

DWD claims staff walk through outdated UI system

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— Gov. Tony Evers' plan to modernize the state's Unemployment Insurance system would automate the current tedious and time-consuming process, claims workers argued.

From March 15, 2020, to Jan. 16, 2021, 1.28 million initial claims were filed in Wisconsin, quadruple the initial claims filed in all of 2019, said Department of Workforce Development Secretary Amy Pechacek. The agency also received more than 10 million weekly claims compared to just 7.2 million claims in the four-year period leading up to 2020.

When she came to DWD in September, Pechacek said the agency's outdated UI system was "a complete shock."

Yesterday morning, Pechacek and her DWD colleagues walked through the problems of the antiquated system during a public livestream event. The agency's chief information officer, Neeraj Kulkarni, explained that the programming for the UI system was developed in the early 1970s. The code language used in the system was developed in the late 1950s.

The virtual tour came as GOP lawmakers have rejected Evers' request to pass legislation in a special session to begin funding an overhaul of the system. Republicans have argued Evers already has the power to begin the process without legislative approval. They have also suggested he could request the Joint Finance Committee to approve a request to move around existing funds to help pay for the

work.

UI programming and policy analyst Emily Savard walked through the filing process from DWD's end. Claims processors use at least seven different systems that don't always work well together to get through claims, Savard said.

Processors use over 100 screens in the mainframe. But these screens are not intuitive in any way, she said. Even the acronyms and terms for the screens don't mean anything, but they have to be memorized.

"To navigate mainframe is to cycle through individual screenshots ... you can't customize it, you can't scroll, there's no way to see information on one page. Mainframe is static," Savard said.

With a 50-year-old mainframe, any updates to claims go through overnight batch processing from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. During that time, no one can access the system. With a modernized system, these updates would happen immediately, she said.

If there's an issue with the claim, it goes through the manual process of adjudication, which usually takes about 21 days to get resolved. DWD depends on fax, snail mail and more batch processing in the adjudication process before the claim is assigned to an adjudicator to further the process. To update the claim's status, staff manually write and format the claim's status and manually calculate the dollar amount.

"If we had a modernized system, this could all be automated," Savard said.

The adjustments and special programs unit tackles what the mainframe system cannot handle. Before last year, it handled up to 100,000 claims per year. In 2020, it handled over 250,000 claims. The team's work could also be entirely automated with a new system, but instead, the unit had to increase the staff eight-fold — from 16 to 140 — for four times the workload.

Evers' ask for modernization would allow claimants and employers to communicate with the agency via email or online chat, automate the manual processes and allow real-time processing versus the 12-hour batch process, among others, according to DWD.

-By Stephanie Hoff

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