



Important: From the Oregon Employment Department

Senator Kim Thatcher serves Senate District 13. SD 13 covers parts of Washington, Yamhill, Clackamas, and Marion counties, from Hillsboro to Keizer. Check out more at www.kimthatcher.com.

This email came to our my Legislative Office and I think it is very important for you to see!

Thanks,

Kim Thatcher
Senator SD 13

Good afternoon Legislators,

The Oregon Employment Department continues work to address both the historic spike in unemployment insurance claims, and the dramatic expansion of eligibility criteria. We have some new information and can use your help to spread the word.

1. Oregon turned Federal law into real dollars in two weeks!

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act of 2020 was signed into law on March 27. The CARES Act allows payment of Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC). The Oregon Employment Department has started issuing these payments to eligible individuals. Oregonians who are already eligible for regular Unemployment Insurance benefits and eligible for FPUC will receive two weekly payments; one for regular UI benefits, and an additional \$600 payment. Individuals will be receiving FPUC benefits using the same payment method as their regular UI benefits for the week. FPUC payments will be paid for each week someone is eligible from March 29, 2020 through the week ending July 25, 2020. The \$600 payments will be retroactive for those eligible for payments. More information about the upcoming PUA program and all benefits associated with the [CARES Act](#) can be found on the Employment Department's [COVID-19](#) page.

2. We've addressed the error message reported this weekend in the Portland Tribune/Oregonian.

We had a re-start claim error for a portion of claims received during the week of April 5 and again on April 12. We made an automatic fix for this issue last week, and nearly all affected should be able to continue to file weekly claims online. For those who have completed their initial claim, and continued to file weekly claims, your re-start error has been identified and fixed. If you tried Sunday the 12th, and got the re-start error for the first time, you can re-try now and it should work. **You will not lose out on a week of benefits that you were eligible to receive because of a difficulty either getting through on our phone, or because of an online claim error.**

We know misinformation, especially coming from us, is frustrating and scary. We also know that as we rework our systems to keep pace with eligibility rules rewritten at the federal level, we will continue to face challenges with the system.

Bottom line, if a benefits seeker or employer receives a message that doesn't seem right, we ask them to email us – allowing an Employment staffer to run the message to ground.

3. Employers reported receiving notices of unemployment for their employees that look like bills.

Good news, it is not a bill. We provide this information to employers because we are required to; most likely, the information is part of the calculation of an employer's future "experience rating." Ratings are computed annually, and look at the time period of July 1 – June 30.

Because of the timing of the coronavirus, the impact of this is likely to be spread across multiple tax years, minimizing any sudden or drastic changes. The thinking right now is that it is not an indicator that employer "experience rating" will drastically change in the coming years!

4. Updated websites have dashboards and links to information, instructional videos, and a way to sign up for updates electronically:

- <https://www.qualityinfo.org/covid-19>
- https://govstatus.egov.com/ORUnemployment_COVID19

5. Thank you for continuing to advise your constituents to use one of the following email boxes with Employment Department team members dedicated to responding.

Someone will email back or phone the person within the week.

- OED_COVID19_Info@oregon.gov
- OED_UI_Info@oregon.gov

6. Employment Department employees can't all telework? What are you doing for their safety?

The Employment Department promotes telework when possible. Privacy and security are very important to us, the Oregonians we serve, and is critical to our federal and state partnership. This work is essential and we maintain a safe workplace with that security at the forefront of helping Oregonians when they need us most, which has truly never been at a greater level than now.

When people speak to us about their claims, they are providing private information, including their social security number, their earnings information, and when we get the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program up and running, new/private tax documentation we do not usually handle. We have to protect the private information of the people who need unemployment benefits from us. Using unsecured phone lines or allowing inadvertent access to those pieces of private information poses quite a risk.

