

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-430](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Finance, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

UI benefits are a critical source of income for millions of unemployed Americans. Overseen federally by DOL and administered by states, the UI program requested \$32.5 billion in benefits in fiscal year 2015 for approximately 7 million UI claims. During the 2007-2009 recession, states faced challenges processing record numbers of claims, and questions were raised about the quality of customer service. GAO was asked to review customer service issues in state UI programs.

GAO examined (1) customer service challenges, if any, recent UI claimants have faced and the extent to which states collect information on claimants' challenges, (2) any challenges states have faced providing customer service to claimants, and any improvements they have made, and (3) the extent to which DOL monitors states' customer service efforts and provides assistance to help them make improvements.

GAO surveyed state UI programs in 50 states and the District of Columbia (with 48 responding); interviewed officials from state UI programs and advocacy groups in California, New York, and Texas (selected for geographical diversity and large numbers of UI claims); and conducted six focus groups with recent UI claimants in these three states. Focus group results are not generalizable, but provide important insights into the experiences of some UI claimants. GAO also reviewed relevant federal laws and DOL guidance.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making recommendations in this report.

View [GAO-16-430](#). For more information, contact Cindy Brown Barnes at (202) 512-7215 or [brownbarnesc@gao.gov](mailto:brownbarnesc@gao.gov).

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## UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

### States' Customer Service Challenges and DOL's Related Assistance

## What GAO Found

In GAO focus groups of recent claimants filing for unemployment insurance (UI) benefits, those who filed by phone reported experiencing various challenges, such as long call wait times; however, those filing for benefits online reported that it was generally easy to do. In all six of the focus groups GAO conducted in the three states it visited, individuals who had claimed benefits by phone between July 2014 and July 2015 reported experiencing challenges with the state UI program's customer service. GAO defined customer service as including ease of program access, courtesy, timeliness, and accuracy, as well as responsiveness to customer needs and expectations. Some participants in all six focus groups reported experiencing long call wait times and difficulties using automated phone systems. In addition, in two of the states visited, representatives of advocacy groups reported that special populations, including individuals with limited English proficiency, had difficulty accessing the UI program. In GAO's survey of state UI programs, most states—including those GAO visited—reported collecting some data on customer service challenges for claimants. For example, 38 states reported collecting data on average call wait times.

Many states reported challenges in providing customer service, including staffing issues, and most have taken some steps to improve customer service, such as increasing self-service options. Specifically, more than half the states GAO surveyed reported insufficient staffing, outdated Information Technology (IT) systems, and funding constraints, all of which could play a role in claimant challenges. Many states also reported that they have taken or are planning to take some actions to improve customer service. For example, 45 states reported taking action to provide self-service options, and 42 states reported taking action to provide customer service training to program representatives.

The Department of Labor's (DOL) Employment and Training Administration (ETA) provides states with monitoring and assistance on some aspects of customer service. ETA monitors and measures state performance on the timeliness of benefit payments and appeals decisions. ETA also monitors and measures the accuracy of states' non-monetary eligibility determinations, such as whether states accurately assess reasons for claimants' separation from employment. In addition, ETA provides states with various technical assistance. ETA has provided states with assistance on IT modernization, staffing issues, and program access for special populations. UI program officials in the three states GAO visited said they could benefit from more information on other states' successful customer service practices, including practices for addressing continuing staffing and IT challenges. ETA plans to share these practices on an ongoing basis, officials said. For example, officials said ETA plans to share successful practices—including those related to staffing—obtained from its national study of call center operations through its online community of practice. ETA also plans to continue to collect lessons learned from state IT system modernization efforts and disseminate them to states.