

Notes on Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs 1/17/2024 8:00 am meeting on *Unemployment Insurance Wait Times*

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Opening testimony: Michael Harrington, Commissioner of VDOL

- Technical problems at VDOL:
 - Technical issues: 40 year old system with inefficient mechanisms. Prone to error when interacting with other systems
 - December issue: System only processed every other name for UI
 - Mostly resolved. Still around 10% of those locked out are unable to claim. VDOL is committed to ensuring all receive all their benefits.
 - Priority solutions (Denise Reilly-Hughes, Secretary, Agency of Digital Services)
 1. Addressing backlog and getting claimants paid on time
 - Staffing issues: Need people who understand the system and unemployment insurance. Improvements made in recent years but “not sure [they’ll] ever be” fully staffed.
 2. Establish Stability
 - Need the system to function the next few years
 - The risk of a total system failure is “Orange to red,” stabilization is a “critical priority”
 - “Stable” would be getting it to “yellow”
 - Update in the next few weeks will hopefully get them there
 3. Modernization/Replacement of system
 - Will take several years
 - Awaiting greenlight on contract (must remain confidentiality due to negotiations ongoing)
 - Optimistic new system will work much better

Questions from committee:

- Senator Clarkson:
 - Q: What is the status of the phone system currently?
 - Response:
 - Misconception that staff stop answering at 4:30. Staff will stay until 6:00 (when the system shuts down) to answer calls in the queue. All others will receive call-backs. We call multiple times.

- Average hold times are down.
- Senator Brock:
 - Q: What is the hold time now?
 - Response:
 - Maximum is about 4 hours; average is 2-2 1/2
 - Q: When do people get called back?
 - Response:
 - Within 24 hours, most before the end of the day.
- Senator Harris:
 - Q: Do people know their call will be returned, even after 4:30pm?
 - Response:
 - Recently sent a mass email to the whole claimant population informing them to “Stay on the line your call will be answered.”
 - Q: What is the number of the claimant population
 - Response:
 - Number always in flux. People must file to be registered and they’re filing for the preceding week. Someone may have gone back to work.
 - 3,500-4,000 in recent weeks
 - *if they couldn't get through, they wouldn't be counted*
 - Pre pandemic: closer to 5-6k
 - Tight labor market now
 - Q: What is the number of late/backlogged payments from UI?
 - Response:
 - Hard to say exactly, but “gut feeling”= roughly 10% (250-350 people)
 - Hope is that it is less
- Senator Clarkson:
 - Q: How many people are still out of work as a result of the flood?
 - Response:
 - Hard to say. Roughly 1,500 people qualified for regular UI post-flood. Most likely back to work.
 - 26 week benefits cap pushed people to new jobs
- Senator Harris:
 - Q: Because we are stuck with the old system for a few years, could there be a dashboard on the VDOL website that displays “number of claimants, average/maximum time on hold, time until processing.”
 - Response:
 - Something like that live today (1/17/24)

- Call center numbers are a bit tricky to nail down accurately
 - Current system averages whole day, so presents low wait time'
- Susan Garcia, Vermont Legal Aid
 - Q: will there be wait times for non-monetary issues (adjudications/eligibility) on the dashboard?
 - Response:
 - Software makes data collection hard (all calculations are manual)
 - Tracks issues, not cases
 - Average of 45 days for adjudication/fact finding
 - Must "truth-check" before it goes on dashboard, but it's possible
- Senator Ram Hinsdale:
 - Q: Are you understaffed for adjudicators?
 - Response:
 - 20% on average vacancy rate
 - High turnover in first 6 weeks
 - Very hard to be VDOL staff
 - Q: Is there a communication channel with case workers who help those people?
 - Response:
 - VDOL engages with regular communication with Vermont Legal Aid
 - But, confidentiality prevents direct exchange of info without verification of who is asking
 - Goal is more instantaneous/timely communication
 - Always adding people to email list, or they can sign up for it
 - Dedicated UI communication person now
 - Must balance speed with accuracy