

Sen. Wirch: Offering information and assistance with unemployment benefits

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Kenosha - With the coronavirus causing mass shutdowns all across the country, unemployment insurance (UI) benefits will be vital in keeping many families, and our economy, afloat over the next few months.

Gov. Tony Evers has taken steps to help claimants access the benefits they need and have earned. By executive order, Gov. Evers has temporarily suspended the requirement that UI claimants conduct at least four work searches per week, retroactive to March 12, 2020. In the order, the Governor also makes sure that claimants who are otherwise eligible but out of work due to COVID-19 are considered “available for work” and therefore eligible for UI benefits. Claimants still must deal with a one-week waiting period before they can begin to receive benefits; this law was enacted by the Republican majority in the Legislature, over the objection of Democrats, and signed into law by then-Governor Scott Walker. Democrats have tried several times to repeal the waiting period, and Governor Evers has called on the Legislature to act quickly on a repeal in light of the crisis, but as of now, it remains in place.

A consequence of the outbreak is that the state has had to temporarily shut down its job centers statewide. Job centers are an important resource for many UI claimants, particularly those without internet access at home. While assistance and services are available both online and by phone, if you are experiencing difficulty in accessing help or benefits, please do not hesitate to contact me at (608)267-8979 or sen.wirch@legis.wisconsin.gov.

The federal government is also trying to assist those out of work due to the

coronavirus. A bipartisan bill just agreed to by Congress will bolster state unemployment benefit programs. The state of Wisconsin currently offers a maximum of 26 weeks of UI benefits, and a maximum weekly benefit amount of \$370. The federal legislation will temporarily increase claimants' UI benefit amounts by as much as \$600 per week for up to four months; the bill also offers an additional 13 weeks of benefits at normal state benefit levels. Finally, the bill implements a new "pandemic unemployment assistance program", which would provide UI benefits to independent contractors, gig workers like Uber and Lyft drivers, and the self-employed, all groups which are not typically eligible for benefits.

These are tough times. I want to make sure that everyone is able to access all available resources to help their families get through. I'm here to help; feel free to reach out. For more information, visit the state Department of Workforce Development's UI benefit site, dwd.wisconsin.gov/ui.