

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 15, 2024

Media Contact:

Seth Gordon

communications@employ.oregon.gov

Oregon Employment Department adjusting phone hours to address delays in claim processing

Changes for Unemployment Insurance, Paid Leave Oregon, and Contributions & Recovery divisions take effect in June

As of Sunday, May 12, the Oregon Employment Department (OED) has completed 10 weeks of administering Unemployment Insurance Benefits in Frances Online. In that time, OED has distributed more than \$140 million in benefits. Weekly claim volume has stabilized at roughly 30,000 claims for the past two months.

It has been nine months since the launch of Paid Leave Oregon, which has provided more than \$417 million to more than 55,000 people in the that time period.

“Both programs have made significant strides, and we are issuing benefit payments to most customers in a timely manner, but we know that we must do more,” said Director David Gerstenfeld. “Simply stated, we need to get fully caught up on our work to provide the level of customer service Oregonians deserve and require.”

After the expiration of pandemic-era funding forced the department to reduce its Unemployment Insurance (UI) workforce by about two thirds, even as workload remained about the same, we have not had enough people to complete the volume of work coming in as quickly as we would like to. We had been outperforming most of the nation in getting people UI benefits quickly, but now are faced with some people experiencing long delays and that lack of adequate funding has hindered our overall customer service, including not having enough staff to answer the phones.

That not only means significantly reducing the number of customers with long delays on their claims, but also having enough staff to process new work promptly and prevent more delays.

“With additional administrative funding through House Bill 4035 (2024), which goes into effect next month, we have started a hiring push that should help us improve customer service beginning in mid-to-late August,” Gerstenfeld said. “However, this is not enough for us to catch up as quickly as we need to. We know there are people right now who have been waiting too long to receive their benefits or to learn from us that they are

ineligible. While we can't make up for the loss of two-thirds of our Unemployment Insurance workforce, we can take steps to make a very real difference. We must act boldly now to make significant progress and re-establish sustainable, high-quality customer service levels.”

What is changing

Because the department's top priority is to significantly reduce the number of people waiting for their claims to be resolved, we need to provide more staff time to work on claims.

To do that, the department is making two changes – one permanent and one temporary – to its phone hours beginning in June. The changes will affect the phone lines for the Unemployment Insurance (UI), Paid Leave Oregon, and Contributions & Recovery divisions.

Current phone hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. However, depending on staffing, employees keep answering calls on hold until about 5:30 to 6 p.m. when the phone system fully shuts down.

Beginning Tuesday, June 4, phone hours will be from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The system will stop accepting new calls at 4 p.m., but staff will continue to answer calls that are on hold until the last shifts end.

Starting Monday, June 3, OED will also close our contact center phone lines on Mondays so staff can focus solely on processing claims, answering electronic messages, making outbound calls, and working on other customer requests.

This is a temporary measure until we can catch up with our workload. Our initial target is to reduce the number of claim issues that are six-weeks old or more by 80 percent. Currently, that is about 13,500 issues. Once we've reduced that number to 2,700 or less, we'll resume taking calls on Mondays.

It is important to note that “claim issues” does not equate to the number of claims with an issue or the number of claimants with an issue on their claim. A single claimant can have multiple issues on multiple weeks of claims, just one issue affecting one week, or even one issue affecting multiple weeks. Furthermore, some claim issues don't prevent customers from receiving benefit payments, but all issues need to be investigated by staff to determine eligibility.

“We understand this change will make it more difficult for customers to reach us by phone in the short term,” Gerstenfeld said. “But it will help us quickly address the most pressing issues for the customers who have been waiting the longest. Once those have been addressed, staff will be able to process incoming work faster, issue benefit payments more quickly, and provide our customers much better levels of service and support.”

How these changes will help

Many customers are calling solely for an update on their claim. However, our data shows that roughly one third of the time, nothing more can be done over the phone. Staff need more time to process claims and resolve the claim issues that prompt calls, and these changes are a big step in that direction.

