



Unemployment Insurance and COVID-19: Pritzker Administration Efforts to Expand Access and Eligibility

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the United States economy, leading to an unprecedented number of unemployment claims. Through the five weeks from March 1 to April 4, Illinois received 513,173 initial unemployment claims. That is greater than the total number of initial claims for the entirety of 2019 (489,831) and five times greater than the claims filed in the first five weeks of the 2008 great recession.

ACTIONS TAKEN BY IDES TO MEET INCREASED DEMAND

The administration moved swiftly to increase capacity on the IDES website and ramp up efforts at the IDES call center to meet the unparalleled number of unemployment claims. Since March 1, the IDES website has fielded over 6.5 million sessions and the IDES call center has processed thousands of calls per day.

Overhauling the IDES Website Infrastructure

While the original capacity of the IDES website was sufficient to process a standard level of traffic and claims, it was not a match for the unprecedented traffic it has received in recent weeks. As a result, IDES worked with DoIT to move its website to an entirely new hardware infrastructure with more capacity to handle increased demand. IDES also expedited the process for new users to register and submit a claim, cutting red tape in the validation process. Since these updates, loading times for those using the website are now averaging below one second, and server and mainframe utilization has remained below 50 percent.

Expanding Call Center Capacity

IDES updated its phone system to increase capacity by 40 percent, reducing wait times and the number of claimants receiving a busy signal. The daily call center hours have been extended to respond to those waiting in the queue after closure. Additionally, IDES is in the process of establishing an outside call center with an additional 200 agents who will assist in the application and certification process.

Currently, IDES has 173 employees working to answer and process calls, 273 working to process claims, and 93 administrative and support staff, including those in the mailroom. In total, these employees have now worked 6,500 hours of overtime with many working through the weekend to meet the dramatic increase in demand. IDES has also reenlisted recently retired staffers with unemployment benefit insurance experience to work on contract to assist the department during this crisis. These retirees will be provided with laptops to allow them to assist from home.

Building Private Partnerships

The administration has sought out partnerships with technology and consulting companies who have stepped up to provide their expertise during this critical time. This includes an exciting partnership with Google AI, Quantiphi, and Carasoft to launch a 24/7 web bot on the IDES website to immediately provide answers to frequently asked questions to those who choose to use the feature. IDES is also

working closely with companies like Accenture, IBM, and Deloitte to continue to expand capacity in its existing systems and implement new programs.

ACTIONS TO EXPAND INSURANCE ELIGIBILITY

Recognizing the immense financial challenges facing working families during this time, the administration has moved quickly to expand access to benefits and implement new programs enacted via legislation from the U.S. Congress.

Emergency Rules to Ease Eligibility Requirements

IDES filed an emergency rule to make it easier for individuals who are laid off due to a temporary closing of a business to continue to qualify for benefits. These individuals no longer have to register with Illinois Job Link to regularly certify they are seeking employment. IDES also filed an emergency rule expanding the definition of “able and available to work” to allow claimants to apply for jobs beyond their normal scope, in order to certify for unemployment.

Waiving the Waiting Week

Before collection of the regular 26 weeks of unemployment benefits begins, a claimant normally experiences a waiting week during which they do not receive benefits. Through an executive order from Governor Pritzker, the waiting week for claimants was entirely waived. This change allows a claimant to receive two weeks of benefits, rather than the usual one week of benefits as their first payment.

Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC)

FPUC provides an additional \$600 each week in 100% federally funded benefits to anyone entitled to regular state unemployment benefits. FPUC is available for weeks beginning on or after March 29, 2020 and continuing through the week ending July 25, 2020.

The administration acted immediately to implement this federal program and provide much needed resources to Illinois residents. As a result, IDES began disbursing funds through this program, starting the week of April 5, 2020, which was the first week the federal legislation allowed FPUC to be paid. From March 29, 2020 through the week ending July 25, 2020, benefits will be applied automatically to claimants who qualify.

Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA)

PUA provides 100% federally funded unemployment benefits for individuals who are unemployed for specified COVID-19-related reasons and are not covered through other avenues in the unemployment insurance program, including self-employed sole proprietors and independent contractors. IDES is contracting with Deloitte to implement and maintain a web-based solution for PUA as quickly as possible. IDES will have this program fully implemented by the week of May 11.

Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC)

PEUC Provides up to 13 weeks' worth of 100 percent federally funded benefits to individuals who have exhausted their rights to regular state unemployment benefits of up to 26 weeks in Illinois. PEUC is potentially available for weeks beginning on or after March 29, 2020 and continuing through the week ending December 26, 2020. PEUC will be retroactive once implemented. IDES received USDOL guidelines on April 10 and expects to have the program fully implemented the week of April 20.