

Legislative Audit Bureau: Reviews unemployment insurance call centers

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MADISON - Today, the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) released its review of the Unemployment Insurance (UI) program's call centers (report 20-13). The Department of Workforce Development (DWD) manages the program's call centers through which some individuals file initial claims for unemployment benefits. DWD operates one call center, and two entities under contract with DWD operate two additional call centers. LAB found that from April 6, 2020, through August 22, 2020, only 6.6 percent of initial claims were filed by individuals who telephoned the call centers.

LAB found that from March 15, 2020, through June 30, 2020, 38.3 million of the 41.1 million total telephone calls (93.3 percent) to the call centers were blocked or received busy signals and, therefore, did not reach the call centers; 6.2 percent of calls were abandoned by individuals before speaking with the call centers; and 0.5 percent of calls were answered.

"The spike in calls and initial claims that preceded the Governor's shutdown was a clear forecast of the tsunami of calls and claims that DWD should have absolutely been able to expect when the stay-at-home order was issued," said Rep. Samantha Kerkman (R-Salem Lakes). "This was an unprecedented event, granted, but the anguish and unanswered questions of hundreds of thousands unemployed Wisconsin workers could have been mitigated had the Department acted quickly to adapt to a known need."

Beginning in May, DWD reported to the co-chairpersons of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee the weekly numbers of telephone calls that were blocked, abandoned,

and answered. However, DWD did not report on the number of telephone calls that resulted in individuals receiving busy signals. LAB found that a total of 19.6 million telephone calls were either blocked or resulted in busy signals where DWD only reported that 4.9 million telephone calls were blocked. Individuals were unable to reach the call centers if their telephone calls were blocked or they received busy signals.

“I view this as DWD deliberately withheld information from the Co-Chairs. Undoubtedly, the information that was reported softened the true severity of the lack of responsiveness of the UI call system. The findings in this audit have proven the slow and inadequate handling of this crisis. Especially in regards to staffing at DWD’s call center, which after nearly six weeks of heightened call volumes had only added 4 additional staff members. What is not answered here is “If only 6.6% of initial claims were filed by phone, why aren’t people getting their checks?” This might be one of the most disheartening audits I’ve read and yet it is only part of a further dive into the UI system”, said Senator Cowles (R-Green Bay).

LAB indicated that DWD increased its call center staff from 90 on March 31, 2020, to 188 on July 31, 2020. Over time, DWD increased the number of hours per week that the program’s call centers were available to help individuals file claims. As of July 30, 2020, Wisconsin’s call center was open for the second-highest number of hours per week among the call centers operated by seven midwestern states.

DWD contractually required one entity operating a call center to provide at least 500 full-time equivalent staff positions in that entity’s call center, which began answering calls on May 20, 2020. However, LAB reports that it was not until the week of July 19, 2020, that there were that many positions working in this call center. LAB includes recommendations for DWD to improve its management of the call centers and its reporting of initial claims data.

Provisions of 2019 Wisconsin Act 185, which was enacted in April 2020, require LAB to use risk-based criteria to review selected programs affected by Act 185 and selected expenditures made with funds authorized by Act 185. Report 20-13 is the third such review performed by LAB under Act 185. LAB’s review of other aspects of DWD’s management of the UI program is ongoing.

Copies of LAB's report (report 20-13) may be obtained from its website at www.legis.wisconsin.gov/lab or by calling (608) 266-2818. Report concerns related to state government activities to LAB by calling the toll-free hotline at 1-877-FRAUD-17.