

# Jobless Claims Skyrocket nearly twentyfold in Massachusetts

By Chris Lisinski and Michael P. Norton  
State House News Service

Unemployment claims skyrocketed in Massachusetts last week as the federal Department of Labor reported never-before-seen levels of need nationwide during the coronavirus crisis.

**The federal agency's report** listed 7,449 non-seasonally adjusted advance claims in Massachusetts during the week ending March 14 and 147,995 during the week ending March 21, a nearly twentyfold increase.

A similar trend carried nationwide: seasonally adjusted initial claims jumped 3 million week over week to about 3.28 million total, smashing previous records with swaths of the country out of work due to the pandemic.

"This marks the highest level of seasonally adjusted initial claims in the history of the seasonally adjusted series," the Department of Labor wrote in its report. "The previous high was 695,000 in October of 1982."

The claims surge reflect the sudden impact of the virus in the United States and the widespread efforts to shutter businesses in an attempt to slow the spread of COVID-19 and prevent more infections and deaths. In previous downturns and recessions, initial claims have increased more gradually, rather than all at once.

Baker administration labor officials on Thursday morning did not respond to a request for comment on the new numbers and how the state's system has been functioning in the face of the

claims crush.

Gov. Charlie Baker signed a bill last week expediting access to state unemployment benefits for employees who lose access to work because of COVID-19. Those who submit successful applications will no longer face a one-week waiting period and should be able to receive aid within seven to 10 days.

Between 500 and 800 state employees are deployed to facilitate the unemployment claim process, Baker said Wednesday, and he praised the system as “working far better given the amount of volume it’s dealing with than I think anybody would have expected.”

“As I’ve said before, if we didn’t have the platform that we have now, the system would have crashed a long time ago,” Baker said.

In a report last week, Goldman Sachs estimated the national unemployment rate could rise from 3.5 percent to 9 percent due to the outbreak, with the impact particularly sharp on low-wage jobs vulnerable to economic downturn.

Some industries – hotels, airlines, and restaurants, for example – have been vocal about how the coronavirus and the shutdowns it caused have affected their businesses.

The Massachusetts Lodging Association estimated last week that 17,847 direct hotel-related jobs and another 66,799 jobs that support hotels have been cut in the Bay State already, with occupancy rates at many hotels hovering in the single digits.