

COVID-19 Best Practice Information: Unemployment Insurance

Background

- States and territories are facing an unprecedented spike in unemployment insurance applications related to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. This document highlights some examples of strategies states and territories have implemented to help individuals file unemployment insurance claims.
- The following is a list of key findings and considerations for jurisdictions and communities regarding ongoing COVID-19 operations across the country. These are best practices for consideration and do not constitute and should not be considered as guidance in any way.¹

Key Considerations

- The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) was signed into law on March 18, 2020, providing additional flexibility for state and territory unemployment insurance agencies and additional administrative funding to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.²
- The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act signed into law on March 27, 2020, gives states and territories the option of extending unemployment compensation to independent contractors and others who are ordinarily ineligible for unemployment benefits.³

Lessons Learned Related to COVID-19 and Unemployment Insurance

Equitable Access

- **Potential Best Practice:** The State of Vermont has designated specific days of the week for individuals to contact the Department of Labor, based on the first letter of their last name. The alphabetized intake structure for unemployment insurance claims is available Sunday through Friday.⁴

¹ This document contains references and links to non-federal resources and organizations. This information is meant solely for informational purposes and is not intended to be an endorsement of any non-federal entity by FEMA, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, or the U.S. government.

² 2020 U.S. Department of Labor, Unemployment Insurance Relief During COVID-19 Outbreak, <https://www.dol.gov/coronavirus/unemployment-insurance>

³ 2020 U.S. Department of Labor, Unemployment Insurance Relief During COVID-19 Outbreak, <https://www.dol.gov/coronavirus/unemployment-insurance>

⁴ 2020 State of Vermont, Department of Labor Announces Alphabetized Structure For Unemployment Insurance Claims Center, <https://labor.vermont.gov/press-release/press-release-department-labor-announces-alphabetized-structure-unemployment-insurance>



FEMA

- **Potential Best Practice:** Numerous states have removed the one-week waiting period to receive unemployment benefits and job search requirement.⁵
- **Potential Best Practice:** The Florida Department of Economic Opportunity is conducting curbside pick-up for those having difficulty completing an online application. One individual is permitted out of the car to pick up an application(s) from the distribution box outside the CareerSource centers.⁶

Technology

- **Area for Improvement:** Many state labor department technology systems are out of date or lack the capacity to handle the heavy volume of users.⁷
 - **Mitigating Action/Resource:** States should consider making technology upgrades to handle the expected high traffic volume.⁸
 - **Mitigating Action/Resource:** Jurisdictions can negotiate new contracts to expand call center capacity and implement programs that allow claim-takers to work remotely.⁹
- **Potential Best Practice:** The State of Michigan has implemented online tools to aid users in reporting and resolving technical issues with their online accounts. The tools connect users to the Michigan technology team who will contact claimants directly to resolve issues.¹⁰
- **Potential Best Practice:** The New York State Department of Labor implemented a “call back” system. Staff will call residents who need to submit additional information to support their existing unemployment assistance application.¹¹
- **Potential Best Practice:** The State of Arizona has deployed an online question tool to help users navigate the Department of Economic Security website and process.¹²

⁵ 2020 New York Times, What You Need to Know About Unemployment Insurance,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/your-money/unemployment-insurance-coronavirus.html>

⁶ 2020 Ocala-News, Paper applications to file for unemployment benefits offered at CareerSource centers, <https://www.ocala-news.com/2020/04/12/paper-applications-to-file-for-unemployment-benefits-offered-at-careersource-centers/>

⁷ 2020 Fast Company, COVID-19 unemployment fail: State labor departments hobbled by 1970s tech,

<https://www.fastcompany.com/90486794/covid-19-unemployment-fail-state-labor-departments-hobbled-by-1970s-tech>

⁸ 2020 Michigan Live, Michigan unemployment website crashes as eligibility expansion causes ‘very heavy volume’,

<https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2020/04/michigan-unemployment-website-crashes-as-eligibility-expansion-causes-very-heavy-volume.html>

⁹ 2020 Washington Post, Delays in overhauling D.C. unemployment site add to turmoil of coronavirus layoffs,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/delays-in-overhauling-dc-unemployment-site-fueled-turmoil-in-covid-19-crisis/2020/04/02/ebe7d81e-73ad-11ea-87da-77a8136c1a6d_story.html

¹⁰ 2020 MLNS, UIA to dedicate 100 people to resolve technical issues with unemployment insurance claims,

<https://www.wlns.com/news/ui-a-to-dedicate-100-people-to-resolve-technical-issues-with-unemployment-insurance-claims/>

¹¹ 2020 New York Department of Labor, Facing Unprecedented Spike in COVID-19 Related Unemployment Insurance Applications, NYCS Department of Labor Announces Partnerships to Boost Tech Capacity and Make it Easier for New Yorkers to File, <https://labor.ny.gov/pressreleases/2020/april-09-2020.shtm>

¹² 2020 AZ Big Media, How Arizona workers impacted by COVID-19 can access unemployment benefits,

<https://azbigmedia.com/business/how-arizona-workers-impacted-by-covid-19-can-access-unemployment-benefits/>

- **Potential Best Practice:** Individuals are creating online communities to help workers navigate the process of filing for unemployment insurance.¹³
- **Potential Best Practice:** Massachusetts has launched an online, mobile-friendly, Spanish language unemployment benefits application to provide non-English speaking claimants access to benefits. The Department of Unemployment Assistance is also working on making language applications available in Portuguese, Haitian, Creole, Chinese, Vietnamese, and other languages.¹⁴

Staffing

- **Potential Best Practice:** Many states have contracted call centers staffed by experienced customer service professionals to increase capacity in support of the unemployment insurance program.¹⁵
- **Potential Best Practice:** Bozeman Montana’s Job Service office has trained consultants to aid individuals applying for unemployment insurance.¹⁶
- **Potential Best Practice:** Many states have increased staffing and extended hours to meet the increased demand of unemployment claims.¹⁷

Topics for the “Best Practices” series are generated from crowd sourced suggestions. Have an idea? Let us research it! Organizations and individuals can e-mail best practices or lessons learned to fema-cipsupport@fema.dhs.gov.

¹³ 2020 New York Times, These Groups Are Giving Out Unemployment Advice. Their Expertise? Personal Experience., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/us/coronavirus-unemployment-workers-sites.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article>

¹⁴ 2020 Mass.Gov, Baker-Polito Administration Launches Spanish Language Unemployment Application, <https://www.mass.gov/news/baker-polito-administration-launches-spanish-language-unemployment-application>

¹⁵ 2020 Office of Governor Steve Sisolak, Gov. Sisolak Announces Selection of Call Center Vendor, Adding at Least 100 Full-Time Operators to Manage Unemployment Calls, <https://nvhealthresponse.nv.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Gov.-Sisolak-Announces-Selection-of-Call-Center-Vendor.pdf>

¹⁶ 2020 Bozeman Daily, Job Service Montana offers help filing for unemployment insurance, https://www.bozemandailychronicle.com/coronavirus/job-service-montana-offers-help-filing-for-unemployment-insurance/article_46b9553c-f981-5a2e-8a70-0249ec19bec6.html

¹⁷ 2020 Reuters, States rush to prepare for wave of U.S. unemployment, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-unemployment/states-rush-to-prepare-for-wave-of-u-s-unemployed-idUSKBN2171RW>