

Public Assistance During COVID19 Pandemic

4-27-2020 UPDATE

Before the COVID-19 pandemic began to dramatically affect Connecticut residents and its businesses community, the CTDOL typically received ~3,000 new claims a week with a peak of under 10,000 per week; since March 13, 2020 it has received more than **421,000 applications – well over three years of application activity in six weeks**. The agency has processed* over 352,000 by shifting staff responsibilities, borrowing former CTDOL staff that have gone to other agencies, bringing back retirees, and creating multiple automated programs to process both initial and weekly claims.

The Agency had been issuing approximately \$15 million per week in state benefits payments. Under the COVID-19 pandemic, it has **issued over \$330 million in state unemployment benefit payments**.

The current **time for most applications to reach processing* is now 1-3 weeks**, much reduced from a recent peak of 6 weeks. The wait variance is dependent upon the complexity of the individual claim.

CTDOL recommends individuals select the direct deposit option for benefit payments rather than debit card. **Direct deposit**, made to a savings or checking account, occurs within two business days once a payment is issued. Due to a nationwide shortage of debit cards, it could take up to four weeks for the bank to issue one, and if no option is selected, delivery method defaults to debit card.

We are pleased to report that federal **FPUC programming was successfully implemented** this weekend. Claimants began to see this **\$600 supplemental benefit** in their online accounts on Saturday, April 25th. FPUC payments totaled almost \$89 million, and combined with the over \$51 million in state benefits, the agency provided **\$140 million in state and federal unemployment benefits this weekend alone**.

*Claimants can access their online accounts by clicking on the **green button** on www.filectui.com, which allows a claimant to manage their account, view the status of their account, and **file weekly claims**.*

Once an eligible claimant receives the increased weekly federal payment with their current week of state benefits, they can expect a subsequent lump sum payment with all retroactive weeks within the next two weeks. This retroactive payment will date back to all previously paid weeks that were filed since the FPUC program was enacted on March 29, 2020.

However, there are some cases where the retroactive \$600 payments will be received in less than two weeks. Here are some examples:

- Claimants with claims that were on HOLD status retroactive to 3/29/2020 but were released by CTDOL staff on Friday (4/24/2020) or later will receive the \$600 additional FPUC payment for each of those weeks that are no longer on HOLD.
- Claimants who have not filed their weekly claims but have been caught up on their filing by CTDOL staff on Friday (4/24/2020) or later, will be paid the \$600 FPUC payment for each of the back weeks.

**Some processed claims require further research to determine eligibility prior to issuance of payment.*

Helpful information for claimants

CTDOL's digital filing platform is open online **24 hours per day, 7 days per week**.

File application here www.filectui.com (accessible by computer and mobile device)

Please advise your constituent who is **unable to file** for unemployment benefits **via the Internet** to use a **cell/smart phone or a family/friend's computer**, if possible. If none of those are an option, please have your constituent call (860) 263-6975 or (203) 455-2653 for assistance. One of our customer service representatives will gather the customer's contact information including name, phone number and SS# and will assign staff to contact the customer within 5 business days to take the unemployment claim over the phone.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are updated daily on CTDOL website
<http://www.ctdol.state.ct.us/DOLCOVIDFAQ.PDF>

New claims, to help speed processing, select the **"Temporary Shutdown"** as the reason for separation from employment. An online **tutorial guide** to walk you through the process step by step is found here:
<http://www.ctdol.state.ct.us/UI-online/Guide%20for%20Filing%20CT%20Unemployment%20Claims.pdf>

General questions may be submitted to [www.dol.webhelp@ct.gov](mailto:dol.webhelp@ct.gov)

Our American Job Centers are closed to in-person visits due to COVID-19, but claimants may call the following numbers for **general information** concerning unemployment benefits.

860-263-6975 and 203-455-2653 from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm Monday – Friday (excluding holidays)

203-809-9847 and 203-892-6036 from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm Monday - Friday (excluding holidays)

203-548-7322 (Spanish) from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm Monday – Friday (excluding holidays)

Claims cannot be processed or expedited by calling this telephone service.

The Federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act allows self-employed individuals and independent contractors, who are normally denied regular unemployment benefits, to receive benefits through the new federally funded Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program. Due to the staggering number of claims being filed during the pandemic, CTDOL recommends that **self-employed and independent contractors wait until the new PUA system is up and available to take claims** before first applying for regular benefits. We expect to **begin accepting applications by April 30, 2020**. Delaying might expedite the process for self-employed and independent contractors in the future and will also provide the CTDOL with more of an opportunity to keep working on the backlog to prepare for the PUA program.

