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**State of Vermont**  
**Department of Labor**  
**Office of the Commissioner**  
5 Green Mountain Drive  
P.O. Box 488  
Montpelier, VT 05601  
labor.vermont.gov

May 7, 2020

Vermont State Legislature  
115 State Street  
Montpelier, VT 05633

Dear Members of the House and Senate,

This letter is in response to questions and concerns provided to the Department from a number of legislative members. Below you will find details and activities that are currently underway within the Department to address the concerns pertaining to call center capacity, service provided to claimants, and the need to process the remaining unresolved claims in a more expedited manner.

### **Call Center Capacity and Service**

Late last week the Department authorized the immediate scaling of the Maximus Call Center to a maximum of 400 agents. Maximus currently has over 150 agents on the lines at any time and will be at 200 agents by May 13<sup>th</sup>, with a total of 300 agents coming online during the week of May 17<sup>th</sup>. A more detailed schedule is currently being prepared by Maximus that will outline additional requirements and benchmarks. The Maximus solution is currently considered the most advantageous option to achieve the terminable objective in the shortest amount of time. As an established call service provider, they have the ability to recruit, hire, onboard, and train staff members with minimal DOL resources needed. Allowing the Department to focus on claims processing to ensure benefit payments for close to 70,000 Vermonters. Additionally, Maximus has the infrastructure necessary to provide effective large-scale call center services with supporting technology such as courtesy callback, real-time chat, and customer surveying.

With the hope of addressing the concerns we have received regarding customer service, the Department is working to modify the message Vermonters receive when their calls are not answered to include more information. In conjunction with this, we are working to seamlessly transition calls



to the supplemental call center when the Maximus line is full. Load balancing lines will ensure Vermonters automatically get switched to a line that may not be as busy. As well, we have relayed our concerns regarding customer service etiquette to our two call center teams, and as a result, all Maximus calls will be recorded for quality assurance. Finally, we will look to implement additional training and customer surveying in order to monitor call service trends, and ensure that callers are treated with dignity and respect.

The Department is also working with Maximus to see if an 'off-hour' claimant support line is necessary and would provide value. This type of support schedule comes with some limitations, as the UI mainframe is taken offline each night in order to process the day's work. This prevents any off-hour call center operations from reviewing and resolving claim issues. However, questions that do not require technical assistance using the mainframe, as well as PUA specific questions, could be answered with an off-hour support solution. For those that require technical assistance, we could set up a process to collect, assign, and resolve issues when the mainframe is up and running the following day. That is where our efforts to establish a constituent relationship management tool are key and likely to make these additional 'off-hours' viable.

The Department is finalizing this management tool over the coming days, and is planning for implementation during the week of May 10<sup>th</sup>. This solution should ease the process for constituents to register issues and ask questions. It will also aid claimants in finding the status of their application and notify them if they need to provide additional PUA information or file a claim. We understand many Vermonters do not know where they are in the process and we hope this tool can give them some reassurance. Based on the information gathered through the tool, we have developed priority levels, ensuring that those with the most urgent need, get their issues resolved the quickest.

In addition to these efforts, the Department is working to recruit and onboard additional staff that can be available for the long-term (12-24 months) work that is before the Unemployment Insurance Program. These individuals will aid the Department in expanding ability to process claims, adjudicate cases, make eligibility determinations, and further our program integrity and quality control efforts for federal compliance.

### **Payment Processing**

One of the significant populations unable to be served by the UI program are those that are 'monetary ineligible' for regular UI. These are individuals the Department of Labor is working to make eligible by performing the time-consuming process of manual monetary determination.

This 'monetarily ineligible' population represents approximately 10,000 claims. If our mainframe coding is successful over the next two days, we expect a few thousand of this population to remain in regular UI, and the remaining individuals to be pushed to the PUA system by Monday. While



this process sounds simple, it does not come without risk, but we understand the humanitarian crisis happening before us and we will once again put people over process.

Below are some additional details and work that is ongoing.

- Identify, evaluate, and catalog unserved population and sub-populations in order to make more claimants eligible for regular Unemployment and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance benefits.
- Design, develop, test, and implement the PEUC and EB federal programs.
- Clear constituent issues provided through the Legislative constituent process.
- Manually attached FPUC payments to claims with overpayment offsets.
- Run remaining 'monetarily ineligible' population through the eligibility coding change.
- Keep those with a WBA in regular UI and push all remaining 'monetarily ineligible' claimants into the PUA system. Claimants will be notified to complete the PUA application.
- Process weekly claims for roughly 70,000 unemployed individuals

In addition to the above, the Department has implemented an Incident Command System and structure to better prioritize and respond to the issues at hand. The incident command leadership team meets three times per week to set priorities and objectives, review progress on objectives, and make course corrections as necessary to ensure attainment of the objectives. The incident response team meets twice each day, once in the morning to review daily tasks and again in the evening to review progress. These teams are comprised of members of the Department's senior leadership team, the Agency of Digital Services, the Governor's Office, and representatives from other state agencies.

I know each of you understand the vast and complex problem that is before us as a Department, as well as a State; nevertheless, I would also like to share how far we have come.

Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the state's federally funded unemployment insurance program handled roughly 200-400 calls per day and processed approximately 400 new claims and 3,200 payments per week. The Unemployment Division was made up of 65 employees, of which only 15 were devoted to claims processing. At the start of COVID-19, between the weeks of March 15 – April 4, the Department received 65,244 new claims, an increase of roughly 577% and today there are more than 275 individuals handling claims in some way. I know Vermonters did not ask for this, and they deserve the best response possible from their government. I only share this because I want to thank the hundreds of individuals working and helping the Department to serve Vermonters in this incredible time of need.

In conclusion, allow me to extend my appreciation for the passion you all share for Vermonters during this difficult time. Please know that we at the Department share this same dedication and are working tirelessly to serve all Vermonters. Additionally, we know we have much more to do and



are committed to improving each and every day. Displaced and disadvantaged Vermonters need our help, and we will strive to meet their needs regardless of the challenges or obstacles before us.

Sincerely,



Michael A. Harrington  
Interim Commissioner  
Vermont Department of Labor

c: Lieutenant Governor David Zuckerman  
Senator Patrick Leahy  
Senator Bernie Sanders  
Congressman Peter Welch

