

METRO

State cites jobless aid ‘overpayments’

Thousands in Florida told to reimburse funds

Lawrence Mower
Tampa Bay Times

TALLAHASSEE — The state’s Department of Economic Opportunity is trying to claw back possibly billions of

dollars in non-fraudulent unemployment claims distributed during the first 18 months of the pandemic. Thousands of Floridians have received stern letters warning them that they face being sent to collections if they don’t reimburse the state.

So how many unemployment recipients, through no fault of their own, must now pay back previous “overpaid”

benefits? The state doesn’t know.

“It’s been a constant stress for so many Floridians,” said state Rep. Anna Eskamani, D-Orlando, who has helped tens of thousands of Floridians with their unemployment claims.

The latest overpayment notices are arriving after federal unemployment benefits ended last month. They reflect the continuous chaos and disarray

hampering the state’s jobless agency. From the pandemic’s outset, the agency has struggled to pay timely and accurate claims for millions of Floridians who lost their jobs. Some overpayment notices were mailed out after the deadline for recipients to appeal them. Calls to the state’s hotline go unanswered or un-

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Baptist Health fortifies specialty care with Heart Rhythm Center



This is a rendering of an operating room at the Heart Rhythm Center planned at Baptist Heart Hospital. PROVIDED BY BAPTIST HEALTH

Beth Reese Cravey
Jacksonville Florida Times-Union
USA TODAY NETWORK

Construction is to begin this month on a \$17 million facility at Baptist Medical Center Jacksonville’s Heart Hospital that will house a team specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of heart rhythm disorders.

Baptist Heart Hospital, Northeast Florida’s only freestanding hospital for heart and vascular care, offers the region’s “most advanced and comprehensive” program in cardiac electrophysiology, or EP, a subspecialty of cardiology that focuses on the heart’s electrical activity, according to the health system.

The Heart Rhythm Center “will offer patients a one-stop destination for EP procedures including catheter-based ablations and implanting defibrillators, pacemakers and other devices,” said Dr.

“All pre-operative, procedure and post-operative care, including overnight stays if needed, will be performed in this state-of-the-art center and will allow patients to stay in this community for the care they need.”

Dr. Matthew McKillop
Medical director, electrophysiology program

Matthew McKillop, clinical cardiac electrophysiologist and medical director of the electrophysiology program. “All pre-operative, procedure and post-operative care, including overnight stays if needed, will be performed in this state-of-the-art center and will allow patients to stay in this community for the care they need.”

Scheduled for completion in January 2023, the 14,400-square-foot center will include three cardiac electrophysiology labs, staff stations, support spaces, 10

patient rooms and a family lounge.

“Heart rhythm problems can be life-limiting or life-ending, so ... treatment is important,” said Michael Mayo, president/CEO of Baptist Health, Baptist Jacksonville’s parent.

Other factors are population growth in Northeast Florida and Southeast Georgia and new technology to diagnose heart rhythm abnormalities, Baptist Jacksonville President Nicole

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A decade in the works

St. Augustine finally breaks ground on tag! Children’s Museum

Colleen Michele Jones
St. Augustine Record
USA TODAY NETWORK

After several false starts over more than a decade, organizers behind the tag! Children’s Museum announced Thursday they are officially breaking ground on the project planned for a 4-acre parcel near St. Augustine’s Shipyards.

A children’s museum for the city has been in the works since at least 2010, but the venture has been marred by delays in fundraising, as well as changes in leadership and property sites over the years.

Thursday, museum administrators, donors and community leaders gathered to mark the beginning of the construction of Phase I, which will include indoor and outdoor spaces and is expected to open by winter 2022, according to tag! Executive Director, Kim MacEwan.

Many of the facility’s galleries and amenities are named after benefactors such as the Lastinger Big Backyard, the Florida Blue Healthy Gardens, The Cofrin Family Tree Story Garden and The PLAYERS Championship STEM programming.

The “Discovery” center, as all of Phase I is called, carries the namesake of the Newman Family Foundation led by St. Johns County residents Chuck and Diane Newman.

The Newmans recently provided a large monetary gift which allowed the museum to reignite momentum and get the project back on track, Janice Dusseau Jones, the museum’s board of directors chair, told The Record.

Jones said that while the museum’s nonprofit foundation was still \$2 million shy of its \$7 million goal, construction will begin now even as the fundraising campaign moves toward closing the gap.

Chuck Newman said he believed investing in a strong cultural resource in St. Augustine would pay off.

“tag! will become a critical part of arts and sciences enrichment and allow children, students and adults to recapture the pure joy of discovery. It also makes good business sense. tag! will become another destination drawing more people into Northeast

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JIA has at least 22 flights canceled

Staff shortages, weather blamed at many airports

Teresa Stepzinski
Jacksonville Florida Times-Union
USA TODAY NETWORK

Passengers flying to and from Jacksonville International Airport during the weekend faced flight cancellations and delays amid widely circulating rumors on social media of a sickout or a walkout of air traffic controllers at the Traffic Control Center in Hillard.

The Federal Aviation Administration denied the rumors — sort of — in a Sunday afternoon statement.

