*This story was produced by Wisconsin Watch, a nonprofit, nonpartisan investigative reporting organization that focuses on government integrity and quality of life issues in Wisconsin.*

**Rejoining workforce isn’t easy for some who lost jobs to COVID-19**

*By Bram Sable-Smith, Wisconsin Watch*

Karen Miller wants to work.

Ideally, the 65-year-old would return to her old job of digitizing government documents for Data Dimensions in Janesville, Wisconsin. But she can’t. The company laid her off in March 2020 — temporarily at first — when COVID-19 struck. The layoff became permanent last summer after the company lost a government contract and [cut more than 100 employees](https://www.gazettextra.com/news/business/data-dimensions-to-lay-off-111-after-government-contract-not-renewed/article_ecead7d9-2f68-5445-a34b-c2bab445f0be.html).

[As the state requires](https://www.wpr.org/gop-lawmakers-vote-reinstate-work-search-requirement-unemployment-benefits), Miller since May has conducted at least four weekly “work search actions” to keep receiving the state’s maximum for unemployment benefits: $370 per week plus whatever the federal government kicks in, which has varied throughout the pandemic. She would search for jobs regardless of the regulations, she said, although a heart condition limits the type of work she can perform. She would prefer to work from home — or at least sit at a desk.

But she said entering her criteria into work search only returns listings for jobs she can’t perform, including physically demanding warehouse and delivery work and positions for nurses or other professions that require licenses that she lacks.

“Why do they ask you what you’re looking for when they aren’t going to send you what you’re looking for?” Miller said. “These companies like ZipRecruiter and Indeed and Glassdoor — they just throw crap at you to see if it’ll stick.”

The search has yielded a few leads and interviews but has yet to result in a new job. She suspects her age has something to do with it.

“I’m willing to take an entry-level position,” she said. “But they don’t want to train somebody that’s 65 years old.”

In earlier months of the pandemic, Wisconsin lawmakers across the political spectrum championed the cause of suddenly jobless workers like Miller — even as Republicans and Democrats blamed each other for an unemployment insurance system that [drowned beneath a flood of](https://wisconsinwatch.org/series/lives-on-hold/) claims and argued over how to fix it.

As the Department of Workforce Development struggled to process claims last year, Miller waited 11 weeks for her first unemployment check. That forced her to spend down her savings and tap into Social Security five years before she preferred — permanently reducing her monthly payment from the federal retirement program.

But few stories like Miller’s have circulated in media coverage of the late-pandemic economy — as vaccinations allow businesses to reopen and a spotlight shines on their frantic search for workers.

[More than two dozen states](https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2021/07/01/unemployment-benefits-covid-federal-aid-ending-early-many-states/7815341002/) have ended early a federal program that adds $300 to weekly unemployment checks to help the recipients weather joblessness during the pandemic. Lawmakers in those states and some business owners claim that the extra benefits — already scheduled to end nationwide in September — remove the motivation for people to look for work.

Wisconsin’s Republican-controlled Legislature also seeks an early end to the extra payments, with Assembly Speaker Robin Vos calling the program a “disincentive to work” that prompts “mischief” among the unemployed. [In a May letter](https://www.wmc.org/wp-content/uploads/05.11.21-WMC-Letter-to-Gov-Evers-UI-Benefits.pdf) to Democratic Gov. Tony Evers, Kurt Bauer, president and CEO of the Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, wrote that the benefits allow “able-bodied workers to remain on the sidelines while thousands of jobs are available today.”

The Legislature approved a bill to end the program, but Evers [vetoed it](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2021/06/29/tony-evers-vetoes-bill-would-end-extra-unemployment-benefits/7805653002/), saying proponents lacked evidence that it would alleviate workforce shortages.

Miller hears how politicians have changed their descriptions of the jobless.

“They think we’re all just sitting around,” she said. “We aren’t a bunch of lazy people. We were workers who lost our jobs and now are being asked to do things that we have no experience with — a lot of us, or don’t have the credentials or don’t have the tools to do.”

Miller was one of 10 people who spoke to WPR and Wisconsin Watch about rebuilding their lives after losing work amid the upheaval of the pandemic. Thirteen others contacted [WHYsconsin](https://www.wpr.org/series/whysconsin), a WPR engagement project, with questions about accessing long-overdue unemployment aid and recounted struggles to find work; they either did not respond to inquiries or declined to be interviewed, citing stigma surrounding the still-unemployed.

The interviews illustrate lingering challenges and tough choices in efforts to rejoin the workforce. A 51-year old Milwaukee man sold both of his trucks to keep up on rent after losing his warehouse job at a ministry that distributes free food — lost transportation that narrows his job search options.

