

LEGISLATIVE REPORT

Upgrading the unemployment insurance call center phone system

DECEMBER 2021



Employment Security Department
WASHINGTON STATE

Background

Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5092, Chapter 334, Laws of 2021, Section 225 (12)(c) requires that the Employment Security Department (ESD) migrate and upgrade the customer call center phone system to a cloud-based system for the unemployment insurance (UI) program. The proviso requires the department to consult with the Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) prior to executing any contract. The department must develop a project plan, timeline, and budget in consultation with the chief information officer. The budget must include base funding for the 2019-21 fiscal biennium for the existing customer call center phone system, projected ongoing costs by fiscal year and by fund for the upgraded phone system. The department must report this to the Office of Financial Management and the relevant committees of the Legislature by June 30, 2021 and in December 2021.

Large volumes of calls to the UI call centers have been significantly delaying ESD's ability to respond in a timely manner. Even after more than doubling call center staff, customers continue to experience long wait times and delayed responses. To address customer service issues and provide benefits as soon as possible, ESD proposed technology solutions that could be implemented in the near term. These solutions would reduce wait times for customers and allow staff to process claims more quickly.

Approach

ESD identified that service delivery could significantly improve by using technology solutions to resolve less complex unemployment insurance issues. This technology would free up call center staff to work directly with people who have more complicated issues on their claims or who require more assistance due to technical literacy or other barriers. ESD is working on two technology solutions to address this. One is the Google Contact Center Artificial Intelligence (CCAI)/Unemployment Insurance Virtual Assistance (UIVA) project and the other is the Contact Center as a Service (CCaaS) project.

Consultation with the OCIO

ESD submitted the IT Project Assessment Tool (ITPA) for the Google CCAI and CCaaS projects to the OCIO. OCIO notified ESD that the Google CCAI project did not require OCIO oversight, and the CCaaS would be under the OCIO oversight. ESD continues to work with the OCIO and

the Office of Financial Management (OFM) to ensure compliance with Washington state technology mandates and best practices.

Google CCAI project update

ESD has been working on the Google CCAI technology project since April 2021. The goal of the project is to provide UI customers with access to a virtual agent via chat and voice, using Google CCAI services, to provide answers for commonly asked questions. ESD originally planned to have this project completed by the end of December 2021. However, additional time was added to ensure adequate testing for a successful customer experience. The project has five key phases that are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 – CCAI project timeline

Date	Milestone
October 2021	Phase 1: Provides answers to frequently asked questions about unemployment insurance in English, using text chat on mobile devices or computers. Example: “How do I apply for unemployment insurance?”
October 2021	Phase 2: Provides answers to specific questions about your claim in English, using text chat on mobile devices or computers. Example: “What is the status of my claim?”
December 2021	Phase 3: Make all Phase 1 and Phase 2 questions and answers available via voice chat, with a toll-free call-in number. For Phase 2 questions, add Spanish language to both text chat and voice chat.
January 2022	Phase 4: Customers can self-schedule a time for a callback by a live ESD agent. They will be able to access the scheduler in either Spanish or English, via text chat or voice.
February 2022	Phase 5: We will add artificial intelligence to support the most valuable answers so that users can ask questions in a wide variety of ways—for example, using misspellings or slang—and the assistant will understand and respond appropriately to the question. We will choose which answers get this extra layer of intelligence based on user testing, frequency of use in current system, and gaps in the existing knowledge base. In addition, we will make these answers available in both English and Spanish.

Improving equity, diversity and inclusion

This CCAI project supports equity, diversity and inclusion by:

- Expanding claimant access to information available online.
- Making it available by phone.
- Delivering this information in a conversational assistant, rather than expansive web pages.

Digital access

By providing basic unemployment benefit information in a simple question and answer format, the project improves access for non-digital natives and people who have a difficult time accessing the web. The CCAI will be accessible either by telephone or text chat on either a computer or a mobile device. Artificial intelligence will recognize a variety of misspelled words, slang terminology, unclear phrasing, etc.

Language access

CCAI improves access to customers with limited English proficiency by adding more languages to this system. This enables customers who also face language barriers to access basic unemployment benefit information.

ESD intends to add more languages after completing initial implementation in English and Spanish. The schedule for this work will also be finalized after the initial implementation. We will have more details on the expected schedule and specific plan for adding these languages by February 2022.

CCAI budget status

Funding for this project was provided in the 2021 Supplemental Budget totaling \$2,110,000 in Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF) for fiscal year 2021. About \$926,000 of the funds were spent during fiscal year 2021. Since project work is also occurring in state fiscal year (SFY) 2022, ESD will use \$1.2 million in Unemployment Insurance Administrative funding to cover the costs of this project that fall outside of the timeframe in which CRF was appropriated for this purpose. These funds were set aside and are separate from proviso funding for the CCaaS project.

CCaaS project update

ESD has been working closely on the CCaaS technology project since July 2021 with the OCIO and our quality assurance vendor to meet all the OCIO requirements. ESD has released the request for proposals (RFP) to procure a CCaaS vendor to implement the CCaaS solution in the cloud and is expecting to have the vendor selected and onboarded by April 2022. Table 2 outlines this project's expected timeline.

Table 2 – CCaaS project timeline

Date	Milestone
July 2021- September 2022	Submitted ITPA and Concept Briefing to OCIO. The project is under OCIO and QA oversight. ESD submitted the Technology Budget to OCIO and ESD is working on the IT Investment Plan.
October 2021 - April 2022	Issued the RFP for CCaaS solution to replace current on-premises Genesys system with a cloud-based telephony system. Following competitive procurement rules and process. Plan to have vendor on board by April 2022. Approved Gated Funding Technology Budget and IT Investment Plan.
May 2022- December 2022	Implement CCaaS solution in phases to provide minimum viable product functionalities first.

Budget

ESD received \$2.1 million of Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF) in the 2021 Supplemental Budget for the state fiscal year (SFY 2021). These funds were to purchase and implement the Google CCAI changes. Due to delays in contracting, ESD spent only about \$926,000 of this for initial licensing. The agency cannot pay implementation costs until the work is completed and accepted. The negotiated cost for this project is about \$2.4 million, with licensing being an ongoing cost.

As requested by ESD, the 2021-23 enacted budget also includes \$4.5 million of funding for telephony system implementation and licensing costs. The Legislature used federal America Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, which we will not receive. ESD has requested funding from the Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund to support these costs. ESD plans to use this funding to procure a vendor for the CCaaS implementation, quality assurance vendor costs, and the Quality Assurance Readiness Assessment. The CCaaS budget details are in the Gated Funding

Technology Budget and are posted on the Washington State Information Technology (IT) Project Dashboard, [IT Project Dashboard - CCaaS](#).

Next steps for ESD

- Select a vendor to implement the CCaaS solution in the cloud.
- Finish implementing Google CCAI project.
- Implement CCaaS solution by Dec. 31, 2022. (The project timeline is subject to change after vendor selection and finalized statement of work.).