



# WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

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

Representative Warren Petryk

Representative Treig Pronschinske

Representative Jesse James

Representative Rob Summerfield

Representative Shannon Zimmerman

Representative Romaine Quinn

Representative James Edming

Representative Gae Magnafici

Senator Kathy Bernier

## **Working to Fix Unemployment Insurance**

Over the past several months, unemployment in Wisconsin has soared to record levels, causing thousands of our constituents to turn to unemployment insurance to get through these challenging times. This system was set up to help those who lost their job through no fault of their own to weather times like this. Unfortunately, our offices have collectively been flooded with heartbreaking calls from individuals who are on an economic precipice right now and who have been waiting weeks and sometimes months to get any response from the Department of Workforce Development (DWD).

First, we want to let you know that our offices have been and will continue to advocate on your behalf. If you are having problems, please contact us and we will work to get you an answer to your claim. Also, we want to let you know that we have been advocating for you with DWD since this started to get people their claims as quickly as possible.

Over two months ago, a number of us sent a letter to DWD leadership asking them to explore all options to speed up the processing of claims, including having them pursue pre-approving certain claims that would have a high likelihood of being approved. Additionally, as part of the state's response to the COVID pandemic, we voted to pass Act 185, which gave DWD the ability to transfer state employees from other departments with spare capacity to DWD to help in any way possible.

To our collective frustration, during a public hearing recently regarding their response to the crisis, DWD officials testified that it may be months before they have addressed this agonizing backlog. In addition, DWD made Wisconsin one of the last states in our country to start payments for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance benefits, a new program that helps self-employed individuals get through this period of uncertainty.

On top of delaying payments to those who need these funds, DWD has delayed implementing part of the bipartisan Act 185 which protects business owners from increases in their unemployment insurance taxes. The provision ensures that employers who had to make the difficult decision to release employees because of COVID-19, would not see increases in their taxes. Because DWD has delayed implementation, businesses now face a possible huge tax increase at a time when they are trying to get back on their feet and many of them simply cannot afford it. Without small businesses, many more jobs would be lost, especially in our rural areas.

We continue to be disappointed at the slow response of this administration and their lack of success getting emergency financial assistance to people in need. We hope that these issues get addressed readily because every day DWD delays positive action is another day our constituents wait for vital financial assistance. In the meantime, we will continue to advocate on your behalf to get answers about your claims from DWD and keep this administration accountable for the hapless lack of urgency and action on this topic.

As always, feel free to contact my office with questions, comments, or concerns.

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