A 44-year-old Madison bartender is leaving the industry after more than two decades to pursue a graphic design career, complaining of low wages and ungracious customers, particularly during the pandemic.

A 68-year-old widow moved to southern Illinois to spend her life savings on a modest home and live on a pension. Others are still waiting for the state to deliver unemployment compensation from the pandemic’s earliest days.

Meanwhile, surveys show that some workers remain concerned about lingering COVID-19 risks, and early research [casts doubt on claims](https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathanponciano/2021/07/08/states-that-ended-300-unemployment-benefits-havent-boosted-labor-market-yet-morgan-stanley-finds/?sh=1b491d652237) that ending extra jobless benefits early significantly eases workforce shortages. Wisconsin [rules](https://dwd.wisconsin.gov/uiben/handbook/english/contentspart6.htm) even allow workers to collect some unemployment assistance if they work less than full time.

**Tough choices after a wait for benefits**

During her three-month wait last year for unemployment benefits, Miller feared she would lose the Rockford, Illinois, home she shares with her 38-year-old son and 18-year-old grandson.

Miller and her son previously worked across the border in Janesville. That’s why they turned to the Wisconsin DWD, which processes unemployment claims, after the pandemic threw both out of work. But Miller and her son — who waited 13 weeks to get his compensation — were among thousands left waiting on aid for months or longer.

Worried about her mortgage, Miller applied for a federal pandemic program that allowed most homeowners to defer payments for up to 18 months without penalty — just in case she needed it. Instead, the Millers stayed current on the mortgage by depleting their roughly $10,000 life savings while waiting on their unemployment compensation.

Miller also saved about $120 monthly on car payments by selling her 2014 Kia Soul back to the dealership and leasing another, less fancy Soul. But money remained tight when she turned 65 in September, even after her unemployment benefits began to arrive. So she tapped Social Security.

**Pandemic aid eased hunger, financial troubles**

Any bit of income has helped the family get by, including federal unemployment supplements and stimulus payments. Those and other policies — including state and federal eviction moratoriums — have profoundly benefited Americans harmed by the pandemic. [A University of Michigan analysis](http://sites.fordschool.umich.edu/poverty2021/files/2021/05/PovertySolutions-Hardship-After-COVID-19-Relief-Bill-PolicyBrief-r1.pdf) of U.S. Census Bureau survey data found that federal pandemic relief helped large swaths of Americans stave off hunger, anxiety and depression. And the federal government’s initial $600 weekly unemployment supplement “was associated with a 35% relative decline in food insecurity and a 48% relative decline in eating less due to financial constraints,” [according to public health researchers](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2775731) at Boston University and the University of Pennsylvania.

U.S. employers [added](https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm) 850,000 jobs in June, and many came with higher wages, particularly in the leisure and hospitality industry. That includes restaurant workers, whose [average pay](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/07/02/higher-paying-jobs/) nationally has reached $15 an hour. Still, the country has 6.8 million fewer jobs compared to February 2020, before the pandemic shuttered much of the economy.

“​​We’re reaching the point when vaccinations are becoming widespread, and people are feeling comfortable going back out into the world again,” said Julia Raifman, an assistant professor at Boston University and principal investigator of the COVID-19 U.S. State Policy database. “I think it’s really important to see people through (with pandemic assistance) until they can connect with jobs that will be good over the long term.”

Economists [offer mixed views](https://www.igmchicago.org/surveys/unemployment-benefits/) on whether the most recent federal unemployment supplement is a major disincentive to work. And [Indeed Hiring Lab research found that](https://www.hiringlab.org/2021/05/27/job-search-activity-jumps-states/) job search activity last May — measured in clicks on postings — temporarily and only slightly increased in states that announced they would end federal supplements early. It cites evidence that job searching returned to normal by the eighth day after the announcements.

Meanwhile, search activity is up in some states that opted out of enhanced benefits in June and down in others — in some cases below national trends, [Indeed reported in late June](https://www.hiringlab.org/2021/06/22/job-postings-through-june-18-2021/). A June Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco [working paper](https://www.frbsf.org/economic-research/files/wp2021-13.pdf)concluded that the $300 weekly federal benefit “had small but noticeable effects on job search and worker availability” early this year.