“No FAA air traffic staffing shortages have been reported since Friday. Flight delays and cancellations occurred for a few hours Friday afternoon due to widespread severe weather, military training and limited staffing in one area of the Jacksonville Air Route Traffic Control Center,” the FAA said. “Some airlines continue to experience scheduling



Travelers wait in Southwest Airlines’ rebooking line at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport on Sunday. Southwest canceled more than 1,000 Sunday flights across the country after canceling 800 on Saturday.

DAWN GILBERTSON/USA TODAY

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HOMICIDE TRACKER

2021: 103
2020: 143

CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS

This is the unofficial number of Jacksonville homicides today and at this time last year. Data may vary from official figures due to reporting delays.



This is a rendering of Clay County's newest hospital, the \$215 million, full-service Baptist Medical Center Clay in Fleming Island.

PROVIDED BY BAPTIST HEALTH



Baptist Heart Hospital is part of Baptist Medical Center on Jacksonville's Southbank and is adding a new Heart Rhythm Center.

PROVIDED BY RYAN KETTERMAN FOR BAPTIST HEALTH

Baptist

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Thomas said.

"Thanks to the expert teams and physicians, the Heart Hospital ... is the epicenter of the highest quality cardiac care in the region," she said. "Adding an EP center will help meet our growing community needs."

Baptist Jacksonville and its Heart Hospital are on the city's Southbank. The new center will be built on the second floor of the Heart Hospital's north wing, in space formerly used for outpatient and cardiac rehabilitation.

The Heart Hospital has about 500 staff members and physicians who have specialized training in inpatient and outpatient cardiovascular and thoracic care, according to Baptist Health. Additional staff members being recruited for the center include registered nurses, cardiac electrophysiology technicians and certified nursing assistants.

Baptist Health is expanding on

multiple fronts. Also at the downtown campus, the \$224 million, seven-story Wolfson Children's Critical Care Tower/Baptist Jacksonville Entry Building is about 86 percent complete. The project will connect all areas of Wolfson and adjacent Baptist Jacksonville.

In Clay County, the final beam was recently installed on top of the \$215 million, 6-story Baptist Medical Center Clay, a full-service hospital to open in fall 2022.

Being built on the existing Baptist Clay campus that opened in 2013, the facility will offer local residents a full array of hospital-based medical and surgical services.

"Clay County residents tell us they need more hospital-based health care services close to where they live and work," Darin Roark, hospital president of Baptist Clay, said. "Having a full-service hospital nearby will eliminate the need for travel, while providing the medical expertise that Baptist Health is known for."

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Flights

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challenges due to aircraft and crews being out of place. Please contact the airlines for details about current flight schedules."

A man who answered the phone at the duty watch desk for the Hilliard air traffic control center said, "We're pretty busy" but declined to say more or give his name to The Times-Union. He did provide a phone number to FAA customer service.

Seven flights had been canceled Friday and 10 on Saturday, JIA spokesman Michael Stewart said.

As of 2 p.m. Sunday, a total of five Southwest flights and one United flight had been canceled locally, the JIA website showed.

The FAA canceled the flights not JIA, Stewart emphasized.

"The ones [cancellations] that showed up on Saturday they said were because of crew hours," said Stewart, noting airline flight crews are mandated to rest after so many hours on duty.

Southwest Airlines led the flight cancellations in Jacksonville on Saturday with seven followed by two American Airlines flights and one Delta Airlines, according to JIA flight records.

No reason was listed for the two American flight cancellations, but the other airlines all listed "crew" as the reason, the records showed.

As of 7:45 a.m. Sunday, 27 percent of Southwest flights nationwide were either delayed or canceled according to FlightAware data, Times-Union news partner First Coast News reported.

Southwest said on Twitter Saturday that multiple factors resulted in cancellations and delays nationwide, including unspecified traffic control center issues and bad weather.

Nationwide flight cancellations

Stranded passengers were struggling with a second day of mass cancellations by Southwest, the nation's largest domestic airline, USA Today reported. Southwest canceled 1,018 Sunday flights across the country as of 2 p.m. Eastern Standard Time and 808 Saturday, or nearly one in four flights, according to flight tracker FlightAware.

Sunday's numbers were 28 percent of the airline's scheduled flights and the highest of any U.S. airline by a wide margin, according to USA Today.

Southwest was optimistic the situation would be better on Sunday, according to a statement it issued Saturday.

"We experienced significant impact in the Florida airports yesterday [Friday] evening after an FAA-imposed air traffic management program was implemented due to weather and resulted in a large number of cancellations," Southwest said. "We are working hard behind the scenes to minimize challenges and fully recover the operation as we take care of displaced crews and customers as quickly as possible. We will continue to reset our network today and hope to return to close to normal operations as we move into Sunday."

American Airlines has canceled 63 flights, or 2 percent of its operation, while Spirit Airlines canceled 32 flights, or 4 percent of its flights, according to FlightAware.