In short, changing the phone hours will help customer service in several ways:

- With more time to resolve claims, OED can deliver benefits to eligible customers faster.
- In turn, fewer people will call for an update on their claim.
- That reduction lets our staff answering the phones focus on customers who need direct assistance.

The department is also working on improvements to Frances Online to make it easier for UI customers to understand the status of their claim and make it clear if action is needed on their part. This should also reduce call volume.

Overall, the negative impacts of reducing phone hours will be small compared to the progress we'll make in resolving the issues that customers are calling about.

This is supported by data from a January pilot project in the UI program where employees were given two hours per day to focus on outstanding work. Some examples of this work include reviewing the information customers have sent in, responding to written requests, and making outbound calls to get additional information we need to determine eligibility and issue payments.

As a result, productivity increased from 25 percent to more than 200 percent, depending on the type of work.

Staff will continue to make outgoing calls before 9 a.m. and after 4 p.m. as part of processing claims and addressing other customer needs. We also have people working overtime outside of normal business hours to help resolve claims.

Both Paid Leave Oregon and Contributions & Recovery will also benefit from having more staff time focused directly on resolving the issues our customers are calling about.

Paid Leave Oregon is also adding staff to speed up claims processing and improve customer service. Customer care staff has increased by more than 20 percent since April, and the program is continuing to hire.

Committed to improvement

"We know how important this work is," said Gerstenfeld. "People are already facing difficult situations with the loss of employment or when they need to take leave from their jobs. We recognize that it is frustrating to wait any amount of time to receive benefits and that it has been especially difficult to reach us by phone. We are committed

to improving the customer service we provide to Oregonians and these steps will help us do that.”

We will continue to explore innovative ways to address the challenges it faces, apply the lessons learned along the way, and keep the public informed about its performance. In particular, we will track the effect the phone changes have on productivity and share updates on our progress.

We have already seen progress in many areas and appreciate the support of the legislature and Governor in providing the right tools and more staff to get the job done.

What OED customers need to know

- Starting June 3, contact center phones will be closed on Mondays for Unemployment Insurance, Paid Leave Oregon, and Contributions & Recovery. This is a temporary change.
- Starting Tuesday, June 4, our permanent phone hours will be from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.
 - Staff will answer calls on hold until about 6 p.m.
 - This change will also affect live chat for Unemployment Insurance.
- The most efficient way to contact OED is by sending a messaging through a Frances Online account or by using the Contact Us form.
 - Please do not send more than one request for the same issue.
 - If customers have questions about the status of their claim, they should log into their Frances Online account each day to check their action center, follow any instructions, and respond to any questionnaires they find there.
- Hours for WorkSource Oregon offices and other OED programs will not be affected.
- The weekly claim line, Frances Online, and our online Contact Us form will remain available 24 hours a day.
- Customers can still start the UI initial claim process by phone 24 hours a day, but they must complete their application within phone hours.
- Employers who need to file a payroll report but have no employees will be able to file a report 24 hours a day by phone at 503-378-3981.

###

The Oregon Employment Department (OED) is an equal opportunity agency. OED provides free help so you can use our services. Some examples are sign language and spoken-language interpreters, written materials in other languages, large print, audio, and other formats. To get help, please call 503-947-1794. TTY users call 711. You can also send an email to language@employ.oregon.gov.

El Departamento de Empleo de Oregon (OED) es una agencia de igualdad de oportunidades. El OED proporciona ayuda gratuita para que usted pueda utilizar nuestros servicios. Algunos ejemplos son intérpretes de lengua de señas e idiomas hablados, materiales escritos en otros idiomas, letra grande, audio y otros formatos. Para obtener ayuda, por favor llame al 503-947-1794. Usuarios de TTY pueden llamar al 711. También puede enviar un correo electrónico a language@employ.oregon.gov.