

# Despite Progress On Processing A Record Number Of UC Claims, Few Are Satisfied

BY: [JUSTIN SWEITZER](#) AUGUST 12, 2020

The Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry has processed 98 percent of unemployment compensation claims between March and the beginning of July, leaving just two percent of claimants without payment.

But that 2 percent figure represents over 30,000 Pennsylvanians who have either been deemed ineligible for unemployment compensation or are still awaiting a resolution. The fact that some individuals still haven't received payments despite applying months ago frustrated lawmakers at a House Labor & Industry Committee hearing on Wednesday, with legislators seeking ways to improve a system that was overwhelmed by claims earlier this year.

Those who haven't received benefits yet are part of a shrinking group of Pennsylvanians that either have either a pending resolution on their claim or have been deemed ineligible for benefits by the state, officials from the Department of Labor & Industry said.

Since the week of March 15, over 1.9 million Pennsylvanians have filed for unemployment compensation.

But even as the number of people who haven't received benefits gets smaller, both lawmakers and the department were not comforted by the fact that tens of thousands of people have gone without unemployment compensation.

Rep. Ryan Mackenzie (R-Lehigh), who previously worked as an L&I employee, said he was appreciative of the work put in by L&I staff to process and resolve claims, but said that the current capabilities of the state's unemployment compensation system aren't adequate.

"It really is failing a large number of people," Mackenzie said, recounting numerous issues faced by people trying to claim benefits, including an inability to contact the department by phone or online chat, as well as emails not being responded to.

Mackenzie also expressed concerns about how some people have only received partial payments.

Officials from L&I said that those who receive partial payments are included in the 98 percent of claimants who have received benefits, a figure that further worried the Lehigh County lawmaker.

"That's very concerning for me, because, anecdotally, I hear all the time from people about the fact that they've received one week's payments, two week's payments," Mackenzie said, noting that the 98 percent figure may not paint the whole picture.

"There are presumably tens of thousands or more people who are waiting for some payment from the state," he said.

In a statement released following the committee hearing, House L&I Committee Chairman Jim Cox (R-Berks) said the unemployment compensation failed to protect Pennsylvanians from economic uncertainties.

“Unemployment compensation benefits are supposed to act like a parachute to help dislocated workers experiencing an economic freefall,” Cox said. “For too many Pennsylvanians, that parachute simply never opened. They and their families are still freefalling.”

“I’m going to keep pushing as long as I see eligible unemployed Pennsylvanians waiting to receive their parachutes,” Cox added.

Lawmakers floated a number of potential solutions, from statutory changes to getting legislative staff more involved in the claims process to assist constituents.

L&I Secretary Jerry Oleksiak said that federal regulations may limit the ability of legislative staffers to help with the processing of claims. Oleksiak added that the department is reviewing potential legislative solutions to prevent the backlogs and unemployment snafus that have dogged the state this year, but said L&I has no concrete recommendations at this time.

He did, however, express his own dissatisfaction — dissatisfaction he said would exist until every claimant receives their payment.

“While I am very proud of the work our agency has done, none of us — none of us — at L&I are satisfied,” Oleksiak said. “And we won’t be satisfied until every Pennsylvanians who is eligible for benefits has been made whole.”

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