



April 17, 2020

Ald. Chantia Lewis
(414) 286-3767

Benefits process for those seeking COVID-19 relief takes step forward

Residents across the greater Milwaukee area have been struggling with the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. In support of those residents, **Alderwoman Chantia Lewis** penned a letter last week to Caleb Frostman, secretary of the state Department of Workforce Development, seeking clarification on what can be done to improve the process.

Secretary Frostman's response letter (**attached**) details steps the state has taken to better support the influx of unemployment claims. Some of the internal steps the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) has taken include: Having over 150 Unemployment Insurance Division (UI) employees work overtime; Training and transferring additional employees to work the UI call center; Extending allowable time to complete application filing from 14 days to 28 days; Updating FAQs on a consistent basis in English, Spanish, and Hmong.

"While there could still be more done to support those in need I appreciate Secretary Frostman's quick response in detailing what steps are being taken to support the community," said Alderwoman Lewis. "Our residents will need every bit of support to get through these challenging times, and I encourage everyone involved to think creatively and proactively moving forward."

As part of the state stimulus package recently signed into law, the first week of unemployment eligibility known as the "waiting week" was temporarily waived. Those who filed starting the week of March 15 will receive retroactive payment for their waiting week. Additionally, beginning the week of April 26, most individuals will receive an additional \$600 per week added to their benefit as part of the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) program. This is paid retroactively to the week starting March 29, 2020. No additional action is needed to receive the FPUC payment.

Information about the benefits application process, including instructional videos and answers to frequently asked questions, is available on the DWD website at <https://dwd.wisconsin.gov/ui/>.

April 13, 2020

Dear Alderwoman Lewis,

Thank you for your letter dated April 9th. I appreciate you contacting me and giving me the opportunity to respond to your thoughts and concerns on behalf of your constituents. The impacts of COVID-19 on our state's residents have been swift and significant. Record numbers of people find themselves out of work and struggling to manage.

The application process for Wisconsin unemployment insurance consists of several distinct steps. First, applicants make an "initial claim." Preferably, this occurs online. If need be, someone can apply by phone as well. In some cases, when someone applies online, they may need to follow up with our staff to verify some information. If that occurs, they will receive a call from our UI staff within five business days.

After that initial claim, the first week of eligibility is known as the "waiting week." During this time an eligible claimant does not receive a benefit. The waiting week is a state law.

We and the Governor have urged the legislature to repeal that state law, but they have failed to do so thus far.

After the waiting week passes, claimants file their first "weekly claim." Payments are made within a couple of days of that first weekly claim, either by direct deposit or a refillable debit card. If someone's application contains information that must be investigated, the process can add several days or even a couple of weeks to the process, depending on how quickly that information is obtained.

Information about this process, which includes instructional videos and answers to frequently asked questions, is available on our website, here: <https://dwd.wisconsin.gov/ui/>.

Between March 15th and April 6th, 2020, the total number of initial applications was 313,068, compared to 17,748 during the same time period last year. The number of weekly claims this year during this time period reached 589,616, while last year it was 155,148. The total amount of unemployment benefits distributed during this time period this year equaled \$68,759,104.

To handle the record volume of unemployment claims, DWD has taken extensive internal steps to meet the demand. For example:

- Over 150 unemployment Insurance Division's (UI) employees are working overtime.
- Trained and transferred 35 employees from another DWD division to assist the UI call center, with an additional 45 being trained for part-time assistance.
- Recruiting to hire 36 claim specialists.
- Hiring up to 25 positions to work on manual tasks for claims and 60 limited-term employees to process paperwork.
- Assigned eight employees to make outgoing calls to applicants whose online applications required contact with DWD staff.
 - Online claimants who were previously instructed to call DWD now receive a message that a claims specialist will call them back within five business days to assist them in completing their

initial claim. These claim specialists have cleared more than 1,000 claims since this began on March 30.

- Successfully recruited UI retirees to return to DWD to help as limited-term employees.
- Extended allowable time to complete application filing to 28 days (was 14 days).
- Updating FAQs on a consistent basis in English, Spanish, and Hmong.

- Acquired additional trunk to allow for greater call inbound and outbound center functionality during excessive call periods.
- Updated videos in English and Spanish on "How to Apply for Unemployment," "How to File Weekly Claims," and "How to Create a Username and Password."
- Claimants can change their last name using claimant portal.

We will continue to shift resources where most needed and to improve our technology to respond to this dramatic spike in unemployment claims.

Again, thank you for your letter and please feel free to reach out to me directly at any time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Caleb Frostman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Caleb Frostman
Secretary, Department of Workforce Development