

Hello,

I would like to share the story of my experience so far with the Oregon Employment Department during the time of COVID-19.

I am a sole proprietor Licensed Massage Therapist, female business owner, and single income family. I temporarily closed down my business on 3/18/20 due to COVID-19. My family has had no income since then and I have yet to receive any unemployment checks.

I applied for regular Unemployment on 3/30/20 after the CARES act was passed and we were told by the OED that we as self-employed people could do so. The OED updated their online claim form by this time to include workers who would not normally qualify. Over the next few weeks of waiting for money, it was revealed that the antiquated computer system the OED uses could not actually process our claims and they were working on creating a way to do so.

On 4/23/20, I received an email from OED inviting me to participate in the new PUA pilot program. I immediately completed my application that same day and uploaded it to their secure system with my tax return as proof of income.

During the past 9 weeks, I have received multiple and varied denial letters from regular UI. I received a letter from PUA dated May 15, stating that I am eligible for the minimum weekly benefit of \$205. There are two problems with that:

1) I am definitely eligible for more than the minimum based on my 2019 income. That is why I sent a copy of my tax return with my initial PUA application - to prove I qualify for more than the minimum. I recognize that they may be just sending the minimum amount to everyone to get money out the fastest to the most people and will go back and adjust it later. However, I have no confidence in that. That determination letter stated if I would like to appeal I have 30 days to do so. I immediately sent an appeal email with another copy of my Schedule C as proof of income. But, with no way to get through on the phone line, and only getting automated email replies days or weeks later, I am afraid that has gone nowhere and they will say my time for appeal has passed.

2) More than two weeks have gone by since that determination letter and I still have not been paid, and when I check my claim status online it continues to say, "week claimed, not processed" for all 9 weeks I have claimed. How long does it take after eligibility is determined before my claims are processed and I get paid?

Additionally, the PUA claims process has not been very user friendly. We have to download the form, save it to our computer, fill it out, save it again, and upload it to them. This clunky way of doing things has caused a lot of problems for some, including blank forms being uploaded. Has that happened to me? I don't think so but how would I know since it is impossible to speak to anyone from the department? Also, in the last two weeks, they have changed the weekly certification form from one page to two pages, with confusing questions that are not applicable to me and no opportunity to provide an explanation for my answers.

There are two main things I'd like you to be aware of that have been the most frustrating about this whole situation:

1) There has been a huge lack of communication from the OED. It is nearly impossible to get through on the phone line. Many have spent hours on hold to only be told they cannot answer any PUA questions. PUA does not even have a phone line. Emails only get an automated reply weeks later that basically say "we know a lot of time has gone by since you emailed us, if you still need help, email us again". What a joke! I know that in the last week, due to increasing pressure from the news media and local representatives, the OED began sending out robo-calls and automated emails to PUA applicants stating they have received our claims and they will be processed within the next two weeks. I have not even received that communication!

2) There appears to be no rhyme or reason to what they are doing or how claims are being processed. Error messages and conflicting information appear constantly. As part of the pilot program, I should have been at the top of the pile, but nothing is happening. I know for a fact that people who have claimed the same time as me or after me, have already been paid, but I have not. Why is that? There should be nothing complicated about my claim that is holding it up, my work history and earnings are very straightforward. I have double-checked everything I have sent in for completion and accuracy.

I could go on. There are many, many other problems, such as the "waiting week" issue, but I will stop here. Yes, these are unprecedented times. We are living through a pandemic. The OED was overwhelmed with the amount of claims and types of new claims they've never dealt with before. The computer system is too old and inflexible. I know they have taken steps to hire and train 600 new employees and created a new claim system for PUA from scratch. I recognize the efforts they have put forth under very challenging circumstances. However, it is not good enough. We are now going on 9-12 weeks that many of us have had no money coming in. Yet we still have to pay rent, utilities, health insurance, food - not to mention the ongoing business expenses many of us self-employed individuals still have. Taking this long to process claims is unacceptable and has left many Oregonians in panic and desperation. Other states facing the same challenges have found ways to process claims more quickly. We need to do the same. We need to do whatever it takes to get this done.

Thank you,
Kristin Weber

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