

Wisconsin unemployment phone line dropped 86% of calls

By [Ellen Gabler](#) of the Journal Sentinel
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The voices taunt thousands of Wisconsin's unemployed.

Here's what happens: Unemployed people call a hotline run by the Department of Workforce Development to check on their claims for unemployment benefits or to answer agency questions about their application.

The calm, recorded voice of a woman says: "To speak with the next available claims specialist, press 0."

But about 86% of the time, the caller is soon disconnected with a simple "Goodbye" from the calm, recorded voice of a man.

The callers still don't know why their unemployment checks haven't hit their bank account, and they can't ask a live person any questions.

"Those checks were my lifeline to pay my bills," said Jeff Sohns, a laid-off wholesale mortgage broker from Wauwatosa, whose unemployment insurance checks were held up for four weeks in August while he waited for the agency to sort out questions about his job search.

The worst part, Sohns said, was he tried to call the inquiry line at least a dozen times but still had no idea why his checks weren't coming or how to fix the situation.

"This whole month, it's been a nightmare," said Sohns, who finally received his weekly checks last week after he got through to a claims specialist and discovered information was missing from his file.

Officials with the Department of Workforce Development said the phone system drops calls so people don't sit in a queue for too long.

State employees and unemployed workers say frustration levels have been boiling over because of the situation.

Public Investigator reviewed eight months of call center data after hearing that laid-off workers were unable to find out what was happening with their checks.

The review shows that on average, about 62,000 calls made to the unemployment inquiry line were dropped during each week of August - more than 86% of all calls that came in. That includes people redialing multiple times after they were disconnected.

More staff hired

Officials said they have tried to address the problem by adding staff, phone lines and server capacity to handle more claims online.

The unemployment insurance division has about 100 more employees than the staff of 550 people a year ago, said Dick Jones, agency liaison for the Department of Workforce Development. Of those 650, a total of 142 are in the call center. The agency is hiring 38 more employees to answer calls.

"We are doing all we can to help them," Jones said. "We certainly understand that this is a stressful time for them."

Public Investigator found that the number of dropped calls is continuing to rise from a low point of 59% in early May.

The recession, of course, has left the agency slammed with record levels of unemployment insurance claims.

Year-to-date, initial claims are up 80%, to about 788,000. Continued claims from people who have been laid off for longer periods are up 95%, according to the latest agency data.

The extension of federal benefits from 26 weeks to 79 weeks has added to the agency's work as well, Jones said. And, the agency is backed up with initial claims and appeals.

There are more than three times as many claims awaiting appeal compared with one year ago. Agency officials said they have recently hired more staff to address the backlog of 2,500-plus appeals.

System praised, too

But the system isn't in complete disarray.

Many people interviewed raved about how well the system worked when they first lost their jobs. They filed for benefits online and started receiving checks a few weeks later. And the phone number for questions about initial claims appears to get people to a person quickly.

Jones said that's on purpose - the agency wants to get people signed up for benefits quickly so they can start receiving checks. The agency consistently meets the standards required by the U.S. Department of Labor by paying nearly 90% of claims within 21 days after they are filed, Jones said.

Problems pop up when people have to call the inquiry line to ask about a claim that's already been filed or answer questions from the agency about their claim. This can include details about work history, documentation on weekly work searches - or to ask about how checks could be affected by starting school or taking a part-time job.

Jones said only a small percentage of people have to deal with this line. The department processes claims and sends checks to more than 200,000 people every week, and about 31,000 claims have eligibility issues.

For example, Sohns' online account said he needed to call the 800 number to answer questions about his claim. He said he was hung up on at least a dozen times.

His checks had stopped coming and he didn't know why. Eventually, he got through to a representative - he can't remember how - who said his file was missing documentation about his work search. He immediately faxed in the information and waited two more weeks for his checks to come again.

You can't go there

Last month, Steve Hansen considered driving from his Kenosha home to the agency's Madison headquarters to find out why his checks were stopped. Hansen was laid off in July and received two checks soon after. Then the checks stopped, and he tried to call the inquiry line to find out why.

"It's like you're banging your head against the wall," said Hansen, who was stressed out because the end of the month was nearing and his bills were due.

Hansen's plan wouldn't have likely worked. People can't stop in at an actual office to ask about their claims.

The agency did away with local offices in the mid-1990s and is able to handle more cases by using the online system, said Allan Alt, chief of the systems and processing section for the Division of Unemployment Insurance.

Alt acknowledged that the agency's Web site has "very, very basic information online now" but said the agency will be adding to it soon, making some calls unnecessary.

Many filers expressed frustration with the way the agency seemed to lead them in circles, suggesting online that they call the hotline and then suggesting on the hotline that they check online.

Some of those people are even trying to save the system money.

Don Skarda of Muskego needed to contact the department in early August to let it know his pension would soon be kicking in. His engineering job had been eliminated the autumn before and he'd been relying on a severance package and then unemployment insurance.

Skarda said he tried to call the inquiry line more than 30 times at different hours of the day. Finally he called the initial claim line and a worker passed along a message and had someone call him four days later.

"The worst of it was, you are trying to do the right thing," Skarda said.

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