



Laura Byrnes  
**CAREER  
 SOURCE**

**Thankful  
 to offer  
 help  
 As work  
 waivers end,  
 CareerSource  
 on the job**

In less than two short weeks, waivers intended to make it easier for those filing claims for Reemployment Assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic are scheduled to end.

Formerly known as unemployment compensation, Reemployment Assistance provides temporary wage replacement benefits to qualified individuals who are out of work through no fault of their own. RA is run by the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity.

You may recall, perhaps painfully so, that the program encountered more than its share of glitches last spring as businesses were forced to cut back or shutter and staff were furloughed or laid off.

From March through May, the RA system was deluged by Covid-19 related claims — 1.7 million claimants filed for assistance representing 63.5% of the total 2.6 million claimants through Nov. 7.

Regionwide, 44,138 individuals or 22% of the labor force filed claims including 11,464 in Citrus County, which represented 24.2% of the labor force.

Of those, 7,400 claimants here or 64.5% of the reported total, filed in the first three months of the pandemic. That parallels what was happening statewide, with 1.7 million individuals, or 63.5% of the total number of claimants, filing during that initial period.

Suffice to say, the system was swamped.

Early on, Gov. Ron DeSantis lifted work registration and job search requirements ordinarily required to claim weeks. Those waivers, which took effect March 15, were originally set to end in September but were extended through Dec. 5.

And now that date is fast approaching.

What does this mean if you or someone you know plans to file for, or continue claiming, benefits after the waivers end?

First, it's important to underscore that work registration and job search requirements are nothing new.

They had been in place for more than a decade prior to March 15.

Second, while CareerSource CLM does not run the RA program, we can play a critical role in helping claimants fulfill requirements to obtain benefits.

Specifically, our staff can work one-on-one with you to:

- start the work registration process by registering with Employ Florida,

See BYRNES/Page D2

# Season unlike others



Associated Press

Shoppers walk past a display of Christmas decorations at a Target store, Sunday, Nov. 8, 2020, in Marlborough, Mass. Thanksgiving is Thursday and more national chains will be closed than in recent years.

## 2020 pandemic changes look of holiday shopping locally, nationwide

**MICHAEL D. BATES**  
 Staff writer

There is little doubt the COVID-19 pandemic will change the way people experience the holidays this year.

Thanksgiving is Thursday and more national chains will be closed than in recent years. In Citrus County, the closings include Bealls, Home Depot, Lowe's, Ollie's Bargain Outlet, Publix and Walmart.

Josh Wooten, president/CEO of the Citrus County Chamber of Commerce, said he knows online shopping will be more attractive to some this year due to COVID-19 but hopes shoppers check with local retailers and see if there are online options.

"We also encourage buying gift cards from local businesses," Wooten said. "Wearing a mask and social distancing can slow the spread. If you take precautions, shopping our local businesses can be safely done."

People can still support the local economy by having a friend or relative shop for them, he added.

"Many of our local businesses make a large percentage of their profits over the holidays," Wooten said. "They in turn pay taxes, donate to charities and employ our friends and neighbors. Consider all of that as you map out your strategy for shopping this year."

### A different look

Walmart says it will spread out its traditional one-day Black Friday deals over three weekends in November in an effort to reduce crowds in its stores during a pandemic.

The nation's largest retailer said

more of its doorbuster deals will be reserved for online, as a way to steer more shoppers away from its stores.

With the coronavirus still spreading, stores have had to rethink their usual holiday plans. Thanksgiving Day doorbusters are canceled. There will still be in-store sales the day after Thanksgiving, but companies are expected to try to steer many shoppers to their websites to avoid crowds and chaos.

"We're preparing for a holiday season unlike any we've seen before," said Target CEO Brian Cornell.

### An earlier start

One thing that hasn't changed is shoppers' preference to shop earlier than ever. It used to be the Friday after Thanksgiving, normally called Black Friday, kicked off the Thursday normally kicks off the busy holiday shopping season.

But more than 40% of holiday shoppers say they started earlier than they normally do, according to a National Retail Federation (NRF) and Prosper Insights & Analytics survey.

"Retailers have demonstrated their commitment and ability to ensure safe shopping environments for their customers and their associates," said NRF President and CEO Matthew Shay.

As of early November, 59% of holiday shoppers said in a survey they had already started making purchases, a 21% increase from a decade ago.

Even so, there is still plenty of shopping left to do. On average, holiday shoppers say they have completed only 26% of their shopping so far.

Retailers' top priority is the health and safety of their employees and customers, and it seems these investments

are paying off. A large majority (70%) of holiday shoppers say that, given the precautions retailers have taken for COVID-19, they have felt safe shopping in stores this holiday season, according to the NRF.

"Consumers have welcomed the longer shopping season, where many retailers have chosen to offer deals before and leading up to the traditional Thanksgiving and Black Friday doorbusters," said Phil Rist, with Prosper Insights.

### What's hot

Clothing and accessories are the most popular gift category, according to 54% of those surveyed by the NRF, followed by gift cards/gift certificates (49%), toys (37%), books and other media (34%) and food/candy (28%).

Similar to last year, consumers plan to purchase between three and four gift cards, for an average spend of \$163 per consumer. Total spending on gift cards is expected to reach \$27.5 billion.

The 2020 top toys for boys and girls include LEGOs and PlayStation. Cars and trucks, Hot Wheels and video games are also popular gifts for boys. Barbie and dolls remain the top toys for girls.

Credit cards (42%) remain the top form of payment consumers plan to use this holiday season, followed closely by debit cards (41%). Just 15% of consumers listed cash as a top form of payment during the holidays, the lowest in the survey's history and likely related to the coronavirus.

Half (49%) of shoppers plan to use an alternative form of payment such as PayPal, Apple Pay, Samsung Pay or Venmo.



## LIVE UNITED 365 Small Business Circle

Hunter Springs Kayaks is a new member of the LIVE UNITED 365 Small Business Circle of the United Way of Citrus County. Owners Dave and Mellisa Perry are pictured with Meghan Pitzer, United Way CEO. To learn more about the program, call the United Way at 352-795-5483.

Special to the Chronicle

