

DWD beefs up staffing, call centers to handle unemployment crush

Posted on Friday, May 15, 2020

DWD is adding new call centers and expanding staff and hours to answer questions from unemployed Wisconsinites seeking help during the economic fallout from COVID-19.

The state also has transferred 243 employees to handle calls from laid off Wisconsin workers and is in the process of hiring another 315.

The combined impact of the moves will jump the number of staff handling unemployment claims from less than 50 before the pandemic to more than 1,300.

This comes as GOP lawmakers have been critical of the agency for not moving more quickly to address the frustrations of laid-off constituents who have had difficulty reaching DWD.

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Last month, the agency projected Wisconsin's unemployment rate was around 27 percent due to the impact of the coronavirus, and DWD reported nearly 5.4 million calls the week of May 3 alone.

"I'm incredibly appreciative and excited for the additional assistance our UI Division is getting from other DWD divisions, state agencies, and vendors," agency Secretary Caleb Frostman said in a statement released to WisPolitics.com. "We need all hands on deck to help the people of Wisconsin get the resources and financial support they need during the pandemic."

DWD had 46 employees in the Unemployment Insurance division prior to March 15, just as the administration's response to the pandemic was beginning to ramp up.

Since then, the agency said, it has:

- *transferred 106 agency employees to the UI division;
- *temporarily assigned 91 DWD employees to the division starting Monday;
- *temporarily transferred 46 staffers from other agencies to the division; their start dates began last week with the final moves coming Monday.
- *began the process of hiring 315 additional employees. An agency spokesman said about one-fourth of those will be full-time employees while the rest will be temporary hires.

According to the agency, it received more than 518,000 unemployment applications between March 15 and May 9 along with 1.8 million weekly claims. Since April 21, it has received more than 72,000 applications for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, which helps those who aren't eligible for regular unemployment such as workers who are self-employed or have a limited recent work history.

To help handle the volume of calls and the process claims, the agency has now signed contracts for two call vendors and a third with a contractor that will help process and adjudicate claims.

Currently, the agency's call center hours are Monday through Friday 7:35 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., when employees stop taking calls and put in overtime to process claims.

Those hours will now be expanded to 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., when staff will stop taking new calls but answer all remaining calls.

One contract call center will handle inquiries related to unemployment benefits. The vendor, Aloria, began training workers this week, and when fully staffed, will have up to 500 employees by June 29 working from home and answering calls.

A second vendor, Beyond Vision, will have 40 people handling calls related to the PUA applications. It is scheduled to open June 1.

The third, Nelnet, will have about 100 people working to process claims and another 100 to adjudicate them. Training for those employees will begin June 1.

See the release:

<https://www.wispolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/200515DWD.pdf>

Rep. John Nygren, R-Marinette, said the additional hires were a good step by the

agency.

But he wants call center hours expanded to 10 p.m. as other states have done. He also urged the agency to look for new ways to speed up the application process.

Nygren was one of 36 GOP lawmakers who sent Frostman a letter urging the agency to explore options to speed up processing claims. The letter includes suggestions of looking into a pre-approval procedure for claims that have a high likelihood of approval.

He said the uptick in calls began in March and expressed frustration the agency hasn't moved quicker.

"The bottom line is I'm at the point of enough excuses. Hiring people is an important step," said Nygren, who co-chairs the Finance Committee. "My point is it's just a frustration. Can you imagine if you or I didn't get a paycheck for eight weeks?"