The U.S. airports with the heaviest flight cancellations for departures and arrivals Sunday are all big Southwest "hubs," even if the airline doesn't refer to them as such call them hubs: Denver, Baltimore, Dallas Love Field, Las Vegas and Chicago Midway.

USA Today Network writer Dawn Gilbertson contributed to this report.



Supporters of the tag! Children's Museum participate in a groundbreaking ceremony at the property, located near the city's Shipyards district, on Thursday. PROVIDED BY BONNIE HAYFLICK

Museum

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Florida and boosting our economy," Newman said.

The museum is anticipated to have an estimated \$2 million annual impact on the economy and around 300,000 area students, 76 school districts and 85,000 patrons could be expected to visit the center each year, according to museum organizers.

Phase 2 will add more buildings to the complex with additional indoor exhibits, learning labs and outdoor learning opportunities. MacEwan said she did not know when that phase of construction would begin.

The idea for a large-scale children's museum was first introduced by a group of five local moms, all of whom still serve on the advisory board.

But changes in location, feasibility studies, permitting and fundraising all have delayed the start of the project.

"These are the things that take time and money, but we have been plugging away all along," Jones told The Record.

Jones said it is not unusual for a cultural center like this one to take 10 to 15 years to come to fruition.

"And this is one passionate group [of organizers]," Jones added.

Just some of the museum's corporate partners and stakeholders include Dr. Jimmy and Karen Glenos; the Platt Family; Danielle and Gene Fraser; The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida; and Bozard Ford Lincoln.

The project has also received the ongoing support of the St. Johns County School District and community and youth organizations such as the West Augustine Community Redevelopment Agency.

As plans have moved slowly behind the scenes, leaders like MacEwan have worked to get the tag! name out in the community through offerings such as children's camps and STEAM programming.

Jobless

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returned. Appealing the letters can take months.

The overpayments are a headache for the state as well, and the Department of Economic Opportunity has suspended referring the cases to collections through the end of 2022.

"The Department recognizes the highly frustrating issues overpayments cause, and we are actively working to alleviate the challenges being experienced by claimants," department spokesperson Emilie Oglesby said in a statement.

Just how much the state has sent in overpayments is still unknown. The Department of Economic Opportunity has not said how many people have been overpaid, by how much, or how much it's recouped from Floridians. (Earlier this year, state auditors found the department's data was such a mess that they couldn't verify how much the state has paid out in jobless benefits during the pandemic.)

The amount could be in the billions of dollars. U.S. Department of Labor data estimates that out of nearly \$2 billion in a sample of state benefits paid out during the first year of the pandemic, \$788 million were overpayments. (The state has paid out more than \$31 billion in state and federal benefits since March 2020.)

That works out to a 40% overpayment rate, according to the federal data. That would be the third-highest overpayment rate of any state, although the Labor Department cautions that the data is too unreliable to do a state-to-state comparison. A Florida Department of Economic Opportunity spokesperson did not dispute the data.

Some of the reasons for the overpayments are because of Florida's shambolic response to the pandemic. The demand for unemployment benefits was so great that it crushed the state's already-troubled online unemployment system. In a scramble to get payments to Floridians, the department automatically sent money out without verifying the exact dates the recipient was eligible.

Such inexactitude required recipients, months later, to go back and clarify the weeks they were eligible; if they didn't do it in time, they might have been hit with an overpayment notice.

But changing federal guidelines requiring unemployment recipients to submit their employment records multiple times also triggered some overpayments.

"It's just one hurdle after another. Now we have to go back and feel like we're in trouble."

Zoe Martin
DeLand resident

When Congress extended pandemic unemployment benefits last year, it added a provision requiring states to ask recipients for employment records showing they were eligible for benefits. If recipients didn't submit the records in time, they were told to repay the money.

Zoe Martin, 39, of DeLand, got an overpayment notice last year that required her to submit documents showing she'd lost her job because of the pandemic. Then, two months ago, she received another notice stating that she owes about \$18,000 unless she resubmitted those records. Except this time, she can't find those records.

"It's just one hurdle after another," she said. "Now we have to go back and feel like we're in trouble."

Overpayment notices have created other problems for recipients: once they get one, it can block them from claiming additional benefits.

That's what Sylvania Richard, 26, of Orlando, said happened to her. She attended Valencia College for a warehouse logistics program and did a brief internship in May. Unbeknownst to her, the internship paid her, which she said triggered an overpayment notice from the state when she claimed benefits. She said she's been unable to claim benefits since, and unable to reach someone for help.

"It still says they're waiting for adjudication from the overpayment," Richard said.

The U.S. Department of Labor did throw a lifeline to alleviate what it called the "widespread overpayments in benefits": it allowed recipients keep the money if the overpayment wasn't their fault.

"Amid the pandemic, state unemployment insurance programs did the best they could in the face of unprecedented demand as millions of Americans filed claims for benefits," Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Employment and Training Suzi LeVine said in May. "That demand, coupled with systems stretched beyond their capacity, led to widespread overpayments in benefits."

As of Sep. 29, 168,862 federal waivers had been requested in Florida, and 96,314 were granted, according to the Department of Economic Opportunity. The rest were either denied or are still waiting to be approved.