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COVID-19, One Year Later: NJ Labor Dept. Committed to Serving Workers in Need While Leading Push for National Unemployment Reform

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 17, 2021

TRENTON – As New Jersey hits the one-year mark since COVID-19 upended the state's economy – leading 1 in 3 workers to apply for unemployment benefits – the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development pledged to continue the hiring and automation that made it possible to deliver an unprecedented \$25 billion in benefits to 1.5 million jobless workers, and to be a strong voice for long-overdue national unemployment reform.

The department has made significant strides to work through the 2 million new unemployment claims filed since the pandemic took hold last March – tripling unemployment staff, automating a million transactions, and improving workflow – but every NJDOL employee knows the shock workers experience when an unforeseen layoff occurs, and their fear, uncertainty and frustration when unemployment drags on.

"As we come up on this grim anniversary, our commitment to New Jersey workers has never been stronger," said Labor Commissioner Robert Asaro-Angelo. "If you are a worker who has been unemployed for a year, or if your benefits stopped abruptly and you don't know why, I want you to know we are doing our best, day and night, to serve you as quickly as possible."

One year ago beginning this week, NJDOL faced the start of an onslaught of new claims unlike anything previously imagined, and in the first week of April, it saw a 2,700 percent increase in weekly unemployment applications from the same week, one year earlier. Every innovation over the past year has been designed to improve efficiencies, including automation that requires fewer claimants to speak with an agent, freeing up the most experienced agents to work on the most complicated claims.

"The last week of March 2020, we had nearly 600,000 claims for benefits – and we knew the situation was dire for workers across our state who were broadsided by the pandemic, many of whom had never been unemployed before," Commissioner Asaro-Angelo explained. "We were seeing four times the volume of claims filed in the months after Superstorm Sandy in just a week, with a remote workforce and pre-pandemic staffing levels."

By the end of this month, NJDOL will have tripled the total number of staff supporting its Unemployment Division, up to 1,500. That includes 250 new NJDOL employees in Unemployment related areas, including employees with prior claims experience who returned to the Unemployment Division, 325 employees reassigned from within NJDOL or other state agencies to Impact teams to triage claims, and a 500-person contract call center.

One early response to the pandemic included increasing capacity so more claimants could access our system online. Successful IT upgrades permitted up to 280,000 claimants per day to check their claim status or certify for benefits, up from roughly half that amount. IT also automated pin resets and other functions to speed claims processing. Most recently, New Jersey is the only state that has written new programming to allow more than one million claimants reaching the end of their benefit year in the next few weeks to continue receiving benefits by automating the federally required review, and auto-filing new claims if necessary.



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NJ adds jobs in July; 7th consecutive months of gains. [nj.gov/labor/lwdhome/...](https://nj.gov/labor/lwdhome/)

Aug 19, 2021



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As of the latest reporting, more than \$33 billion in unemployment benefits have been sent to Garden State workers. With federal benefits set to expire on September 4, we encourage everyone to check your email and visit MyUnemployment.nj.gov for updates and available resources.



With the goal of bringing the most relief to the largest number of claimants in the quickest amount of time, NJDOL's IT improvements have touched upwards of 1 million transactions thus far that would have otherwise required a manual review, saving weeks, if not months, for claimants.

The department's systems have been consistently stable throughout the pandemic, with very few unplanned outages over the past year. After March 17, 2020, there have been just 30 hours in which claimants were unable to file a claim or certify for benefits. Many states with newer computer systems – at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars – have performed no better than New Jersey in getting benefits to claimants.

Other behind-the-scenes improvements have been less obvious, though their impact has been felt by hundreds of thousands of claimants. At the start of the pandemic, for example, the department's call center could handle a maximum of 10,000 calls per week. By the end of this month, call center employees will be able to connect with as many as 48,000 callers per week, and by this time next month it will be more than 50,000 a week.

Additionally, impact teams have been calling claimants who have entered incorrect information on their applications, correcting errors such as incorrect banking codes (which at points last year numbered more than 20,000 claims per month), which could delay benefits indefinitely. Appointments for adjudication and appeals now occur online, saving weeks of wait time. And, the department began using text messages for the first time to communicate with claimants who cannot be reached via email.

The department's website has undergone dramatic improvements as well. It has a new, user-friendly design, FAQs, helpful eligibility charts in multiple languages, tips on how to certify for weekly benefits, an interactive Chatbot that has answered 4.65 million queries, and information about COVID-related benefits available to workers.

While claimants' problems are often attributed to the computer system, the biggest hurdle to processing claims has been the welcome, but disruptive sweeping federal pandemic relief that added 330,000 independent contractors and self-employed workers overnight to a system not designed to administer benefits to this population. Providing economic relief to these workers was one of NJDOL's biggest challenges.

Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation, Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation, and FEMA Lost Wage Assistance were all programs that provided crucial relief to those in need, but severely complicated the eligibility determination and certification processes for millions of claimants in New Jersey and across the country.

Fortunately, President Biden signed the American Rescue Plan on March 11 – before the existing federal unemployment benefits expired, giving states lead time to reprogram its system to distribute the new benefits. This important expansion will provide billions of dollars for struggling New Jersey workers and their families. The new law extends the suite of new federal benefits through Sept. 4, and continues the \$300 weekly supplemental unemployment benefit. New Jersey is delivering these new benefits seamlessly to almost all claimants.

The Department continues to work with the Biden Administration, Congress and 53 other states and territories on a long-term solution to the deficiencies in the federal unemployment system that have been exposed by the pandemic: outdated rules and a disjointed system.

"While I'm proud of the relief we have been able to deliver to our residents, the fact remains that our federal unemployment system was created in 1934 and barely updated over the years, causing needless hardship to our workers," the Commissioner noted. "Every day we are focused on improvements to our current systems and processes, but we continue to push for a federal solution that unifies our state systems and for regulatory reform whose goal is to serve – rather to exclude – as many workers as possible."

New Jersey leads the nation in the percentage of unemployed workers who go on to receive benefits, according to the latest federal data available. Additionally, personal income in New Jersey rose by more than 7 percent during the pandemic, which Pew Charitable Trusts attributed primarily to the provision of unemployment benefits in the state.

While the Commissioner continues to press for federal reforms, that effort always takes a backseat to getting eligible claimants the benefits they are due next week.

"Our work is far from finished. We won't rest until every claimant receives every penny in benefits they are eligible for," the Commissioner said.

For additional reading/viewing, please see:

CNN's March 16 piece the one-year anniversary of COVID in the workplace:

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/16/politics/unemployment-benefits-year-end/index.html>

Forbes' March 1 article on the tangled web of federal unemployment benefits:

<https://www.forbes.com/advisor/personal-finance/why-its-so-hard-to-claim-unemployment/>

The Century Foundation's Feb. 8 article on the costs to workers of delays in extending federal

unemployment benefits: <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/tardy-stimulus-action-causes-pandemic-unemployment-benefit-delays/>

CNBC's March 11 article on how the unemployment system fell short in the early days of the

pandemic: <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/11/unemployment-system-fell-short-during-pandemic-it-could-buckle-again.html>

John Oliver's March 8 segment on unemployment, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jm9YKT0dltk>

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US Senate Finance Committee's Feb. 8 press release on Sen. Ron Wyden's bill to fund an

overhaul of the national unemployment system: https://www.finance.senate.gov/chairmans-news/wyden-brown-warner-cortez-masto-unveil-bill-to-overhaul-unemployment-insurance-technology_

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