

System Fail, Part 2: Customer Disservice

Written by Mark Sell, BT Contributor
June 2020

System Fail, Part 2: Customer Disservice Florida's unemployment nightmare continues



all the Florida Reemployment Assistance Hotline at 1-800-204-2418, put it on speaker, and just go about your business at home all day.

You might not get an answer at all from the Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO). If you call just before 7:30 a.m., you might get lucky. After three, four, or seven hours, you *might* reach a human. When that happens, they might help reset your forgotten unemployment PIN number, but that's about it. They're under strict instructions not to help you with much else. If they try, they could be fired.

Did you put your middle initial in the application but fail to include it during the phone call?
Suspended, pending a fraud investigation.

Did you say you just got back from being out of town for more than two days? Disqualified. You should have been looking for work.

Did you say you've been to a career center in the past two weeks? Better say yes, even if it was closed for the pandemic. The correct answer is not the right answer.

They're not allowed to tell you why you got the denial. They might not even have access to the system.

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As for getting your money, expect to be on hold for weeks, maybe months. Florida's payouts are the nation's slowest. As of May 27, this state, with nearly 22 million people, had paid out \$3.5 billion in state and federal claims. New York, with 19 million people, had paid out more than \$10 billion as of May 20, or three times as much per capita.

In May's cover story, "System Fail," the *BT* followed the odyssey of District 38 Democratic Sen. Jason Pizzo, who drove to Tallahassee on April 21 with his chief of staff, Maggie Gerson, out of exasperation with the stories of misery inflicted by the state's system.

"Of the last 150 days, I've spent 100 in a hotel room," Pizzo said on his 44th birthday on May 20.

As of deadline, Pizzo's office was still fielding calls into the wee hours from distressed people across the state, and trying to untangle an unemployment relief system perhaps designed to fail.

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Also as of deadline, the state had reported receiving applications from 1,730,666 unique claimants. Of those, 1,070,676 claims were deemed eligible and processed, of which 95.1 percent, or 1,018,296 were paid. That leaves 712,370, or 41 percent of unique claimants, unpaid, whether unprocessed, deemed ineligible, or pending investigation. Of those paid, the DEO website's dashboard doesn't indicate how much they received, whether that total was \$130 or \$275 or \$3300 or \$6000.

"The governor says 95 percent of completed applications have been paid," says Pizzo. "But are they only partially paid? It's a total scam of spinning the success of a system. Here's the \$64,000 question: Why are 6000 people taking calls or paper applications if 95 percent of applicants have been paid?"

Gov. Ron DeSantis, in appearances and conferences throughout the state and in Washington, D.C., has repeatedly cited nuanced policy decisions in the containment of outbreaks and deaths relative to other states. On May 27, Florida, No. 3 in population, was No. 9 in reported cases and No. 11 in deaths, according to the CDC.



But the governor has not even pretended to defend the state's CONNECT reemployment assistance system at www.floridajobs.org, launched in 2013 under his predecessor, Gov. (now Senator) Rick Scott. DeSantis has called it a "clunker" and "the equivalent of throwing a jalopy in the Daytona 500."

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On May 4, DeSantis ordered an investigation by the state's inspector general. The state has responded with fitful results, doubling server capacity, spending \$110 million for expanded call response, and supplementing CONNECT with a mobile-friendly PEGA system.

Deloitte, contractor on the \$77 million system, said it gave the state exactly what it asked for by the time its work ended in 2015, as more efficient cloud-based computing was supplanting servers, and that its systems have worked well in other states. Pizzo and others have said the state's server-based setup was antiquated when launched.

Meanwhile, the lawyers are beginning to circle. Tallahassee attorneys Marie Mattox and Gauthier Kitchen sued the state over its system flaws and red tape, and sought an emergency injunction for immediate payment. They went before a judge May 26, with more than five hours of testimony from the unemployed, a call-center worker, and a DEO official. The judge hadn't ruled at press time.

Payment delays have strained not only people's financial health, but their mental and physical well-being. Calls to the Switchboard 211 crisis helpline have more than doubled, with a large share of those calls related to food insecurity and psychological health, says Miriam Singer, president and CEO of Jewish Community Services of South Florida, which administers the 24/7 hotline.

Yet the crisis has also bonded people together into hives through social media, where they can stay informed and build constructive political action that could produce seedlings of greater civic engagement.

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letters@biscaynetimes.com