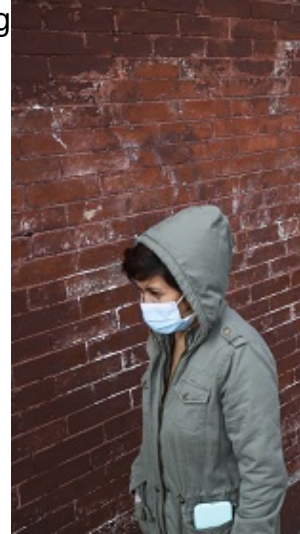


Jeff Smith: Legislature Must Act for Unemployed

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 05 August 2020 12:18

<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/unemployment-lines-covid19-bg-s5.jpg>



The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many of us out of work and policy decisions made in more normal times have made it difficult for Wisconsinites to get the help they need now. The legislature must meet to get us through this difficult time.

MADISON - "I've been working my whole life, and was doing fine before COVID-19, and now suddenly, I can't work, and can't get unemployment. I'm scared of what life will be like in a few weeks when I run out of money for food, let alone bills," said a man whose unemployment benefits were delayed 10 weeks.

He was one of the hundreds of constituents we've helped over the last 4 months. His Unemployment Insurance (UI) was held up because the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) needed to investigate his previous employment.

UI was created so anyone who lost their income would have something to fall back on. As a society, we've learned we're better off if we have insurance programs to support families during tough times. Our economy and family lives are better when unemployment payments can prevent evictions, provide food and supplement lost wages.



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We must always remember the intent of these essential programs. There will always be detractors, but also opportunities to improve. In the past 10 years, detractors got their way by changing the unemployment insurance to a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” philosophy. They claimed abuses of the system but forget about people who really need a smooth-running system to help them through what is normally a bump in the road.

For over a decade, Republicans knew DWD’s software and computer system wasn’t prepared for a flood of UI requests, but DWD’s warnings went unheeded by our Joint Committee on Finance. Wisconsin was left with a 40-year-old phone system and software that requires retired technicians to perform maintenance because it is so outdated.

My office, like many others, have become mediators for constituents who’ve had difficulty contacting DWD or have waited an inordinate amount of time for their case to be resolved. With the enormous surge of claims, people have waited up to 15 weeks to receive resolution and payments they desperately need to pay rent, buy food, pay for utilities and afford other vital needs.

One of the changes made by Republicans prevented people who received Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) from receiving unemployment. This resulted in one of my constituents, who is blind, unable to qualify for unemployment insurance benefits, even though she worked part-time to supplement the meager SSDI payment she receives due to her disability.

A young, fresh-out-of-high-school worker was let go by his previous employer and found a new job. Due to suitability determinations created by Republicans, his unemployment claim was stuck for weeks in adjudication.

DWD must verify workers’ job history to determine their benefits. Complex cases make the hurdles even greater for DWD to pay out UI. A woman from the district was undergoing cancer treatments. A week or two into the pandemic she was scheduled to go back to work. Her short term disability payments forced her UI claims to be held up in adjudication for verification, which resulted in all her payments being delayed months.

These are just a handful of examples of the hundreds of constituent cases my office has worked on in the past 4 months. Much of the delay and trauma in UI cases could be resolved if the

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legislature acted. We've been on hold for over 100 days because Majority Party leaders are unwilling to bring us together before the November election.



My colleagues and I introduced bills to motivate the Republican leaders to fix the delays in UI claims, but no response. They are more interested in running for reelection than helping unemployed workers.

Many people have never needed to navigate the UI system before but found themselves trying to figure it all out for the first time. Some may have wondered if UI was ever really needed. This pandemic has clearly shown UI matters and so do the details.

An old neglected system, additional hurdles imposed by Republicans in the last 10 years and their reluctance to address the unemployment crisis have left Wisconsin workers without answers. We can do better, but we have to work together to get the job done and help Wisconsin get through this difficult time.