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COMMENTARY

State Unemployment Websites Crash as COVID-19 Shines Light on Government Technology Failures

States need to prioritize creating more functional, advanced, and robust government websites and services that meet the needs of the taxpayers who pay for them.

By [Spence Purnell](#)
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As the COVID-19 pandemic and stay-at-home orders continue to hit businesses and workers, nearly [17 million Americans](#) have filed unemployment claims in the last three weeks, which have seen 3.3 million, 6.9 million and 6.6 million people file first-time unemployment claims.

For context on weekly unemployment claims filed: “The previous high was 695,000 in October of 1982,” the Labor Department said.

There’s also some chance those numbers would be even higher if people weren’t having so much difficulty filing the claims with state unemployment agencies.

“Crowds of Floridians lined up to obtain paper applications for unemployment benefits this week after the state’s online and phone systems were overwhelmed by a crush of newly jobless residents,” [CNN reported](#).

“New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has apologized to stressed New Yorkers trying to apply for unemployment insurance on a site that has been repeatedly crashing,” [reported NBC New York](#).

Ohio Lieutenant Governor [Jon Husted said](#) the state’s unemployment system was overwhelmed because it was “built to take care of what we could expect on a regular or even robust basis.”

That’s what Americans have been hearing from many states: governments couldn’t possibly have been prepared for this onslaught of off-the-charts, record-setting unemployment claims.

And in some sense they’re correct— two months ago they couldn’t have seen 6 million unemployment claims coming in during a single week. But that’s different than saying they didn’t know a state unemployment website should be able to handle a massive increase in web traffic. After all, media, retail, and other non-government websites successfully handle that challenge every day.

Due to the unpredictable nature of the Internet and the way social media platforms enable distribution and sharing of content, unexpected traffic spikes of up to 800 times a website’s normal traffic happen to private websites frequently. Presented with this challenge, some companies offer services to websites to ensure the

sites stay up and maintain functionality during large traffic spikes. Using tactics such as scalable servers, content delivery networks, and compression of non-essential content, small websites with less funding than state government unemployment agencies regularly employ these tactics to keep websites running.

New York solicited Google's help in fixing its unemployment website, [CNBC reports](#):

The site... is supported by Google's cloud infrastructure, should be able to handle a "high volume of uses," allowing users to save incomplete applications and pick up where they left off. It can be reached via smartphones, tablets and laptops.

Meanwhile, New Jersey is having trouble finding programmers to work on its website because no young programmers want to train in the legacy language, COBOL, which recently ranked 26th on TIOBE's Programming Community Language Popularity Index.

"Literally, we have systems that are 40 years-plus old, and there'll be lots of post-mortems," [New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy said](#). "And one of them on our list will be how did we get here where we literally needed COBOL programmers?"

Florida, in particular, has had big warning signs flashing for it since 2015 that the state's unemployment website was seriously flawed. Well before COVID-19 hit, the site's automated entries were incorrect, fraud was rampant, and password recovery was less than stellar. The website contract, which cost taxpayers \$77 million including overrun costs of \$14 million, was solely negotiated by the state's economic agency. The now-defunct Agency for State Technology, initially tasked with trying to create a statewide enterprise architecture to deal with procurement projects such as these, was allocated only \$3.5 million that same year, reflecting Florida's incoherent approach to state technology, a problem that afflicts many other states as well.

Enterprise technology policy at its core is the collaborative creation of standards that must be met when agencies are developing new technology, like an unemployment website. Most states have fostered an environment of technological "silos" by allowing each agency to procure and manage its own information technology (IT) systems. Run a siloed IT policy, where state agency systems aren't compatible or efficiently sharing data, for over two decades and the result is about what we have today— an unnavigable labyrinth of outdated technology systems that are inadequately constructed, managed and operated.

This episode should serve as a vivid reminder to state governments that society is going to increasingly rely on digital government services. Statewide enterprise technology policy isn't optional anymore. States need to prioritize creating more functional, advanced, and robust government websites and services that meet the needs of the taxpayers who pay for them.



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