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A non-profit law firm and community education organization helping low and moderate income people in Kansas



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More call center workers join Kansas Department of Labor to handle unemployment surge

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New call center workers joined the Kansas Department of Labor this week and more will be added next week to help handle the surge in the number of people seeking unemployment benefits, Gov. Laura Kelly announced Tuesday.

The addition of more trained call center workers and other new measures comes as the state labor department works with a new team of specialists following the resignation of Labor Secretary Delia Garcia. Garcia resigned late last month after the KDOL issued clawbacks of unemployment benefits that overdrafted the bank accounts of some unemployed Kansans during the coronavirus pandemic.

For months, an increased number of Kansans trying to file for unemployment benefits have overwhelmed the state labor department. Many people reported being left on hold for hours, some not able to reach the agency to ask questions at all.

“One of the primary difficulties the agency has had is the high volume of calls coming in that require highly-trained customer service representatives to address,” Kelly said in a news release announcing the new hires and other changes.

The KDOL has been working with Accenture for just over two weeks following Garcia’s resignation. The new workers are trained in unemployment surge response “and will be able to provide progressively higher levels of service to callers,” Kelly said.

The unemployment system in Kansas “is one of the most severe cases of outdated technology they (Accenture) have encountered.”

A first group of new workers began taking calls on Monday and more will begin next week after completing training.

In addition, the KDOL hired seven more information technology employees with a goal of speeding up the implementation of various federal unemployment programs. Those new hires include people with specific experience in the programming language the KDOL's system was built in, which Kelly called "outdated."

The KDOL also launched a new online virtual chat agent, named Amelia, to answer the agency's most frequently asked questions in regards to unemployment benefits.

You can access Amelia by visiting www.getkansasbenefits.gov and navigating to the bottom right-hand corner of the web page, where a "chat with us" box will appear. As of Monday afternoon, the bot had nearly 7,000 virtual conversations with users.

Accenture has worked with more than a half dozen other states on COVID-19 related programs, according to the governor.

The unemployment system in Kansas "is one of the most severe cases of outdated technology they (Accenture) have encountered," Kelly said Accenture informed them.

The current KDOL system requires everything be done manually with minimal automation, which means processes take longer and fewer Kansans can be served, according to Kelly. Data and metrics are not stored in a central location.

In addition to adding new call center workers and features like Amelia, Accenture is also looking at how to use federal stimulus funds to rebuild the "antiquated system."

"Once the surge response is stabilized, we'll be able to turn attention to the badly needed system rebuild, so we never face this situation again," KDOL Acting Secretary Ryan Wright said in the news release.

The bundle of changes follow Garcia's resignation as head of the state labor department last month. Garcia's departure came less than a week after the Kansas Department of Labor moved to "clawback" more than 4,500 duplicate benefit payments totaling \$7 million, a decision that overdrafted the bank accounts of an untold number of recipients.

The governor's office previously said KDOL was working with banks to reimburse benefit recipients with overdrawn accounts. The state also set up a hotline and an email for impacted residents.

If you were affected by the clawbacks, you can call 785-580-2602 or email KDOL.duplicateconcerns@ks.gov.

Since the pandemic began, the KDOL has delivered \$1.2 billion in unemployment claims to nearly 200,000 Kansans, according to Kelly.

“We know there have been major issues and missteps, we’ve hit the reset button and are focusing on the future,” Kelly said. “Accenture is reviewing and providing recommendations to improve the stability of our systems to make sure they are readily available to support Kansans.”

The extra \$600 per week in unemployment benefits, part of the federal government’s coronavirus relief efforts, is set to expire on July 25 in Kansas.

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