



# WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

---

P. O. Box 7882 Madison, WI 53707-7882

**For Release:** February 26, 2021

**Contact:** Rep. Don Vruwink, 608-266-3790

## **Let's Stop the Blame Game and Work Together**

*By State Representative Don Vruwink*

This week after almost a year of delays, the Legislature took a small step in fixing our state's outdated unemployment compensation system.

The weaknesses in the system were first revealed by the recession last decade. The failures were further exposed by the current covid pandemic and the resulting layoffs, job losses, and forced closure of small businesses.

As a state legislator, I received call after call from the people I represent who struggled with filing an unemployment claim or resolving the claim. These were mainly small business owners, their employees, and self-employed professionals whose businesses were shut down by the pandemic.

They told me they received messages on-line and by letter that were impossible to understand. When they tried to call the specified phone number, they could not get through to a person nor even an opportunity to leave a message. They spent hours on hold. Their calls were repeatedly dropped.

I responded to every call and email from my constituents. The problem is the unemployment compensation system was overwhelmed.

Last week, I voted in favor of Senate Bill 1, which passed the Assembly on a vote of 89-0. It passed the Senate on a vote of 27-3. This bipartisan legislation will begin to overhaul Wisconsin's aging unemployment claim system.

The system uses computer programming language from the 1970s. Those of us old enough to remember the days of floppy disks would agree that we need change.

There has been much finger-pointing. The majority party blames Governor Evers. The minority party blames decades of neglect. Republicans and Democrats have been blaming each other the

past 11 months for the backlog of unemployment compensation claims. The truth is both parties need to take responsibility for the failures. Both parties had a chance to fix it and did not.

In 2007, the Department of Workforce Development, which oversees unemployment claims, planned a major overhaul of its outdated computer system. But Gov. Doyle's administration halted the upgrade because it fell behind schedule and looked to exceed its \$24 million budget.

Then came the Great Recession of 2009, which exposed the desperate need to modernize the system. Instead of fixing the problem, the Legislature created barriers that made it more difficult to access unemployment compensation. These changes were made in the name of reducing fraud but no attempts to upgrade the antiquated computer system were made.

Because of these barriers, only 32 percent of unemployed Wisconsin workers received unemployment pay in 2016, down from 50 percent in 2007.

After an audit found DWD call centers automatically blocked 80 percent of calls during times of high volume, the agency shifted to online-only claims in 2017. This created more technological hurdles for the unemployed in a state where 43 percent of rural areas lack broadband coverage.

Many people cannot file a claim online because they do not have a computer or access to reliable Internet. If they could go to the library to use the computers, they would. But many libraries were shut down in the pandemic. Even if they can find a wi-fi hotspot, today's smart phones are not designed for filing unemployment claims.

Fifty-three percent of Wisconsinites live paycheck to paycheck. When unemployment compensation is delayed, then utility bills go unpaid, rent and mortgage payments go unpaid, car payments go unpaid, and credit card debt jumps.

Last week's bill was a step forward in fixing the system. My hope is the Legislature will continue to update the system to make it work for everyone. And stop blaming each other for its failures.

**-END-**

*State Rep. Don Vruwink represents parts of Rock, Walworth, Jefferson, and Dane counties, which include the communities of Whitewater, Milton, Edgerton, Footville, part of the Village of Oregon, and 15 surrounding townships. He can be reached at 608-266-3790, [Rep.Vruwink@legis.wisconsin.gov](mailto:Rep.Vruwink@legis.wisconsin.gov), and P.O. Box 8953, Madison WI 53708.*