

The Virgin Islands Consortium

When Will You Start Receiving Local Unemployment Checks? An Old System and Overwhelming Number of Applications are Prolonging the Wait

Business / **Published On April 19, 2020 06:07 AM /**

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Department of Labor officials said they have been in overdrive to push out as many unemployment payments to recently laid off workers as possible. But an archaic computer system along with an inundation of claim applications are making the process more tedious and protracted.

During a [wide-ranging interview](#) with the Consortium Thursday, V.I. Department of Labor Commissioner, Gary Molloy, and V.I. D.O.L. Legal Counsel and Assistant Commissioner, Nesha Christian-Hendrickson, explained why people who were recently made redundant

because of the Covid-19 pandemic may have to wait longer than usual to start receiving unemployment benefits.

Multiple residents have contacted the Consortium to vent their frustration with the process. At least two persons who filed three weeks ago, and have called the department for updates, have been told by Labor employees that they were not quite sure how far along in the pipeline their applications were. One person, who only provided her first name as Catherine, said a Labor employee hung up the phone on her after she started venting about the process. Catherine worked on Main Street in St. Thomas and was laid off three weeks ago.

The V.I. Department of Labor from August 2019 has been working on a new computer system that is expected to propel unemployment operations into the 21st century. However completion of this system is expected by October — months away from the capacity needed now.

Just like states across the mainland, the V.I. Department of Labor has not been able to keep pace with the number of claim applications coming in. A staff shortage of 50 persons have also exacerbated the problem. The unique circumstances have prompted quick action from Labor officials, who have been repurposing V.I. D.O.L. staff and turning the Dept. of Labor into an "unemployment machine," while keeping other functions of the department operational, said Ms. Christian-Hendrickson. The department is seeking to bring aboard additional individuals from other government departments and agencies to help with the influx of claims, and has made essential some employees once deemed non-essential as part of the ramp-up effort.

Mr. Molloy said the department needs to get to the point where it is processing 200 claims per day because of the volume coming in. Currently, because of the staff shortage, about 30-50 claims per day territory-wide are being processed. As the staff shortage is mitigated, the numbers are expected to increase, the commissioner said. As of Thursday, over 4,000 claim applications were filed territory-wide.

He said while between 700-800 people were receiving unemployment benefits, most of those claimants were continuing beneficiaries and not post-coronavirus claims. "That [post-coronavirus] number is very low in terms of getting out. That's why additional staff is necessary to help with the workload," Mr. Molloy said.

He added, "Starting Monday we're expecting at least 20-plus more individuals to be able to come in to start being trained. Then the week after we're expecting another 18, so we're working it out with other government agencies for individuals to be able to come in, be trained and get to the process."

The commissioner said social distancing has also affected the speed in which the department moves. Considerations such as how many staff members will be allowed to telework, how to accommodate the additional staff members the department is expecting, and looking for an additional facility to house backend processes have all contributed to the slow pace.

The department's call center, which is currently an 8am-5pm operation, is expected to be active around the clock. The department is also working to eliminate language barriers

for the Haitian-speaking community in St. Thomas, and Hispanics on St. Croix.

Even so, there are only 23 lines in the call center territory-wide, which are shared with the Labor Department's regular numbers. "It's very difficult to get us for any reason at this point," Mr. Molloy said, an admission that speaks to the level of claims being filed, and it's a problem that is being experienced in various parts of the US. In some states, Labor Department websites have [crashed under the weight of claims being filed](#).

Currently, the V.I. D.O.L. system allows unemployment claimants to file online, which includes application submission and uploading of Personal Identifiable Information. However that system and the Dept. of Labor website's Unemployment Insurance system currently do not communicate, according to Mr. Molloy. Because of this issue, Labor officials have designated the department's Workforce Development arm to execute the effort by using the department's [VIEWS](#) system to securely upload the unemployment claims information into the department's network.

Because the VIDOL website's technology is very old, it takes between 90 minutes to 2 hrs to enter one claim. That's why after an online claim is filed, the department's Unemployment Insurance Division prints out the application so as to quickly enter the information manually into the UI system. "We're still working on getting that electronic part to work, so we have programmers since August 2019 that are continuing to work on having the system automated," Mr. Molloy said.

"What the ultimate goal of this system is, is to be able, if for any reason we are down, then our claims could be taken by another location and another state to be able to help and continue the process. When we finally get there it will be a system that's going to help with all the automation and help us long-term in the event of any disaster," the commissioner said.

Initially, Labor officials were estimating that just over 12,000 claims would be filed. However, with the additional provision for the self-employed and those whose quarterlies are insufficient for regular unemployment now being eligible under the new federal programs, the department is expecting 20,000 claim applications.

During the interview, Mr. Molloy and Ms. Christian-Hendrickson described the process as someone filing online, who then receives a call in 72 hours informing the applicant that their claim had been received. Thereafter, V.I. D.O.L. employees upload other Personal Identifying Information (PII) of claimants into the system. As of Thursday there were between 2,500 to 2,600 claims in process, said Mr. Molloy.

Going based on the process described to the Consortium, exacerbated by the thousands of claims coming in, it may take some laid off employees in the territory well over a month — if not two — to start receiving payments, especially as the backlog continues to grow and if the V.I. D.O.L.'s projection of upward 20,000 claim applications are filed.