

# Unemployment Unattainable



## To File, or Not to File (Online)

A total rehab of the hardwoods at a house in Barrington was welcome work last month for American Floors of Riverside.

Owner Keith Daly says work slows considerably around the holidays: when the Christmas tree goes up and people have holiday parties, they don't want a floor crew sanding and putting down layers of pungent finish.

"I lay my guys off at that time and if there's a week's worth, we pick up a job. I'll call them in and they'll complain - they don't want to come back in," Daly said.

They don't want to come back in because of the difficulty they've had dealing with the Rhode Island Department of Labor Training, which oversees the state's unemployment insurance program. Cutbacks forced the layoff of nearly a third of the workforce over the summer, while the number of claims - 28,000 per week - has remained fairly steady.

Daly's workers are just a few of the thousands who have complained about not being able to get through, either online or on the phone, to file a claim.

Charles Fogarty, director of the Department of Labor and Training, which handles unemployment insurance claims, says his program is funded entirely by federal money. And when the feds cut \$3 million last summer, it forced Fogarty to lay off 51 of the 150 people employed at DLT.

"We were having difficulty maintaining good customer service even in the best of times, but obviously having that occur all at once had a big impact. It was kind of like a torpedo to the bow," Fogarty said. So DLT has had to adjust to try and keep up with the workload - including a major push toward getting people to ditch the phone and use the web. In fact, 75% of all claims now come in online.

"If you're frustrated with the phone, the best way to do it is with the Internet because you get a receipt; you know we've got it. We process them as quickly as they come in," Fogarty said. "We're not up to where we need to be, so I'm not saying it's going to get done tomorrow, but it makes it a much more efficient system."

That's what Daly told one of his employees.

"I said, 'Just go online. It'll be easy.' [The employee] said, 'No it won't because when you do it online you still have to talk to somebody.' I said, 'No you just fill it out and then you collect.'"

That's when Daly decided to find out for himself.

Daly: I laid myself off... normally I don't. But I laid myself off because there was no work so I could. I did it online. I filled out all of the forms fine; everything worked out fine. Couple of weeks later I don't hear

anything. Finally I got a call left on my machine that my paperwork was filled [out], but I still have to speak to a representative, please call this number. And the number I had to call was the same number they're calling.

Hummel: You've got young guys who are familiar with the Internet, know what they're doing. It's not an aversion to technology - it's the same thing you ran into: you apply online but then there's another step that you have to take that you can't take.

Daly: It tells you you still have to speak to a representative.

Hummel: What's your message to the state on this?

Daly: Just hire somebody to answer the phones. I think it would be less stressful if they could speak to someone.

And it turns out, some relief is on the way. DLT announced last month that it is going to bring back another 11 employees laid off last summer to help with the call load. Director Fogarty says it's a work in progress.

"We're looking at process changers, we're looking at technology. We're doing that - literally meeting every day to see what we can do. Things have gotten better, but obviously the customer service is not where we want it to be... where it needs to be, and we're going to continue to work on it until we get it right."

To see the video version of this story go to [hummelreport.org/1.31.2013.dlt.html](http://hummelreport.org/1.31.2013.dlt.html).