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WI GOP is Dealing with a UI Problem They Long Ignored

Since being swept to power in 2010 and solidifying their majority through gerrymandering, Wisconsin Republicans have systematically weakened and undermined Wisconsin's Unemployment Insurance (UI) program. They have made work search requirements in Wisconsin some of the most stringent in the country, as well as enacting a one-week waiting period before receiving benefits, making it easier to deny unemployed Wisconsinites benefits.

The COVID-19 pandemic made UI problems obvious, but issues with UI have been plaguing the Department of Workforce Development for some time. We have known for over a decade that Wisconsin's UI system is out of date and needs an upgrade. A 2014 audit of UI also showed that call centers were severely understaffed and were unable to handle 60-80% of the calls that came in.

Wisconsin Republicans have now introduced a bill to overhaul UI, but it truly is more of a rebranding. It would, among other things, rename the UI programs to the "Division of Reemployment Assistance." The bill would add more barriers for Wisconsin workers who lost jobs through no fault of their own and who need help while looking for new work. It would also create burdensome bureaucratic red tape by introducing new reporting requirements for employers.

Some provisions in the bill are actually duplicative of functions already performed by DWD or are requirements that are already in place, such as registering for and participating in re-employment services.

There are widespread trends, not unique to Wisconsin, which are creating difficult hiring situations. Demographic changes and labor force gaps (such as high retirement rates and low birth rates) are two examples. But using people who lost their jobs as scapegoats for workforce woes and treating them as if they are lazy for needing some assistance to bridge the gap is not a smart approach.

Luckily, even though Republicans in Wisconsin refuse to tackle the underlying reasons for Wisconsin's employment issues, Wisconsin is nevertheless getting back on track. Governor Evers has announced an historic \$130 million investment in the Workforce Solutions Initiative to further engage underutilized talent pools. His plan will accomplish that engagement through training and coaching while also supporting local childcare, transportation, and other solutions. While Wisconsin Republicans slept through the last 8 months of 2020 and refused to convene the legislature to fight the spread of COVID-19 and its impact on Wisconsin's workforce, Gov. Evers was not so idle.

Thanks to Gov. Evers leadership, Wisconsin is now ahead of the curve with our labor force. While the country sits at a 5.2% unemployment rate, Wisconsin's is just 3.9%. While the rest of the country's workforce participation rate is 61.7%, Wisconsin is sitting at 66.5%. And according to the most recent figures, we now have fewer people in Wisconsin on UI than were on it before the pandemic, showing that we are on our way back.

We absolutely must fix the issues that have plagued the Wisconsin Unemployment Insurance program for more than a decade, but a facelift will not be enough. To fix Wisconsin's issues, we must be ready to look at the deeper causes and face them head on, rather than looking for a subset of Wisconsin workers to scapegoat.

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