

Legislature takes no action during special session on unemployment insurance system

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Two GOP legislative leaders say they remain unconvinced Gov. Tony Evers needs a special session bill to begin overhauling the state's unemployment insurance computer system

And interviews with Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, and Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke, R-Kaukauna, show the two GOP caucuses have yet to resolve their standoff over a COVID-19 bill.

Both houses Tuesday gaveled in the gov's call for a special session on the UI bill and left it open.

After helping gavel it in, Steineke told reporters the gov's bill to allocate \$5.3 million to begin modernizing the system was "just not necessary." He also accused Evers of waiting almost a year to propose anything to address the system.

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"That's the thing that's frustrating for us. He does this dog-and-pony show with this special session when he has the unilateral ability to do this on his own," Steineke said. "So if he's looking for legislative approval to start moving forward, he's got it. We'll give it to him."

Evers included provisions to address the backlog in the COVID-19 bill he announced last month. Dem lawmakers in July unveiled a package of eight bills that sought to remove obstacles in the application process while broadening access. Introduced with the support of the Evers administration, backers said they would speed up the application process, while Republicans insisted they'd only add to the problem.

The gov's proposal would cost an expected \$90 million over 10 years to modernize the system. While Republicans pointed to a series of appropriations they contend the gov could use to begin the work, the administration countered most of those accounts either don't have anything in them, are running at a deficit or wouldn't cover the costs. And, the administration added, it's unclear if existing money can even be used for the work.

Assembly Minority Leader Gordon Hintz, D-Oshkosh, slammed GOP lawmakers for their inaction. He likened it to Republicans missing a deadline to secure \$25 million in federal aid to cover the first week of jobless benefits after they waited until mid-April to pass a COVID-19 bill.

"So what is their plan? Republicans say their constituents are struggling with lagging payments from an antiquated system, but then refuse to take action on measures that would help address the problem," Hintz said. "Choosing to play politics and point fingers at Governor Evers at the expense of helping those who are struggling with the economic fallout from the pandemic is unacceptable."

Evers has repeatedly knocked the state's UI operating system, saying it was created during the Nixon administration.

But LeMahieu insisted the issue isn't the program's computer system, but the Evers administration's failure to properly address claims.

"I think he needs to get his own department in order first before asking for a bunch of money to fix what probably doesn't need to be fixed," he said.

The Evers administration announced in late December that it considered the backlog resolved after assigning 5,000 claims older than 21 days to adjudicators. But Republicans continue to point to various cases where applicants have waited months for their cases to be resolved.

The Senate Economic and Workforce Development Committee has an informational hearing planned Jan. 27 on the program with only invited speakers allowed to testify.

See the hearing notice: <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/raw/cid/1589457>

LeMahieu and Steineke also continued to stand by conflicting COVID-19 bills.

The Assembly passed its COVID bill along party lines the first week of January before the Senate amended it by stripping out a host of provisions and passing a bill LeMahieu had negotiated with Evers. The centerpiece of the Senate version is the liability protections for businesses, non-profits, schools and others; it was also included in the Assembly version.

“Obviously, we like the bill that we passed,” Steineke said. “If you talk to senators individually about the items that were in there that they took out, you’d probably find a lot of support for those items. ... We’ve got to find a way forward, and we’ll be trying to figure out what that is over the rest of the next few days.”

GOP senators have taken several of those provisions that were pulled from the bill and put them into standalone legislation. The Senate Human Services, Children and Families Committee has a public hearing Thursday on five of the bills. They include: prohibiting mandatory COVID-19 vaccines; prohibiting employers from requiring a vaccine as a condition of employment; adding new restrictions on how school districts can move to virtual instruction; stripping state and local officials of powers to limit gatherings in a place of worship; and directing DHS not to prioritize prisoners for the vaccine.

Many of the provisions the Senate stripped out of the Assembly bill were dropped in an attempt to secure Evers’ support for the bill.

Steineke and LeMahieu both said they haven’t spoken with the gov lately about the bills.

“We want a bill that will be signed into law,” LeMahieu said in an interview with WisPolitics.com. “I’m not sure what the Assembly will change. I’d still really like them to take up the version we sent over to them.”