Living in Illinois offered Miller an additional lifeline unavailable to some laid-off Wisconsinites: She qualified for health insurance through Medicaid, whose enrollment [surged](https://www.medicaid.gov/medicaid/program-information/medicaid-chip-enrollment-data/medicaid-and-chip-enrollment-trend-snapshot/index.html)by 15% during the pandemic’s first year — now covering more than 73 million Americans. (She then qualified for Medicare after turning 65 in September.) Wisconsin is among [12 states](https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/status-of-state-medicaid-expansion-decisions-interactive-map/) that have declined to expand Medicaid access to those making 138% of the [federal poverty level](https://home.mycoverageplan.com/fpl.html) — or about $36,570 for a family of four. Wisconsin’s decision [leaves $1 billion in federal pandemic relief on the table](https://apnews.com/article/wisconsin-medicaid-business-health-government-and-politics-1ab60e341674584c3059511d35ec7c21).

**Going without health insurance**

Romeo David of Spooner, Wisconsin, has lacked health insurance since April 2020 when his employer cut his mechanical engineering job of four years.

The 59-year-old naturalized U.S. citizen grew up in Romania, where he said he “survived communism,” before arriving in Wisconsin in 1993. Given his seniority and previous salary, David likely would not qualify for Medicaid. But he refused to pay more to continue health insurance, not knowing when he might find a new job.

“I’m protesting (expensive insurance options) with my life right now. I just find this system horrible,” David said. “Looking back, I paid thousands of dollars every month. I could have driven a better car.”

**Starting a business, struggling with bureaucracy**

David’s work search challenge: He can’t find a job matching his education and experience. So David started a business from his garage that makes cutting boards and other light wood products.

He does not expect to profit for at least a year, so he called DWD early to ensure that launching a business would not jeopardize his unemployment compensation. DWD told him that checking the “self-employed” box on his claim and answering a few questions should suffice, he recalled.

But following those directions instantly froze David’s unemployment benefits. After David peppered DWD with calls, he said, someone finally advised him to stop checking the “self-employed” box since he wasn’t making money. It had automatically triggered a review of his claim.

“There were no instructions on the website and they never (previously) told me anything like this,” David said.

He had four job interviews in late June and has expanded his work search to include parts of Minnesota. Meantime, he’s living off his savings, which can temporarily sustain him but aren’t enough to retire on, he said.

**Facing eviction amid wait for aid**

Jennifer may lose the home she shares with her 25-year-old son and 3-year-old daughter after losing work during the pandemic. The Milwaukee math and science tutor asked to be identified only by her first name, citing stigma surrounding the jobless. She is now looking for other jobs while her tutoring work fluctuates, but few offer the flexibility she needs to care for her daughter, and she can’t afford to hire help. Jennifer is still trying to emerge from a financial hole following a 15-month wait for unemployment payments.

The 46-year-old filed for unemployment in March 2020 while staying home to care for her COVID-19-stricken son before falling ill for several weeks herself. Jennifer does not qualify for regular unemployment insurance as a contractor, but Congress last year created a separate program for gig workers like her: Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, or PUA.

Wisconsin requires PUA applicants to first be denied regular unemployment benefits. Next, a mixup about which day she officially stopped working kicked her claim into a lengthy appeal process that was not resolved until June 2021. She finally received back compensation that month, and only with the help of a Madison attorney — Victor Forberger, who the Wisconsin State Bar Association [recently named](https://www.wisbar.org/aboutus/awardsandrecognition/pages/default.aspx) Pro Bono Attorney of the Year for 2020, citing his work with residents vexed by Wisconsin’s unemployment insurance system.

Even with the delayed compensation, Jennifer’s finances remain tight.

She fell about $10,000 behind in rent payments during her wait. She’s applied for rental assistance from the Social Development Commission, which administers Milwaukee’s federally funded aid program. She has yet to hear back, and her landlord has filed for eviction. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s eviction moratorium, recently [extended through July](https://milwaukeenns.org/2021/06/25/update-federal-ban-on-evictions-gets-extended-again-heres-what-you-need-to-know/), is all that’s keeping her family in their home.

But the late-arriving unemployment aid can at least cover a deposit on a cheaper apartment.

**Back at work but waiting for past benefits**

After Jay Baukin lost two months of work early in the pandemic, Goodwill rehired the 63-year-old to his part-time position in June 2020. But the lost pay was significant, and the DWD still has yet to deliver unemployment aid. Baukin, who suffered a traumatic brain injury in a car crash 18 years ago, relies in part on federal Social Security Disability Insurance payments. But the monthly checks of roughly $1,500 don’t fully cover his bills. Baukin lives in Dane County, where the [living wage](https://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/55025) is about $2,562 per month. Baukin called the income he gets from working 24 hours a week at Goodwill “essential” for survival.

“Otherwise, I’d be at the street corner with a sign saying ‘I’ll work for food,’” he said.

