

June 1, 2020

Public Testimony for the May 27 and 30, 2020 Oregon House Committee on Business and Labor hearings on the Oregon Employment Department's Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Chair Holvey
Vice-Chair Barreto
Vice-Chair Bynum
Members of the Committee,

My name is Steven Demarest. I am the president of SEIU Local 503, the union that represents the bargaining unit workers of the Oregon Employment Department. I am also an Oregon Employment Department employee with over 39 years of service, most of that involving unemployment insurance.

On May 4, 2020, I, along with SEIU 503's chief steward for the Employment Department and union staff, met with OED executive team members, including Director Kay Erickson and Division Director David Gerstenfeld, and DAS LRU representatives.

As the committee has learned, the most valuable resource for resolving the UI claims issues, and dealing with the backlog of claims resulting from those issues, is experienced UI claims workers. Not only are those workers highly and thoroughly trained, they are the fastest workers in this area because of their experience. The committee has learned that the OED is not fully utilizing this workforce and that its productivity is inhibited.

My testimony addresses the possibility of more fully utilizing the experienced UI workforce and maximizing its productivity, by telework and by improving workplace conditions. One drag on productivity is requiring experienced workers to report to the workplace while the Employment Department's mainframe is down instead of teleworking during hours it is up.

The biggest barrier to telework is the Employment Department. At the May 4, 2020 meeting, Director Erickson, in response to a direct question, said that if all technical issues were resolved, the Department would not allow teleworking for UI claims work. The only reason she provided for this position was the need for phone coverage. However, workers who are willing and able to work but are staying home because of the combination of COVID-19, their personal circumstances, and workplace conditions, are not providing phone coverage. Most of the workers who report to work at the worksites do not provide phone coverage. Of those workers reporting to the worksites, attendance and productivity would improve for several if they could telework.

At the May 4 meeting, Mr. Gerstenfeld acknowledged that accessing the Department's mainframe from a remote location is no greater demand on the mainframe and computer system than accessing the mainframe from the Department's work stations.

The VPN capacity of the Department's server could limit the number of workers who telework. Since the pandemic began, several institutions and agencies have quickly increased their server's VPN capacity. For example, the Oregon PERS agency doubled its VPN capacity within a few weeks. Currently three-fourths of PERS staff is teleworking. Consider the payoff if the investment were made in expanding the Employment Department's capacity. The Department's IT staff has multiple projects, but perhaps it could borrow IT staff experienced in expanding VPN capacity.

At the May 30, 2020 hearing, Director Erickson mentioned broadband and multiple monitors as issues. "Multiple" is actually two. The Department has not asked if UI workers have high-speed broadband or an available monitor before denying their telework requests. A worker using one monitor is more productive than a worker who is not working, but there is no reason the Department cannot provide a monitor, along with a laptop and cell phone, to enable a worker to telework.

Finally, productivity would improve if workplace safety was improved, because attendance would improve. The Department is not providing masks or shields (except that the new Wilsonville UI center has shields). Also, the workplace directives that Director Erickson testified to on May 27 have not been enforced as reality, particularly social distancing. Teleworking would increase the capacity for social distancing in the workplaces.

The Employment Department's UI workers want to work and carry out the Department's mission to provide timely benefits to the Oregonians who are entitled to them. They want to be partners with their employer in that work. They are hoping for assistance from you in achieving those goals.

Thank you.

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