

# UI backlog falls over 1 percentage point as GOP chides DWD for not preventing buildup

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The Department of Workforce Development's unemployment backlog fell to 4.32 percent from 5.55 percent last week.

DWD records show the high was 16.4 percent between March 15 and May 23.

The current backlog is equal to about 41,734 unique claimants held up in adjudication by one or more weeks due to multiple issues. Compared to last week, that's 18,469 fewer Wisconsinites waiting for a UI check.

Issue resolution is considered timely if completed within 21 days of the date the issue was detected. As of Friday, 35,383 claimants had been waiting for 21 days or more for their claim to be resolved, a decrease of 15,550 from Dec. 8. The average number of days from application to payment of UI is 28.

DWD has paid about 576,650 claimants over \$4.55 billion since March 15, an increase of 10,385 claimants and \$70 million over last week.

Republicans in a Joint Legislative Audit Committee chided DWD for not doing enough at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to prevent a backlog of UI claims.

Dems on the committee instead placed much of the blame on legislative inaction and previous GOP policy that gummed up the bureaucratic process.

At the peak of the problem, the agency fell behind more than 100,000 UI claims after its call center and online application process became overwhelmed with an influx of out-of-work Wisconsinites. DWD officials yesterday said there are still some 30,000 cases backlogged but they expect to wrap up most within the next few weeks.

They also noted that, before the pandemic hit, only about 6.6 percent of all claims came through the department's call center. After the pandemic began in earnest in March and April, DWD received more than 40 million calls, with 93.3 percent of those either blocked or marked as busy due to the sheer volume.

Committee co-chair Rep. Samantha Kerkman, R-Salem, said lawmakers' offices also received a flood of constituents asking for help navigating the unemployment crisis. She said DWD should've immediately opened up and revamped its recession playbook at the first signs of the crisis hitting the state in March.

"Our staff became the front lines for your guys," she said. "In some cases, our offices became call centers. Going forward, I hope that your plan includes partnerships that you never even thought of before."

Amy Pechacek, DWD transition director, told the committee the pandemic was "a crushing experience," and that the agency couldn't have kept up with the influx of claims with the resources it had no matter what it did.

She added the department got caught with the pandemic right as it worked through implementing new federal unemployment guidelines. And from March through last

week, she said, DWD received some 8.7 million weekly UI claims, more than the total claims received in the previous four years combined.

“So we basically had four years of weekly claims in nine months,” Pechacek said.

Meanwhile, Rep. Katrina Shankland, D-Stevens Point, noted the Legislative Audit Bureau didn’t compare Wisconsin’s issues adjudicating claims to other states. She suggested a closer LAB look at adjudication issues would be helpful, along with a closer look at laws that she said add “time and inefficiency to the process.”

“At this point, no amount of staff can speed up a process if state statutes are the piece that is slowing the process down,” she said.

Pechacek echoed some of Shankland’s sentiment, calling the department’s UI infrastructure so “antiquated” that it added “a significant amount of time” for officials to even prepare for the claims with additional CARES Act funding attached.

But Sen. Chris Kapenga, R-Delafield, told Pechacek the agency needed to “step up” its overtime hours for employees to keep up with demand. He called the DWD’s average overtime of three hours a week per employee not good enough and suggested even 50 hours of work a week shouldn’t be considered too much in a crisis.

Pechacek shot back that the three-hour overtime average actually amounts to around 41,000 total hours of overtime work. And she said the statistic doesn’t account for salaried employees or for all of the vacation time workers lost to instead work on filing claims.

“The staff really is dedicated to the mission of the unemployment office and understands that these are real people, these are families, our neighbors,” she said, noting DWD employees not only had to work on claims but also had to deal with the stresses of the pandemic just like everyone else.

During the hearing, state Sen. Alberta Darling, R-River Hills, asked officials why former DWD Secretary Caleb Frostman wasn’t testifying. Frostman left the agency back in September after Gov. Tony Evers asked for his resignation.

Darling said she wasn’t aware he had been fired. But at the time, she criticized the gov over Twitter for “too little too late” in removing Frostman from leading the agency.

Watch the hearing:

<https://wiseye.org/2020/12/16/joint-legislative-audit-committee-38/>