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Jobs slump pressures state office

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Allison Miller, a single mother of two, was just scraping by on unemployment as the holidays approached earlier in the week and was in no mood to get caught in red tape.

But her unemployment benefits mysteriously stopped coming, and she needed to resolve the problem.

"I didn't have the gas to go to (the state's one-stop career center in) Neptune," Miller, 42, of Eatontown, said. "But nobody would pick up the phone. I would let it ring 25, 30 minutes, and nobody would pick up the phone."

The New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development is straining from an influx of unemployment claims, leaving people such as Miller, who already are on edge, trying to navigate the state's bureaucracy.

The state said it has been hiring workers to assist, but the workload is increasing steadily.

The state's unemployment rate has risen to 6.1 percent in November from 4.2 percent a year ago.

"The phones are as full as could be," Labor Department spokesman Kevin Smith said, urging workers filing claims for the first time to use the department's Web site at www.njuifile.com.

New Jersey pays workers who involuntarily lose their jobs 60 percent of their pay — up to \$560 a week this year and \$584 a week in 2009 — for 26 weeks. Workers who exhaust their state benefits are eligible for unemployment benefits from the federal government for another 20 weeks.

Miller lost her job as a bookkeeper for an Eatontown automobile dealer in October, when banks cut back on lending and made it tougher for consumers to buy cars.

She said she applied for benefits online. She was quickly approved, and she received at least two checks. But after requesting that the money be deposited electronically into her checking account, the checks stopped coming. Her rent check bounced.

She said she repeatedly called the Labor Department, letting the telephone ring for 25 minutes at a time, but got no answer. She borrowed gasoline money and drove to the Labor Department's career center in Neptune on Monday. The office was packed with job-hunters, but she said the computers were down and the representatives couldn't help.

Miller, owed three unemployment checks, was at wits' end by Tuesday morning.

"How do you get a note from the Department of Labor to send your landlord, (explaining why the check bounced?)" Miller said.

Smith at the Labor Department said the agency's computer system that processes the claims was

down twice on Monday for less than an hour each time, which slowed down work at all of the state's career centers.

Despite the glitches, he said, the department processed 2,037 claims, about average for the month.

Unemployment claims in New Jersey last week were more than 30 percent higher than the same week a year ago, officials said. And analysts expect the demand to only get larger next year as employers continue to scale back in the recession and workers' severance packages expire.

To accommodate workers, the state expanded its call center hours to 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. during the week and 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. on the weekend, and it has added 70 workers to keep up with the workload. But Smith said some of those workers still need to be trained.

"We expect that if the economy continues to be slow the way it is, (the new employees) are going to have work," Smith said.