

Complaints Spur Investigation of Unemployment Compensation Claims

Posted on May 06, Posted by [Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



Hundreds of complaints from people attempting to apply for unemployment compensation poured into legislative offices this winter. Many complained about the State's website. Others said they couldn't even get to a real person on the phone to get answers on claims they filed. The Walker Administration had few answers.

MADISON - "I called the hotline several hundred times. Each time I called I got a message about 'being busy at this time'," a Pierce county man I'll call Ken told me.

Ken lost his job as a mechanic and needed to file an unemployment insurance compensation claim. After more than two weeks of trying to get through the state's Department of Workforce Development (DWD) application process, Ken heard of someone who received help from my office. He called.

Hundreds of complaints from people attempting to apply for unemployment compensation poured into legislative offices this winter. The complaints were consistent: the website dropped me; I got no answer from phone calls; no one ever called me back; I was on hold for hours.

The complaints led Senators to write to the Governor seeking answers. The complaints also led to a review by the Legislative Audit Bureau.

Recently the Legislature's Joint Committee on Audit approved an evaluation of the unemployment insurance claims process. During a public hearing we learned some reasons

behind the dramatically inferior customer service.

When Ken first filed his unemployment claim, like half of all who file a claim, he went to the Department of Workforce Development's website. But part-way through filling out the web-based forms, the system wouldn't allow him to complete his application. The website indicated he must call the state office.

Audit committee members learned that half of the people who tried to complete their unemployment claim applications online had the same experience as Ken.

"The current system is not able to sift through complicated initial claims," DWD Secretary Newson told Audit Committee members. "We have a lot of 'drop points'."

That is 'insiders speak' for a computer system that can't handle the complexity of people's work history. It turned out Ken's 'problem' was he took a job in Minnesota. Reporting the employer across the river caused the website to freeze him out.

The system should be designed to handle the routine variations in a jobless worker's history. Testimony from state officials gave committee members insight into what is really a poorly designed computer system.

But the poor computer system didn't explain why people couldn't get through on the phone. Many lawmakers received complaints from people who experienced very long wait times. They called on different days and at different times of the day. People who contacted me said they couldn't even get to a real person on the phone. Other people could not get answers on claims they filed.

Lawmakers were puzzled. Didn't unemployment just drop to a five-year low in Wisconsin? Why can't the newly jobless get through on the phone when there are fewer people making claims?

There was no clear answer from the administration.

The call center experienced a spike in claims and a loss of staff. State officials explained to lawmakers they were working to correct those problems. They hired new workers and are working on a new computer system.

A backlog of cases plagued the agency. According the Department of Workforce Development's Annual Report, in the summer of 2012, the department had a backlog of over 10,000 unemployment claims. Officials testified they significantly reduced the backlog of cases not processed.

"I believe we are meeting or exceeding outstanding customer service," the DWD Secretary told the committee. Lawmakers saw things differently.

Despite the agency's obvious reticence to comply with the audit, lawmakers voted unanimously to begin an investigation of the unemployment insurance claims process.

Complaints make a difference. If you have knowledge of the failings of the unemployment claims process, let the Legislative Audit Bureau know. Your information will help with the investigation. You can call the Fraud, Waste and Mismanagement Hotline at 877-372-8317 (or 877-FRAUD-17).

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