

# New director tackles troubled program

**Bill Poehler** Salem Statesman Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Oregon Employment Department announced Wednesday it has hired Karen Humelbaugh as the new director for its embattled Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance program, a week after it was revealed a formal discrimination complaint had been filed against the new program.

Also Wednesday, Oregon Employment Department acting director David Gerstenfeld said the department has brought in an attorney from Barran Liebman LLP, a Portland law firm that represents management in employment law, to investigate the complaint.

The Legislature created the program in 2019 to give 12 weeks of paid time off to new parents, domestic violence victims and those caring for ill family members. It was intended to start in January 2023 but the Legislature this year delayed the program by nine months at the request of the department.

Gerstenfeld previously described the complaint as being about “discriminatory behavior and the lack of accountability” in the program, though he has repeatedly declined to go into details about the complaint.

The department has not responded to the Statesman Journal’s request for a copy of the complaint.

Eight employees have left the program recently and acting director Gerhard Taeubel announced his resignation in August.

“I can’t say much about an ongoing investigation and what the allegations are,” Gerstenfeld said. “I can say that when Gerhard shared with me that he wanted to leave, that the issue was not directly related to the complaint or the issues that have been raised.”

Gerstenfeld was the director of the program when the COVID-19 pandemic started, and about a third of the group working on that program initially shifted to help address the record number of unemployment claims being handled elsewhere in the department.

He said the issues surfaced in recent months, though he wouldn’t be more



The Employment Department building is seen at 875 Union St NE in Salem, Oregon on Friday, Aug. 28, 2020. BRIAN HAYES / STATESMAN JOURNAL

specific than that.

“Since then, there have been discussions and we have moved pretty quickly to take action to really make sure everybody knows that equity, inclusion, treating everybody with respect and really honoring all different perspectives is just absolutely essential to us for the workplace we provide and to the services that we provide,” Gerstenfeld said.

Gerstenfeld said despite the turmoil, the department is still on track to launch the program on the revised schedule of September 2023.

Humelbaugh currently is the director of the Office of Workforce Investments at the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission and has worked for the state for 24 years.

She will transition to the new position Nov. 1.

“Paid leave is a critical safety net that creates an equal playing field for all working families while creating stability for businesses in their workforce,” she said in a statement.

Gerstenfeld said she has already met with employees in the program, and gotten input on desired changes in the office culture.

“I chose Karen for her proven track record managing many strategic initiatives and unraveling complex governance issues at all levels,” Gerstenfeld said.

One of Humelbaugh’s first tasks will be to hire a leadership team, Gerstenfeld said.

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Humelbaugh

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Organic Valley plans rebuild its creamery on the current site in McMinnville  
SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

## Organic Valley rebuilding McMinnville creamery

**Em Chan**

Salem Statesman Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Six months after McMinnville’s Organic Valley milk processing plant went down in flames, plans to rebuild a bigger and better facility at the same site have been announced.

Steve Pierson, Organic Valley’s farmer-member (Sar-Ben Farms in St. Paul) and board president, stated the rebuild will take place in two phases.

Phase one revolves around rebuilding base infrastructure to temporarily resume production for their milk powder product; phase two will be building out the rest of the facility. Phase one is estimated to finish between March and June 2022, while phase two sometime in 2023.

The entire facility rebuild, which would be a total of 35,000 square feet, is forecasted to cost \$30 million to \$50 million, Mark Pfeiffer, vice president of operations, said. Had firefighters not been able to “salvage the evaporator and drier buildings,” a rebuild would not be nearly as achievable.

“We felt good about staying in McMinnville, since it’s the epicenter of milk supply,” Pfeiffer said. “It felt good going to the board of directors to say to rebuild in location and then engage in trying to figure out what it’d look like, permitting, et cetera.”

The original building was built in the late 1930s, early 40s, and was almost entirely out of redwood construction, Pfeiffer said. Rebuilding is acting as a “reset button” for the capability to create a more modern and efficient facility.

“We took a year’s worth of work but did it in two months, and our team has been great but local entities played a

huge role in that,” Pfeiffer said.

Pfeiffer and Pierson both state without the support of the McMinnville Water and Light, McMinnville Planning Department, McMinnville Economic Development Partnership and Business Oregon, among others, that the recovery and rebuild efforts wouldn’t have been possible so quickly.

“Everybody has been nothing short of amazing,” Pfeiffer said. “Especially to folks not just wanting to rebuild but helping us because they understood our sense of urgency for working with farmers out there.”

After the fire, priority was placed on making sure milk that was in the process of being delivered would be rerouted to facilities that could hold or use the product. There are 27 farms in Oregon and 30 in Washington that have their milk processed at this facility, so the last six months have been a balancing act of pulling strings at other facilities in order for the milk to not go to waste.

The McMinnville facility is the only facility in the Pacific Northwest of the four total facilities that the Wisconsin-based organic food brand run. The main staple products of the facility were butter and NFDM, industry jargon for non-fat dried milk, is commonly used in yogurt and ice cream.

Pfeiffer said the milk rerouting was more of a trucking issue, figuring out how to coordinate sending milk to other facilities like Larson’s, which is making bulk butter for them, and getting milk further distances like California, Utah and Idaho.

“Our mission is saving small organic family farms,” Pfeiffer said. “This will help us bring in more farmers since we’ll be able to handle more capacity.”

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