Unlike most states, Wisconsin bars workers on federal disability from collecting regular unemployment aid, and DWD initially [extended that ban](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/06/wisconsin-blocks-pandemic-payments-for-federal-disability-aid-recipients/) to Pandemic Unemployment Assistance before [reversing course](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/06/reversing-course-wisconsin-seeks-federal-ok-to-aid-the-unemployed-with-disabilities/) [last summer](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/07/unemployed-wisconsin-workers-disabilities-federal-pandemic-aid/). Baukin has spent a year seeking that compensation.

In May 2021, a state administrative judge finally ruled in his favor, but Baukin says he has yet to see a dime; he was told that DWD has not loaded the judge’s notes into its [antiquated computer system](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2021/02/wisconsin-unemployment-aid-covid19/), prolonging the wait.

“(DWD) should have sensitivity training that should be mandated — so they know how to service and assist someone with a cognitive disability,” Baukin said.

**Work search with no wheels**

Pierre Young of Milwaukee is struggling to make rent after losing his [part-time ministry warehouse job](https://www.tmj4.com/news/positively-milwaukee/a-second-chance-just-one-more-ministry-offers-a-new-start-food-for-the-needy) and being denied jobless compensation. His federal disability status torpedoed his regular claim, and he lost out on PUA after being told that he failed  to submit his pay stubs fast enough. He is appealing that decision but sold his two trucks to pay bills as he waited. The 1998 Chevy Tahoe and 2002 Dodge Ram pickup —“a beater with a heater” — netted about $800 together.

But Young’s newfound lack of transportation is limiting his work options, making it hard to even score an interview, he said. He’d love to take a 12-week construction job he found through state-mandated work searches, but getting to the job site in Iowa would be impossible.

A felony conviction on his record — [a barrier for many Wisconsinites](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2021/05/convictions-bar-wisconsinites-from-many-jobs-making-re-entry-a-real-struggle/) — is likely further harming his search, Young said, but “my lack of a vehicle is really what’s got me in a box.”

“I’ve got to have a roof over my head,” he added. “So I had no choice (but to sell the vehicle), you know?”

**Ditching the service industry**

Amid the mad dash for workers, businesses are increasingly rolling out [incentives](https://www.hiringlab.org/2021/06/24/employer-use-of-hiring-incentives-grows/) like signing bonuses. But an Indeed Hiring Lab [survey](https://www.hiringlab.org/2021/06/29/indeed-job-seeker-survey-june-2021/) of 5,000 working-age Americans flagged coronavirus-related health concerns as a major factor slowing the return to work. Other reasons for “non-urgent” job searching in order of popularity included: having a working spouse, financial cushion, care responsibilities or security from enhanced unemployment payments, according to the survey.

Madison bartender Jamie McPeters said he sees return-to-work hesitation among local food service workers, even as some restaurants dangle $1,000 signing bonuses for cooks. McPeters decided to leave the industry after more than 20 years to pursue a graphic design career.

Although thankful for regular customers who “took care of us,” McPeters said he won’t miss the $2.13 hourly wage plus tips —  or occasionally rude clientele. Trying to enforce mask-wearing during the pandemic drove the last point home.

“People just didn’t care. They never saw us as actual people who can get sick and die, and it affects our families,” McPeters said. “We’re not actually humans. We’re just there to serve them food and drinks and we have to shut up and take it.”

McPeters won’t pivot into his new career until finishing classes in December. For now, he’s working as a regional sales representative for a hair and skincare company while picking up one weekly bar shift for extra cash.

McPeters spent months waiting for about $10,000 in unemployment aid after most bars shuttered earlier in the pandemic, but having a landlord who is also a friend — and his boss — made renting less stressful. DWD is now holding up a separate round of unemployment payments from early this year after someone fraudulently tried to access his account, [a common problem in recent months](https://www.wpr.org/gop-lawmakers-want-answers-unemployment-fraud-wisconsin).

Across the border in Rockford, Miller hopes to find work that will put fewer miles on her leased Kia Soul than the 70 miles roundtrip required by her pre-pandemic job. She said driving has gotten harder as she gets older. But she’ll take any job she can perform.

“At this point, I’d be willing to work for just about minimum wage,” Miller said. “I do have my Social Security. But I need to supplement that. It’s not enough to live on.”

*Bram Sable-Smith is WPR’s Mike Simonson Memorial Investigative Fellow embedded in the newsroom of Wisconsin Watch (*[*www.wisconsinwatch.org*](http://www.wisconsinwatch.org/)*), which collaborates with WPR, PBS Wisconsin, other news media and the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Journalism and Mass Communication. All works created, published, posted or disseminated by Wisconsin Watch do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of UW-Madison or any of its affiliates.*