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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
5/27/2020

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Senator Erpenbach Calls for Senate to Remove UI Barriers

West Point – In December 2014 an audit was performed on the Wisconsin Unemployment System. The audit found that in FY 2013-2014, 1.7 million calls to the call centers, which was 60.2% of the total calls, were blocked because the queue was full. The audit showed significant issues and vulnerabilities in the process, which should have sounded the alarm for Republican leadership, but they took no action to modernize the system.

Fast forward to 2020, during a global pandemic that has resulted in historic unemployment levels, and Wisconsinites are now forced to pay the price for Republican inaction. Unfortunately, instead of taking steps to modernize the system – that was not built to handle the challenges we are facing today - Republicans have spent the last decade doing everything possible to make it harder to get unemployment benefits. The non-partisan Legislative Council compiled a list of changes to Unemployment under Republican control. It shows that instead of working to improve access to benefits that Wisconsinites have earned, Republicans would rather assume fraud and create tripwires for Wisconsinites who work for a living.

Republicans put into place more than a dozen new hurdles in just eight years that Wisconsinites have to jump over in order to receive the benefits they have earned. One wrong step, and the claimant has to go down a long road of investigations, eligibility questions and fact finding, which only prolongs the process. These excessive policies have resulted in frustration and delays for too many Wisconsin workers.

The Department of Workforce Development (DWD) is facing enormous challenges and have done everything in their power to navigate these unprecedented times. They have been fielding millions of calls a week, are continuing to increase their capacity and hours to keep up with demand, have blocked attempted identity-fraud, and are doing everything within their power to provide service to Wisconsinites during this public health emergency. The Department has proactively worked to improve the system while navigating patchwork laws and are working around the clock to get Wisconsinites the benefits they deserve.

Meanwhile, my colleagues across the aisle have resorted to finger pointing and blaming a Department that informed them of the challenges they were facing years ago. Today at 11:00am the Committee on Labor and Regulatory Reform will hold an informational hearing on the unemployment system to discuss the challenges of the program, difficulties people are experiencing, how DWD has responded and how to move forward. I ask my Republican colleagues to take this time to turn the mirror on themselves and to work to remove legislative barriers that are hindering DWD from more effectively doing their job.

We have work to do — it's time both sides of the aisle to come together and pass meaningful legislation that will provide long-term relief to workers, students, families, and seniors. It's likely that today's hearing will go longer than Republican leaders have allowed the Senate to work since this pandemic started. Their delay has already cost Wisconsin \$25 million of our federal dollars, and their legislation did far too little to remove the legislative tripwires that are preventing Wisconsinites from receiving the benefits they have earned.

I have been listening to my constituents who are looking for help with their unemployment and I believe our jobs as legislators should go beyond giving input from afar. Getting these benefits can be the difference between being able to afford groceries, pay rent, and survive during this pandemic. Now is the time to come together and get work done.

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