was 60% more compared to the calls answered the week of June 1

Moreover, DWD has increased the rate at which it can answer calls. Regularly, the benefit call center is answering almost 70% of the unique phone numbers that it receives each day.[2] This is a significant increase compared to the 4% of unique calls received during the last weeks of May. For context, DWD received more than 155,600 calls for the week ending June 29 alone.

"Each week, DWD and its vendors get closer and closer to answering every call that comes in," Frostman said. "For the foreseeable future, DWD will continue to onboard and train call center staff to maintain quality customer service."

### **Increased Claims Processed:**

With the addition of new staff, DWD is also processing and resolving more claims. The total number of weekly UI claims received from March 15 to July 4, 2020 is nearly 4 million (3,969,830). Of that number, more than 3.4 million (86.67%) have been resolved (paid or denied). The remaining claims in process (528,999; 13.33%) are those awaiting wage verification, adjudication, or similar investigations.

"While we are required by law to determine eligibility before we pay benefits, we know the time it takes to investigate eligibility issues that hold up some claims creates incredible hardship on those people who are relying on UI to pay their bills,"

Frostman said. “With the additional staff, we are reducing the time it takes to process verification documents, investigate issues raised by claimants and employers, and get the benefits out the door.”

When someone applies for UI benefits, DWD must investigate any and all issues from all employers the claimant worked for over the last 18 months unless the separation was due to a layoff from a lack of work.

Beyond the first application, issues that arise when weekly claims are filed must also be resolved. When there is an eligibility issue on a claim, it must go through adjudication (i.e. an investigation). An adjudicator is responsible for the investigation of the eligibility issue. Adjudicators are specialized positions that typically require four weeks of training. As of today, the Department has resolved 3,440,831 issues since March 15

Adjudication requires manual review and thoughtful consideration of the specific facts to ensure the integrity of program and that benefits are paid when due. The adjudicator determines whether the claimant is eligible for benefits by gathering information, contacting parties by phone or in writing. The adjudicator then evaluates the facts based on the information received, makes additional contacts for information to resolve conflicts, and determines whether the claimant is eligible for benefits. The investigation and determination process are required by state statute and federal law and adheres to the temporary CARES Act programs passed by Congress and signed into law by President Trump.

The most common eligibility issues that require an investigation include:

- **Separation Issues:** These issues, which include quits and discharges, are the most contested of the holds that require adjudication and take the longest time to resolve.

Example: Jane Claimant quit her job at ABC Company 10 months ago because she didn't like her employer. Even though Jane worked for XYZ Co. after quitting ABC Co. (and was laid off from XYZ Co. due to COVID) DWD still needs to investigate that quit from ABC Company. An adjudicator needs to talk to Jane Claimant, her employer at ABC Co., potentially her employer at XYZ Co., and any other relevant third party. If there is conflicting information, the adjudicator talks to whomever is needed to resolve that conflict. Everyone the adjudicator talks to has a minimum of 48 business hours to respond to the adjudicator. After all information is gathered,

the adjudicator looks at the law to see if Jane Claimant would be allowed benefits or denied benefits, and, if allowed, whether ABC Co. will be charged for any portion of benefits paid. If Jane Claimant is denied, the adjudicator has to see if Jane Claimant earned enough wages from XYZ Co. to again be able to receive unemployment benefits (i.e. met requalifying requirements after the quit.)

- **Issues that impact qualifying amount or weekly benefit amount:** Wage information from the past 18 months is needed to figure out the claimant's weekly benefit rate and maximum benefit amount. Wages are also used when the claimant had filed for benefits in the past and had a suspension; the department needs to see if the claimant has met the requirements (this typically includes earning a certain amount of wages). It may take multiple attempts for the department to get this information.
- **Wage holds:** DWD must investigate when there is an allegation of misreported work and wages.

Example: Joe Claimant filed for unemployment and said he did not work last week. ABC Co. reports Joe Claimant worked 20 hours and earned \$400 last week. Because this information is different, a hold is placed on Joe Claimant's claim while DWD conducts an investigation to make sure the correct benefits were paid.

For the full list of eligibility issues, please visit: <https://dwd.wisconsin.gov/ui201/b7201.htm>.

In addition to the increased efficiencies, DWD has also successfully launched all three CARES Act programs.