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Florida's broken unemployment system to get new boss, DeSantis says

The department's executive director, Ken Lawson, will stay in his job, but oversight of the unemployment system will be handled by Department of Management Services Secretary Jonathan Satter.



Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis. [The Florida Channel]

By **Lawrence Mower**

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TALLAHASSEE — A month into Florida's historic unemployment crisis, Gov. Ron DeSantis is replacing the man in charge of the state's broken unemployment system.

In a stunning admission, DeSantis said during a Wednesday news conference that he still doesn't have basic information about how many unemployment applications have been processed or how many people have been paid — data that his counterparts in other states have been touting regularly.

"I think that we need to know exactly how many claims are paid, not only on a daily basis, but on an hourly basis," DeSantis said. "That's just a change that needs to be done."

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The unemployment system is handled by the Department of Economic Opportunity, which DeSantis oversees. The department's current executive director, Ken Lawson, will stay in his job, but oversight of the unemployment system will be handled by Department of Management Services Secretary Jonathan Satter.

"His mission is very simple: get assistance out as quickly as you can," DeSantis said. "I hope that Jon can get in there, rattle the cage, and get it."

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that role, he oversees a team of more than 1,000 employees and an \$800 million budget, serving as the support agency for state government, state universities, counties, local municipalities, and independent taxing districts throughout Florida.

Jonathan Satter [State of Florida]

He'll now also be responsible for the state's response to millions of unemployment claims that have been and are expected to be filed in the coming weeks because of the economic meltdown caused by

COVID-19.

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Last month, Lawson took responsibility for the failure of Florida's unemployment processing website, CONNECT, which continues to shut down, preventing jobless Floridians from getting weekly payments of up to \$275.

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But DeSantis on Wednesday expressed frustration that problems persist with getting even the most basic information about the state's unemployment system.

Asked about how many outstanding claims there were, DeSantis said he didn't know, adding that's been the problem. He said he's been asking for the information "every morning" and not receiving it.

"Every morning I should know how many claims have been paid," DeSantis said. "Right now it's hard for me to even get those numbers, and that's unacceptable."

The lack of such a simple data point is an indication that Florida is struggling mightily to process a stunning surge in coronavirus-related unemployment claims that started a month ago.

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Like many states, Florida's system couldn't keep up with the number of people trying to file for unemployment, causing the state to resort to paper applications. One potential culprit: the system's backup wasn't connected, something that wasn't discovered until weeks into the fiasco.

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But filing for unemployment largely seems to be fixed. The next critical step is processing those claims, which is required to determine whether people are eligible for unemployment.

Many states have been able to say how many claims they have processed and how many people have been paid. Neighboring Georgia has processed 644,000 claims, [according to Reuters](#). California [says it's processed more than 2 million](#) so far.

Even New Jersey, whose unemployment system is operating on a computer language so old that their governor [has begged anyone for help](#), claims to know how many applications have been processed: [166,000, or 60 percent](#).

Last week, Lawson said the state had a backlog of more than 560,000 claims, and the department was hoping to process 80,000 of them — an indication that Floridians could be waiting many more weeks for unemployment checks. The department has not answered multiple requests from the *Times/Herald* about whether the state met that goal last week.

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launched late last week. Tens of thousands more applications have been sent through the mail through a free partnership with FedEx, he said.

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Prior to his appointment as secretary, Satter spent 28 years in the banking, commercial real estate and logistics industries, his website bio states. Satter received a bachelor of arts degree from Rollins College and a Master of Business Administration degree from Nova University.

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