

# Assembly unanimously passes UI system upgrade bill that includes liability protections from COVID-19 lawsuits

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Assembly lawmakers unanimously approved an amended bill that would begin the process of overhauling the state's UI computer system.

The bill would also, among other things, waive a one-week waiting period for unemployment benefits through mid-March and provide businesses with liability protections from COVID-related lawsuits.

But before voting for the bill yesterday, Assembly Dems slammed their GOP colleagues for implementing the waiting period in the first place during former GOP Gov. Scott Walker's administration and for failing for months to pass unemployment relief legislation.

"I want to thank you for finally, after 11 months, finally deciding to address this issue," Rep. Christine Sinicki said to the majority party. "All you've done is point fingers at the governor ... when in reality the governor and the minority have been begging you for months to do what's right."

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The Milwaukee Dem called it "not the perfect bill" and only a first step towards relieving unemployed Wisconsinites. She said she hoped to see more follow-up bills down the road.

Dems also introduced a series of amendments that would've automatically waived the one-week waiting period whenever necessary to receive federal funding and

allocated dollars towards updating antiquated software at DWD. But the amendments failed to pass along party lines.

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, called the amendments “more of the same” and “more unbelievable ways of making the system more complex.”

He urged state residents to not depend on the government for benefits but to “provide them for yourself” by getting a job. Vos added he’s hiring at his popcorn factory and called on people in the area to apply.

Republicans quickly shot back at Dem criticisms for legislative inaction, with Assembly Speaker Pro Tempore Tyler August, R-Lake Geneva, saying Evers last March shut down the state economy with his COVID emergency orders without considering the influx in UI claims such a move would cause.

“Anybody who saw the shutdown coming would’ve known it’ll cause a massive spike in unemployment,” August said. “And the governor either didn’t see that was going to happen or he just didn’t care.”

The Senate last week voted in favor of the bill 27-3. It now goes to Evers’ desk for approval.

Evers in mid-January sought \$5.3 million in state funding to begin the process of overhauling the unemployment system’s computer system. But the bill was amended by majority Republican lawmakers to require the Department of Workforce Development to seek and exhaust federal funding first. The agency would then be able to come back to the GOP-run Joint Finance Committee to seek state funds.

The bill also was amended to restore the suspension of a one-week delay before laid-off Wisconsin workers can begin collecting unemployment. Republicans imposed the requirement a decade ago, but it was suspended last spring as the pandemic took hold.

Doing so made the state eligible for enhanced federal matching funds. But the suspension ended Feb. 7 and is costing the state \$1.3 million a week in enhanced matching federal funds to cover claims. Those who are laid off but don’t claim the maximum of 26 weeks of unemployment are also now losing a week’s worth of checks.

Evers last week said he wished the bill went further, but indicated he plans to sign it