



205 House Avenue, Suite 101, Camp Hill, PA 17011 | PH: 717.612.1590 | FX: 717.612.1593 | www.pawork.org

## PA Workforce Development Association

The PA Workforce Development Association (*formerly PA Partners and the PA Association of Workforce Investment Boards*) is the voice of Pennsylvania's local workforce system, leading the workforce conversation, telling the workforce story, and serving as a clearinghouse for workforce development information to all stakeholders in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. We appreciate the opportunity to submit comments on the UC Call Centers, and issue that has had a significant impact on operations at PA CareerLink® sites throughout the Commonwealth.

### Unemployment Compensation Call Center Issue

**Overview of problem:** Federal funding cuts have prompted the PA Department of Labor & Industry to significantly reduce staff and resources at Unemployment Compensation (UC) Service Centers. As a result, many UC beneficiaries attempting to call the UC Service Hotline are unable to speak to a person who can help them – they simply get a busy signal or a multiple-hour wait. Because local PA CareerLink® sites have one or more dedicated courtesy phone lines to the UC Service Centers, hundreds of UC beneficiaries seeking to renew their benefits or get their questions answered have been lining up at PA CareerLink® sites simply to use the UC phones. The result has been a significant drain on staff time and resources and frustrated claimants who spend hours in line waiting to make a phone call instead of productively seeking employment opportunities.

Local Workforce Investment Boards (WIB) continue to be supportive of the UC regulations requiring PA CareerLink® registration and believe that getting UC claimants in to PA CareerLink® centers early on will increase their chances of finding employment. The enhancements to JobGateway are also positive for staff. The Department of Labor & Industry had indicated that the change in regulations would be “business as usual” and local sites should not see any major impacts on PA CareerLink® operations. Staff welcomed increased traffic into the PA CareerLink® sites hoping that more individuals would take advantage of these services to become more competitive in the job market and become reemployed.

PA CareerLink® staff have been patient and cooperative with administrative issues that have resulted from UC policy changes. In addition, PA CareerLink® administrators have welcomed the opportunity to reach more people who are looking for work. However, the influx of UC beneficiaries solely to use the UC phones has grown to the point where the costs and inconveniences far outweigh the benefits of increased traffic at these sites.

#### **Examples**

- “In the Lehigh Valley, frustrated callers are flooding into PA CareerLink® in Allentown, which has two phones connected directly to unemployment compensation call centers. Those two phones can accommodate about eight people per hour, so the line starts early in the morning and keeps growing until the agency has to turn people away.” *The Morning Call*, October 23, 2012.

- Central Pennsylvania Workforce Development Corporation (CPWDC): “[...] more staff time is being taken up by PA CareerLink® staff, who aren’t technically able to answer any questions about UC, but can only point individuals to the phone, website or fax number. However, staff must diffuse frustrated customers, and manage the line of people waiting for the calls. The waiting line requires constant supervision by PA CareerLink® staff to maintain order, deal with unruly claimants, and prevent claimants from cutting in line before their turn or arguing because some callers take much longer than others. This disrupts other customers using the PA CareerLink® for job searching only. Staff are often met at the door by individuals wanting to use the phone before the site officially opens in the morning, or staff have stayed late because a claimant hasn’t completed his/her phone call.” Rachel Smith, Executive Director, Central Pennsylvania Workforce Development Corporation
- Data and anecdotal evidence was collected from each PA CareerLink® on the impact of the UC phone customers. This data includes the following examples:
  - In Lancaster County, 36% of the total customers at the local PA CareerLink® site over the last 7 months have been UC phone customers.
  - At the PA CareerLink® in Chester County, phone use is the busiest in the mid-morning, particularly on Mondays and Tuesday, with wait times up to 90 minutes.
  - PA CareerLink® Chester City staff has noted that customers complaining of UC issues are “through the roof,” and that wait times are between 2-3 hours. Staff noted that they believe these UC issues “really hurt the PA CareerLink® brand” because UC callers blame the PA CareerLink® for the inability to reach the UC Call Centers.
  - At PA CareerLink® Bucks County in October of 2012, 46% of all customers came in to use UC phone. Staff have had to deal with angry customers, long wait times, and regular verbal disputes between customers.

### **Recommendations Moving Forward**

Local and regional PA CareerLink® sites are seeking solutions to help manage this compliance crowd so that resources can be focused on services that they are funded to provide and those that can help people get back to work.

PA CareerLink® sites seek guidance and resources to manage these issues in a long-term and sustainable manner. PA CareerLink® sites are eager to collaborate with various state departments to partner on new initiatives that streamline administrative functions for serving job seekers across the commonwealth.

### **Some suggestions include:**

- Increase staffing and resources at UC Call Centers
- Provide more dedicated UC phone lines available at PA CareerLink® sites
- Have UC staff members housed at PA CareerLink® sites to answer questions
- Provide more guidance to claimants in correspondence to reduce the need to call UC. Often the answer to the claimant’s question can be found online or through another resource.
- In general, provide better customer service to UC claimants and treat them with respect

### **Submitted by:**

**PA Workforce Development Association**

*Linda Blake, Executive Director*