

Deluge of unemployment calls has state hiring to keep up

By Kate Nash | The New Mexican

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The phones at the state Department of Workforce Solutions rang 408,000 times the week of Jan. 4, but because of high call volume, employees were able to answer only 21,487 of those calls.

Many of the calls were from people redialing the number in an effort to avoid waiting on hold, several people filing for unemployment benefits have said in recent days.

All that redialing makes sense when you consider the average wait time for English speakers was more than 33 minutes, while for Spanish speakers, it was more than 46 minutes.

Those numbers, collected by the department and released to *The New Mexican*, help tell the story of the department's beleaguered phone system, a source of anger for many trying to access the system in a time of need.

And while the department doesn't expect the number of calls or people filing for unemployment to change anytime soon, it is working to change one figure — the number of employees answering the phone.

The department has 43 customer-service representatives, but Gov. Bill Richardson has directed the department to move ahead with 20 "emergency hires" and find about 30 state employees in other departments with similar skills who can temporarily help answer calls, starting as soon as next week.

"We've added the additional resources, and we're excited about that," said Workforce Solutions spokeswoman Carrie Moritomo.

Today — for the first time on a Saturday — the department's hot line, 841-4000, will be open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. On Sunday, the department's number for people to certify their claims, 841-2000, will be open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Moritomo said the department was able to make 24,620 payments the week of Jan. 4 and approved more than \$7.5 million in benefits.

The call center logjam has prompted more people to use the department's online services. From Jan. 4 to Jan. 10, 1,067 new claims were filed over the Internet, and 14,932 people certified their claim online, according to the department.

Still, the department has become a lightning rod for criticism on blogs and newspaper Web site comment sections as it has struggled to keep up.

House Speaker Ben Luján, D-Nambé, called the department's handling of the situation "inexcusable."

He said Friday he's looking at what legislation needs to be passed in the session that starts Tuesday to deal with the situation.

"I'm very concerned. These are people that have lost their job and are only trying to get the benefit they have earned ... they evidently need this benefit to feed their families and pay the bills," he said.

Luján said he's not sure on the specifics on legislation yet, but one idea includes adding more phone lines and otherwise streamlining the system. He said he's not sure if additional employees need to be added or whether some state workers can fill in from other departments for a while.

Another lawmaker says she'd like to make another change related to the department, one that would give beneficiaries more money in each check.

Right now, the department pays unemployed workers 53.5 percent of their weekly wages. Rep. Mimi Stewart, D-Albuquerque, hopes to boost that to 60 percent. She said giving people more money is one way to help the economy.

"It pumps more money into the economy because any time you give unemployment, they spend all of it," she said.

The increased payments would come out of the state's unemployment trust fund, which is worth \$512 million.

Stewart said the fund is one of the strongest in the country.

"We have one of the most solvent trust funds of any state, but the money does no one any good if it just sits there," she said.

The Workforce Solutions Department is supporting the proposed measure, as is New Mexico Voices for Children.

"Economists will tell you this money is pumped right back into the economy in the form of mortgage and rent payments, utility bills, and other necessities like groceries and medication," the group's policy director, Bill Jordan, said in a statement.

"It's essential to keep families from going hungry and losing their homes, especially when the job market is this tight."

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