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JACOBS CALLS FOR AN IMMEDIATE FIX TO NEW YORK'S UNEMPLOYMENT SYSTEM

Says lives are being irreparably harmed by state's failure to fix problems

(Buffalo, NY) – Calling it the most dysfunctional and mismanaged aspect of New York State's response to the coronavirus pandemic, Senator Chris Jacobs is asking the Cuomo administration and the New York State Department of Labor to immediately commit all the necessary resources to fix the broken unemployment system that still has not provided benefits to tens of thousands of New York residents who have been out of work since March.

"The inability of the Department of Labor to eliminate the backlog of New Yorkers waiting for their benefits has never been higher, and the morale of our fellow citizens struggling to stay above water has never been lower," said Jacobs. "The same state government that told people they must stay home is now doing irreparable harm to its citizens by not fulfilling its responsibility to get them their benefits," he added.

Jacobs said his district office has handled more than 400 constituent cases in his district alone related to unemployment where residents are waiting eight weeks or more to receive their benefits. The variety of the circumstances they are encountering reveal a wide range of problems with unemployment beyond an antiquated computer system.

People filing on-line are not able to complete their application without first speaking to a DOL employee, a process that usually take weeks and is often very frustrating for the applicant. People are placed on hold for unreasonably long periods of time, they are asked to provide information that normally only their employer would have access to, and calls get dropped and then have to be returned. To help eliminate the backlog, the administration has been designating state employees from other agencies to assist with calling applicants after remedial training. When one of these unexperienced callers discovers they do not know enough to be able to help the applicant, they are forced to end the call and tell the applicant someone else will call back.

Days and weeks continue to pass, the irritation builds, and so does the need for relief.

"It's terrible what these people are experiencing through no fault of their own," said Jacobs. "In one case our office has been trying to help an individual who was walking miles to a food bank because he had run out of money for gas. These stories are real, people are desperate, and they feel like no one is listening," the Senator added.

Jacobs said he is in regular communication with his Senate colleagues and that the problems his constituents are encountering are occurring across the state in equally large numbers. Lawmakers acknowledge that unemployment's antiquated computer system was simply overwhelmed by the massive volume of applicants as the pandemic unfolded. However, they also believe that when efforts by the administration to address the problem, including new servers and assistance from Google, have had limited impact, then more must be done and something else must be tried.

Many legislators are questioning if there is even a logical system in place to address the backlog. Some inquiries have led them to believe the new servers are only addressing applications filed from the time the servers went live, leaving earlier applicants to continue to wait to be processed by the antiquated system.

Jacobs says all these problems are compounded by the administration's callous and arrogant response of late. When legislators and the media try to shine light on this problem, the Governor's staff blames the delays on mistakes by the people applying. The Governor has even publicly suggested that people should not be bothered by the delays since the benefits they eventually receive will be retroactive to their eligibility date, refusing to acknowledge that means nothing to people who have exhausted their savings, still have bills to pay and still need to feed their families. He went so far as to say that if people did not like waiting, they should go get a job as an essential worker.

"The Governor's public comments and refusal to address the unemployment benefit crisis have been cruel to the people he has asked to make this great sacrifice," said Jacobs. "All of us want the administration to give this problem the same attention they have given to other elements of fighting the pandemic. We want action, answers and accountability, and that is what I am calling for today," the Senator concluded.

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