Federal Stimulus

In addition to processing thousands of claims, CTDOL is working to program the three federal stimulus unemployment programs into its 40-year-old COBOL system

Pandemic Unemployment Assistance – PUA

(up to 39 weeks)

PUA is intended for those who are not eligible for, or have exhausted entitlement to, state and federal benefits or pandemic emergency unemployment compensation (PEUC). These benefits will be retroactive for all eligible claims. The program dates to February 2, 2020 and retro payment (including FPUC \$600) will be based on the date they became un/underemployed due to COVID-19. Covered individuals also include self-employed, those seeking part-time employment, and individuals lacking sufficient work history. These individuals should wait to file. **DOL expects to begin accepting applications by April 30th.** Individuals must be able and available to work unless they cannot work because of the specific circumstances that relate to COVID-19, including:

- The individual, household member, or one under their care has been diagnosed
- A child or other under the individual's care is unable to attend school or another facility due to closure
- The individual is unable to reach the place of employment because of an official public quarantine, has been advised by a health care provider to self-quarantine, or their place of employment has been closed
- The individual was scheduled to start work and the job is no longer available
- The individual has become "the breadwinner" or major support for a household because the head of the household has died
- The individual must quit his or her job as a direct result of COVID-19
- The individual meets any additional criteria established by the Secretary of Labor

Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation – FPUC

(3/29/20 – 7/25/20)

Emergency Increase in Unemployment Compensation Benefits

- For any UI-eligible claimants (state and federal), PEUC recipients and PUA recipients, Shared Work UI and Trade Readjustment Allowance (TRA)
- Additional \$600 per week for eligible claimants; paid retroactively to week filed (after March 29)
- **Payments began for eligible claimants on Friday, April 24th**, ahead of the anticipated April 27th week.
- Retroactive payments \$600/wk. in a separate deposit/credit from weekly payment
- UI benefits in CT currently range from \$15 to \$649/wk.
- The additional FPUC will bring the range to \$615 to \$1,249/wk.

Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation – PEUC

- Will extend the 26 weeks of regular state UI to 39 weeks. The 13 weeks of PEUC payments are paid after the 26 weeks of regular benefits.
- Payments will be retro to the week of filing subsequent to March 29, 2020, if claimants exhausted all rights to regular unemployment compensation (UC) under state or Federal law for benefit year that ended after July 1, 2019
- Eligibility:
 - Have exhausted all rights to UI under state or federal law; and
 - Must be able to work, available to work, and actively seeking work.
 - CTDOL Commissioner has temporarily waived the work search requirement for state UI benefits. We await guidance on work search requirements for this federal program.

Challenges implementing the new federal stimulus programs

Please have patience as we work around the clock to provide eligible CT residents with Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits.

In order to implement the new federal Unemployment Insurance (UI) programs, in addition to its IT staff, CTDOL has called back retirees to help, has Department of Administrative Services Bureau of Enterprise Systems and Technology (DAS/BEST) assisting and has vendors on site – all working around the clock.

During the pandemic, CTDOL has been managing a 5-part system with a 40-year-old mainframe by:

- Attending to daily malfunctions due to heavy traffic
- Working together with statewide sister agency IT experts on site
- Having multiple vendors on site monitoring system functionality day and night
- Recruiting COBOL and file.net developers to keep up with the unprecedented # of claims and create new programs for the federal CARES Act initiatives
- Reprogramming and building systems to administer the new federal stimulus programs

The Future

CTDOL is currently working on a **new, modernized system for processing UI claims** with the plan to have it operating in 2021. We are doing so through ReEmployUSA, a five-state consortium made up of Connecticut, Maine, Rhode Island, Mississippi and Oklahoma. CT began this relationship in 2016, and officially joined the consortium in 2019, to build the **new system less expensively and more quickly**.

Unfortunately, the modernization project had to be put on hold as we ask our IT staff, vendors and DAS-BEST to re-program our existing 40-year-old UI computer system - comprised of a COBOL mainframe and four connected components. It is not a fully automated system and requires manual determination at multiple points in the process.

Fortunately, the ReEmployUSA consortium is lending its expertise to help CT provide the federal benefit programs faster than would otherwise be possible, by developing new applications so our current system can bypass many manual processes with automation. Still, because the UI program nationally has seen significant cuts in past years, CTDOL staff is down by about 35% overall, and as much as 60% in many of our UI-related departments.

Therefore, we are accessing and calling upon retired and transferred workers with IT and UI experience from other state agencies, as well as working with vendors and national UI experts to process the unprecedented number of claims we are receiving. CTDOL is also recruiting and hiring temporary personnel to administer the federal stimulus programs as then are developed and instituted.

We are working diligently to serve CT residents and provide the safety net of state and federal benefits that so many need while we await relief from the terrible pandemic that we are now experiencing. **We are working hard for you now, and into the future. From our families to yours, we wish you well.**