

Senate overwhelmingly approves revised UI bill that includes liability protections from COVID lawsuits

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The state Senate today overwhelmingly approved taking the first steps to overhaul Wisconsin's problem-plagued unemployment insurance computer system, but didn't provide any money to do so.

The bill, which cleared on a bipartisan 27-3 vote, would instead require the Department of Workforce Development to seek and exhaust federal funds for the work. The agency would then have to come back to the Joint Finance Committee if it needed state money. The bill also would require the agency to issue a request for proposal for the project within 30 days after the bill took effect.

Gov. Tony Evers' administration struggled with a backlog of processing unemployment claims last year after a deluge of applications during the pandemic. His administration has attributed the issue to an antiquated computer system, while Republicans have accused the administration of taking adequate steps to address the issue.

The gov last month ordered a special session to take up his bill, which originally called for \$5.3 million in state funds to get the overhaul moving. But Republicans didn't move on it until after he vetoed a separate COVID-19 bill. The amended UI bill that cleared the Senate today includes several provisions from the COVID legislation. That includes providing liability protections to businesses, schools, nonprofits and others from COVID-19 lawsuits.

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Another provision would restore the suspension of a one-week delay before out-of-

work Wisconsinites can begin collecting unemployment. Suspending the requirement, which Republicans put in place a decade ago, makes the state eligible for enhanced federal funding.

The suspension, approved last spring in a bipartisan COVID bill, expired Feb. 7. The state is missing out on \$1.3 million a week without the suspension in place. A delay in putting the suspension in place last spring cost the state \$25 million.

The COVID bill Evers vetoed sought to extend the suspension through March 13, and the bill includes a similar provision.

The amendment also includes language that would make the change retroactive. But it was unclear whether that would satisfy federal requirements to qualify for the money.

The special session bill is separate from provisions that Evers put into the budget yesterday to allocate \$79.5 million to cover the long-term costs of the overhaul. Dems tried to revise the bill to provide the funding Evers wants as part of his budget. They also sought to make changes such as stripping out the liability protections. But Republicans rejected the amendments.