

PHILADELPHIA UNEMPLOYMENT CALL CENTER TO LAYOFF 75 WORKERS



Effective August 15, 75 state employees will be out of a job at the Philadelphia Unemployment Compensation Service Center. The employees were notified of the layoffs on Monday afternoon in a twist of irony. A team of experts were sent to help those notified of the layoffs learn how to apply for unemployment benefits. The twist of irony is that all of those in the room who were notified already know how to file for unemployment. The people being laid off were responsible for answering phone calls and processing claims. "There was a kind of silence," Raymond Martinez said. Martinez is a business agent with a union that represents workers at the center. "People were in shock." Unemployment claimants will not have to deal with any disruption in benefits or services because their claims will be handled by employees at other centers in the state, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry. "The number of [unemployment claims] being filed has dropped since the recession's end," said Labor and Industry Secretary Julia Hearthway in a statement. "We aren't back to the level of prerecession claims, but the volume has dropped to the point where the need for higher capacities and greater expense isn't there." There are nine unemployment compensation service centers operated by the state and the one in Philadelphia is the only one that is scheduled to close. There was an unemployment rate of 10.2 percent in Philadelphia for the month of May. This number is compared to the 7.4 percent rate for the state and the 8.2 percent rate for the country. The unemployment rate for the city was at 10.8 percent in May of 2011. The workers were told that they are being laid off because the call center's lease at 2901 Grant Avenue was ending and that it was too expensive to renew. "The remedy ought to be to relocate the office and not shut it down," said State Rep. Mark Cohen. "I think it's a big mistake. There are already big backlogs. Many callers are just frustrated and give up." Sharon Dietrich, a lawyer who is the head of the Community Legal Services of Philadelphia's employment law practice, said, "Unfreaking believable. I'm so apoplectic, I can't tell you. If they were simply reducing staff, I would understand that. It is true that unemployment staffing waxes and wanes. But to close an entire service center seems like an extreme measure at a time when they have all these needs that aren't being met."

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