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AUGUSTA- The Maine Department of Labor is announcing that Mainers receiving unemployment benefits will begin to see the additional weekly $600, created by the federal CARES Act, by early next week, and that the unemployment phone line will now be open from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. The additional funds will be received concurrently with claimants' current benefits. It will be retroactive in coordination with the enactment of the legislation and the individuals loss of employment and will continue until July 25 if an individual remains eligible.

"We know that unemployment benefits are a crucial lifeline for people and their families, especially during these unprecedented times," Commissioner Laura Fortman said. The Department has been working to implement the new federal programs as quickly as possible. Thanks to the tireless efforts of staff, Mainers will begin seeing the additional $600 early next week. As we have been expanding the number of people answering the unemployment phone line, we have also been able to extend our phone hours to 3 p.m. Monday-Friday.

No additional action is needed to apply for or receive the additional $600. In order to receive the $600 benefit, an individual must have an existing unemployment insurance claim, continue filing weekly certifications, and be eligible to receive benefits.

The Department is still working to implement the other new federal unemployment programs created by the CARES Act, such as benefits for those who are self-employed, and those who have exhausted their current benefits.

The Department of Labor recommends that people file their claims online with a computer as opposed to a smartphone and do so in the evening when internet traffic is less. The Department has implemented an alphabetical call in schedule to help reduce phone line congestion as the Department ramps up its capacity to receive and process claims. Last names beginning with A-H

should call on Monday, I-Q on Tuesday; and R-Z on Wednesday. Thursday and Friday are left unassigned for those who miss their alphabetical day or need to call at that time.

As the Department continues to expand the number of people taking calls, the call-in hours have been extended to 8 a.m. - 3 p.m. Those who are unable to connect with a claims representative by calling 1-800-593-7660 before 3 p.m. Monday through Friday should submit a message at www.maine.gov/labor/contact/.

The Department of Labor continues to implement solutions to the challenges created by the sudden and unprecedented levels of questions and claims to meet the needs of Maine people. Claims staff are working over the weekend to process applications and contacting claimants who have errors on their applications, CareerCenter staff can reset passwords and handle questions via Live Chat, and the department has hired new staff and brought back retirees. By pulling staff from other areas of the department, the number of staff answering calls has tripled. The online unemployment system, which Maine implemented a few years ago, is performing as designed and is available 24/7.

To apply for unemployment: www.maine.gov/unemployment 1-800-593-7660 between 8 a.m. and 12:15 p.m. Monday-Friday For password resets and basic questions through a CareerCenter: https://www.mainecareercenter.gov/locations/index.shtml
(https://www.mainecareercenter.gov/locations/index.shtml)

For more information and resources, visit the Departments COVID-19 page: https://www.maine.gov/labor/covid19/ (https://www.maine.gov/labor/covid19/) Follow the Maine Department of Labor on Facebook @MElabor and Twitter @maine_labor.

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