

May 31, 2020

Dear Chair Holvey & Committee

Thank you for your concern on the Oregon Employment Department's performance during this pandemic. The lack of leadership had a great impact on thousands of Oregonians. We appreciate you representing residents of Oregon and our frustration. The meeting held on May 30 brought some light and clarity to the situation in some great and unfortunate ways. The obvious was that the OED was not prepared for this pandemic and there were some great questions brought up with no REAL answers. The main question that needs to be answered is, what are we going to do about it? The fact that Rep. Holvey asking how the committee could help the OED and resulting in utter silence was very unsettling with me. I joined a self-employed Unemployment Support group on facebook to be informed and to help other people in the same situation. I learned that there is no rhyme or reason on how the OED are handling our claims. I also learned that our community has been very supportive of each other, resulting in members of the group "paying it forward" and giving each other donations while they wait for their unemployment benefits to kick in. I just wanted a little light to shine on this situation.

My partner and I own a small business that involves special events, nightlife and other various types of entertainment involving gatherings of people. We have been out of work since March 12. Our whole world has turned upside down with an unforeseeable future. We are self-employed and qualify for the PUA program. We initially filed for regular unemployment benefits March 22 so that we can officially be "denied" before the PUA was available and the CARES act passed. We got a letter of disqualification on April 21. On April 23, we received an email invitation to be a part of a Pilot PUA program, which was a few days before it went live on April 28. We submitted the application right away. The questions on the application were confusing so we were not confident in filling it out properly. We did not hear anything from them until 1 week ago stating that our claim will be processed in 2 weeks. I am skeptical at this point. It has been 5 weeks since submitting our PUA application and 10 weeks total since the beginning.

This brings up some questions and concerns. I will address the most pressing concerns.

- Why haven't the Pilot PUA applicants received any information on their application?

There were no instructions on filling out this application prior to the actual program going live. This may have caused confusion and mistakes on these applications. I realized that our claims may be on the back burner because it was "flagged" for a possible mistake or misunderstanding. My understanding is that a pilot is meant to figure what went wrong and improve the process if necessary. If there were mistakes or misunderstandings, we should be contacted immediately to fix that problem. Many people that applied after Pilot applicants have already received benefits.

- How is OED going to handle the backlog of initial claims?

With their "Project Focus 100" in effect, how are they organizing our initial claims in the first place? Is there a way to see which claims were dated back the furthest? It was brought up in the meeting that they are unable to work around the clock. The answer had to do with the system not being to operate in the evening. I believe work can still be done in those hours of the night which can include the organization of initial claims so claims specialists can execute as quickly as possible during the day. Also, finding a way to have employees telework would help the workload tremendously.

- How is the PUA processing team going to keep up with weekly claims?

With information I have gathered on the facebook group, all the claims in the PUA program have to be keyed in manually. This is resulting in outdated information on claim reports and this is another misguided situation. The weekly claim upload portal has not been giving confirmation of submission for the past couple weeks which has led to people uploading their claims and applications more than once. In my opinion, that is more documents to sift through and more confusion.

- What is OED proactively doing to step up their communication?

This was a huge problem from the beginning. In my experience since filing for unemployment, I have been trying to keep up with new information that the OED had to offer. Unfortunately, their line of communication with individuals and the public have not been adequate enough to provide any peace of mind to anyone. We have had to turn to each other in facebook groups, which have been a great help, to find information. I believe the OED should come up with a structure for outgoing calls to start. For example, planning outgoing calls to claimants with SSN ending in "x-x" on Monday, "x-x" on Tuesday, etc. The other way of communication is social media. They have tried doing so over a month after the pandemic started. There 1-2 posts a day that end up being very vague or sounding like excuses instead of providing information that can help claimants. There needs to be constant addressing of all of the questions and thorough instructions. There are constant questions on the facebook group that go unanswered for days/weeks.

Thank you for taking the time to read. I am writing you to help as many people as I can including myself. I believe that Oregon deserves better and we can get there with solving the problems that are arising before us. This is an extraordinary time and it is time to take extraordinary measures.

Concerned, but very patient Citizen
Megan Xaybanha