

Updated May 3, 2018

# Rick Scott's Record Helping Jobless Workers and Small Business Owners After Hurricane Irma: The Worst of Any Florida Governor in Thirty Years

Florida Governor Rick Scott has highlighted as one of his successes his record in helping his state recover from the devastation of Hurricane Irma – the most costly disaster ever to strike Florida. But when it came to delivering help to workers and small business owners who lost pay and were unemployed because Irma had shut down their places of work, Rick Scott's record was the worst of any Florida governor in thirty years.

Hurricanes and other disasters can often leave businesses shuttered for extended periods of time as a result of damaged facilities, closed roads, utility outages, or displaced customers or workers. When that happens workers go unpaid and small business owners lose their incomes, leaving them unable to meet their living costs and causing great hardship for them and their families. Disaster Unemployment Assistance (DUA) is a critical program that responds to this need by providing cash assistance to both workers and small business owners when their paychecks are interrupted due to unemployment after a disaster.

But after Hurricane Irma, most [Florida workers and small business owners were unable to access Disaster Unemployment Assistance](#). For weeks after Irma, the Scott Administration's online claims system didn't list DUA as an option for applying for assistance. And back-up phone lines were frequently shut down, left callers on hold, or transferred calls to out-of-state agents who couldn't file claims. The Scott Administration also failed to deliver on promises to fix the system, and they denied workers' first weeks of benefits even when they said they wouldn't.

The Scott Administration's failure to deliver disaster unemployment aid after Irma was symptomatic of his administration's worst-in-the-nation state unemployment program. Since Governor Scott took office, the share of jobless workers receiving benefits has fallen by more than half, to just 10 percent -- last among the 50 states -- while the maximum length of benefits has also been cut by more than half to just 12 weeks, the fewest in the nation. And Florida's average weekly benefit amount (\$246) is 47<sup>th</sup> among the states.

Predictably, the Scott Administration's failures with its DUA system resulted in very few Floridians managing to apply for and receive benefits after Irma.

### **Here are the numbers on Governor Scott's record:**

- Overall, **Rick Scott has the worst record of any Florida governor in thirty years** in helping workers and small business owners apply for and receive post-hurricane unemployment assistance.
- Although Floridians affected by Irma were by far the largest workforce in the U.S. impacted by a major disaster in 2017<sup>1</sup> and Irma ranks as the 5th costliest natural disaster in U.S. history, **just 7,229 Floridians were able to submit DUA applications after Irma under the Scott Administration's system.**
- As Table 1, shows, **that's the lowest number of DUA jobless claims after any major Florida hurricane in thirty years, except for after 2004's Hurricane Jeanne.**
- **But Hurricane Jeanne was a statistical anomaly and in reality the Scott Administration's record after Irma was the worst of any Florida governor in thirty years.** Jeanne was an anomaly because it came on the heels of three other hurricanes during the 2004 season. As Table 1 shows, after the first three hurricanes, Charley, Frances and Ivan, many Floridians had applied for and were already receiving DUA and so they did not need to apply again after Jeanne.
- **Those lowest-in-thirty-years numbers are all the more shocking because Florida's population today is 20% larger than it was in 2004.**
- **Among the few workers and small business owners who managed to apply for DUA and who were found eligible, the Scott Administration got benefits out to just 53% – 3,744 of the 7,026 eligible applications.**
- **That's the lowest rate for any Florida governor in thirty years after a major hurricane.**
- **More than a third of those receiving DUA benefits only received a first payment in March 2018 -- six months after Hurricane Irma --** according to state data reported to the U.S. Department of Labor.
- **Rick Scott's record of getting DUA benefits out to 53% of eligible applicants after Irma compares poorly to the 70% average of other Florida governors** like Jeb Bush and Lawton Chiles after major hurricanes going back to Hurricane Andrew in 1992 when fully 90 percent of those eligible received help.
- **The Scott Administration's poor record on post-hurricane jobless aid extended as well to regular state unemployment insurance (UI) benefits where it processed less than 25% as many claims after Irma as Texas did after Hurricane Harvey.** Workers who qualify for regular UI after a disaster must apply for that benefit and are not eligible for DUA. After Irma, the Scott Administration had processed just 30,646 disaster-related claims for regular UI as of mid-November 2017 – more than two months after the disaster.

By contrast, Texas processed 136,811 claims after Harvey – more than four times as many – despite the fact that the Florida workforce affected by Irma was far larger than that impacted by Harvey in Texas.

**Table 1.**  
**Florida Governors' Track Records Distributing Disaster Unemployment Assistance after Major Hurricanes**

State	Largest Florida Hurricanes, 1988-2018 + Texas's 2017 Hurricane Harvey	Florida Governor	Total initial applications	Total determined eligible	Total receiving first payments	Percent of eligible receiving first payments	Total amount compensated	NOAA Disaster rank by est. cost <sup>1</sup>	FEMA disaster number
FL	Hurricane Irma (2017)	Rick Scott	7,229	7,026	3,744	53%	\$8,829,346	5	4337
FL	Hurricane Andrew (1992)	Lawton Chiles	8,309	7,241	6,508	90%	\$10,276,740	6	955
FL	Hurricane Frances (2004)	Jeb Bush	19,067	9,552	6,662	70%	\$7,253,251	16	1545
FL	Hurricane Charley (2004)	Jeb Bush	10,963	5,917	4,241	72%	\$5,885,851	12	1539
FL	Hurricane Ivan (2004)	Jeb Bush	8,783	4,894	3,278	67%	\$3,588,472	9	1551
FL	Hurricane Jeanne (2004)	Jeb Bush	5,087	1,736	1,115	64%	\$1,560,823	23	1561
FL	Hurricane Wilma (2005)	Jeb Bush	15,346	8,758	4,886	56%	\$5,271,349	10	1609
TX	Hurricane Harvey (2017)		26,370	19,685	8,506	43%	\$22,855,143	2	4332

Source: Calculations by the authors from U.S. DOL DUA data (accessed 5/3/2018): <https://oui.doleta.gov/unemploy/csv/ar902.csv>

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, NOAA: <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/events/US/1980-2017>

## Endnotes

1. Nearly 7.7 million in the Hurricane Irma designated disaster counties in Florida, compared to less than 3.5 million in the Texas disaster counties affected by Hurricane Harvey. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) <https://www.bls.gov/ces/cesharveyirma.htm>