As early as March 4th, we provided Employment Department team members with information and resources about best practices to stay healthy and safe. Our efforts have continued as the best practices and advice has evolved including:

- Cleaning building per CDC protocols daily
- Soap and water for handwashing, disinfecting wipes, and hand sanitizer are available
- Signage for social distancing
- Individual staff seated at least 6 feet away
- Worksource centers remained open to the public by appointment only to promote social distancing and later went to providing services virtually through email, phones, and skype
- Workspaces that weren't six feet apart were organized into split shifts; no sharing of work spaces (so the people on different shifts are not using the same space as another employee)
- All staff, including the team members in the contact centers have the use of Skype and email to message each other instead of having to ask each other questions face to face
- Our contact centers do not accept walk-ins. The only way to file a claim is online or by phone.
- We have also been opening up vacant spaces in our existing contact centers and other buildings to make additional, socially distanced spaces for taking claims as we bring in new staff
- Through the letters of agreement for represented state employees, which includes employees in contact centers, the Oregon Employment Department also has the same leave options available as all state agencies.

We are continuously adjusting our protocols to keep our workspaces and team members safe and we count on one another to help us do that.

7. We've dramatically increased our staffing levels in response to the wave of claims.

We started with 106 employees dedicated to taking claims during the week starting March 8. In two weeks' time, we doubled the number of employees taking claims, primarily by switching existing OED staff from their area of expertise to taking claims. That means we could use existing work spaces.

As we have continued to hire employees, we have been utilizing spaces that were vacant so we can bring them into a properly distanced environment. Of the initial, record-shattering surge of claims we received, our talented and amazing employees have processed more than half of them. So far, on average, we're still processing claims in about the same timeframe of a few weeks from initial filing to payment as would be the standard in non-pandemic times. That is truly impressive.

As of today, we have 450 team members dedicated to processing claims and we are continually recruiting.

8. We are prioritizing COBOL programming

Oregonians are already getting enhanced unemployment benefits under the

CARES Act, which Congress passed two weeks ago. Where provisions of the CARES Act call for additional coding or computer work, the department is working to implement those changes in its mainframe COBOL system.

- The top priority has been to get the supplemental \$600 payments out the door as quickly as possible, and the first payments began late last week.
- The second priority is to prepare Oregon's unemployment system to provide benefits to those not usually eligible for unemployment insurance benefits, such as self-employed Oregonians. The department is already preparing its systems for this significant expansion of benefits.
- The third priority is implementing the numerous other programs outlined in the CARES Act, including the new federal extension program called the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation, the federal-state shared Extended Benefits program, the Workshare program allotting federal reimbursements (instead of employers reimbursing the trust fund), and the coding necessary to eliminate the "waiting week."

There is significant work required to make changes in our mainframe systems, and making these changes will impact how quickly we can get benefits to people.

Therefore, we prioritize by looking at both the feasibility and risk of the changes compared to the impact of the changes.

9. And the independent contractor (PUA) progress?

We are working on implementing the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program for people who are not usually eligible for unemployment insurance benefits. We may be able to start taking applications before all of the computer programming is done, but we do not yet know if that is the case. PUA benefits will be retroactive to March 29, 2020. As soon as we know how the program will work in Oregon, we will be getting the information out as quickly as we can. It will take us time to take the federal legislation, and the guidance from the US Department of Labor, and from that create and start implementing the programs. Our UI application process really is geared towards employees, as that is who the unemployment insurance program was designed to assist. We are advising that people not apply for this program until we create it. As soon as we know how the PUA program will work, we will be putting information on the [COVID-19](#) page. [Sign up for our email updates](#)

Thank you. Jeannine

Many of the questions we are getting are asking for a confirmation of a claim going through. We ask that constituents with claim specific questions use our dedicated email box address (below). This gets them into a queue to have their specific question answered as the email box is staffed with trained and dedicated employees. This email box is backlogged, but someone will get back to the person.

P.S. Want to stay in the know? [Sign up for our email updates](#)

For questions about your claim, remember we have an email box dedicated to respond to your specific questions. They are back logged, but will get back to you OED_COVID19_info@oregon.gov

Our Oregon Employment Department [COVID-19](#) page

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Pronouns: she, her

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Thank you for helping us save Oregon.

Sincerely,
Senator Kim Thatcher



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