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STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 70TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

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Workforce Agency Problems are Real and Causing Exceptional Harm

One of the tragic circumstances of the COVID-19 outbreak has been the loss of employment for a number of individuals throughout the state and the 70th Assembly District. There are differing opinions on how much of an economic shut down was necessary or even is necessary to attempt to contain the virus going forward, but it is undeniable that the virus and subsequent economic shut downs imposed by federal, state, and local entities have been responsible for putting a large number of individuals and families out of work at no fault of their own or at no fault their employer, for that matter.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, we went from a seasonally adjusted unemployment rate statewide of 3.1% in March of this year, to 13.6% in April, and 12% in May. ¹ In Monroe County, the unemployment rate in March of this year was 3.01%, in April it was 12.12%, and in May it was 9.59%. Jackson County's numbers, respectively, from March to May were: 5.25%, 18.31%, and 15.39%. Wood County's numbers, respectively, from March to May were: 4%, 14.47%, and 12.05%. One would find a similar pattern and circumstance in Portage County as well. ²

In order to try to help mitigate the job losses as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, Congress and the State Legislature took action to bolster benefits for those put out of work. On March 27, 2020, Congress passed a federal stimulus package, the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act*, known as the CARES Act. Within the CARES Act are three benefits that unemployed individuals may be eligible to receive outside of or in addition to regular Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits.

Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) is a temporary emergency increase of \$600 per week in unemployment benefits. FPUC provides an additional payment to individuals who are collecting benefits from a number of existing programs, including regular Unemployment Insurance (UI), including Unemployment Compensation for Federal Employees (UCFE) and Unemployment Compensation for ex-Service Members (UCX), and Work-Share (STC), among others.

Pandemic Unemployment Insurance (PUA) provides up to 39 weeks of unemployment benefits to people not otherwise eligible for regular Unemployment Insurance (e.g. self-employed, independent contractors, workers with limited work history).

Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC), provides an additional thirteen weeks of emergency benefits for people who remain unemployed after they have exhausted their regular unemployment insurance benefits.

A summary of these additional benefits with important timelines can be found on the Department of Workforce Development's website at: <https://dwd.wisconsin.gov/uiben/caresact/>.

At the state level, on April 14th in extraordinary session, we took up and passed a comprehensive piece of legislation to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak. That bill, later signed into law by Governor Evers, eliminated the one-week waiting period for unemployment insurance benefits. The change was applied retroactively to claims made after March 12 and runs through February 7, 2021. Eliminating the one week waiting period was a condition for states to qualify for the enhanced federal benefits. You may



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have seen that the state missed out on some funds we believe we're eligible for through the federal relief package related to that one week waiting period. Some of that has to do with when the federal legislation was passed, when our response legislation was passed, and when rules were developed to receive the aid, and as a legislative body we plan to do what we can to clarify that and receive the full benefit we believe we're eligible for from the federal government.

For potential claimants, to apply for benefits or get specific information related to unemployment benefits, individuals should first visit, <https://dwd.wisconsin.gov/ui/>.

Unfortunately, there has been a huge problem with individuals being able to file their claims, receive a response related to their claims, and for individuals throughout the state to receive the benefits they're entitled to. Since March, my team and I have invested a tremendous amount of time working with individuals from throughout the district to help them both file claims and move claims forward in the process. We have several successes to report on that front, but daily, I still receive contacts from individuals that haven't been notified about their claims since March. This absolutely breaks my heart, brings me sadness, and also angers me that individuals are not able to receive basic government services in a time of unparalleled need.

The Department of Workforce Development has tried to blame their lack of preparation and ability to help constituents on everything from the technology they use, to not being able to staff their call center (even though they were given the ability to move personnel from other state agencies to staff it in the response legislation I mentioned above), to recent reforms to the unemployment system unrelated to completing claims.

At this point, my team and I can primarily help by sharing information related to benefits and we can try to work with the Department of Workforce Development Secretary's office and his legislative liaison team to try to get answers on claims to try to help move them forward. If you're a resident of the 70th Assembly District, here's the information I need to try to help move your claim forward or get you a response:

1. Full name of claimant (Last name, First Name, Middle Initial)
2. Phone number
3. Date of UI Application
4. Date of Birth/Last Four of SS#
5. Status of application (trying to file initial claim, in appeal, etc.)
6. Reason for inquiry (can't get through by phone, unanswered questions, etc.)

Please contact my office at 608-266-8366 or Rep.VanderMeer@legis.wisconsin.gov for assistance.

Nancy VanderMeer represents the 70th Wisconsin State Assembly District, which includes portions of Monroe, Jackson, Portage and Wood counties and serves as the Chairperson of the Assembly Committee on Rural Development and Vice-Chairperson of the Assembly Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs.

¹ <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/WIUR>

² https://bi.wisconsin.gov/t/DWD/views/CountyQuickTable/URNarrow2?iframeSizedToWindow=true&embed=y&:s howAppBanner=false&:display_count=no&:showVizHome=no&:refresh=yes