

WORK

Continued from Page 1A

receiving additional federal unemployment benefits, are choosing to stay home rather than look for work.”

The letter stated the benefits are “creating a labor shortage that is impacting our most vulnerable communities and will not be sustainable long term.”

“There’s a disincentive to work,” said Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, who signed the letter. “You get paid as much, or nearly as much, to not work as you do to work with the federal dollars coming in.”

The letter comes as more than two dozen GOP-led states have ended similar benefits due to slow job growth nationwide, a trend some lawmakers have been quick to blame on federal unemployment benefits, though experts also have said child care and the fear of contracting COVID-19 are playing roles.

“It’s really hurting the economy right now,” said Donna Beverage, a Union County commissioner who signed the letter. “There are some people that need to be on unemployment, certainly if they have to do childcare and that sort of thing. But, it’s really discouraging a lot of people from going back to work when they make more money by being on unemployment.”

From March 2020 to March 2021, Oregonians received \$5.5 billion in federal stimulus money, according to The Oregonian/OregonLive.

In May, payrolls increased nationally by



Carlos Fuentes/The Observer

A help wanted sign sits on the front window of The Cell Fix in La Grande on Wednesday, June 9, 2021.

559,000 workers as the unemployment rate fell below 6% for the first time since the pandemic began. And about 554,000 jobs were added on-average from March through May. At that rate, the labor market will not return to pre-pandemic levels until 2022, according to The New York Times.

Workforce shortages felt across Eastern Oregon

For weeks, Eastern Oregon officials have voiced concerns over the workforce shortage. In a letter to Brown “on behalf of Morrow County employers” in late May, Kalie Davis, director of workforce development for the Port of Morrow, listed 25 employers in the county that had more than 200 job openings total.

The letter from the lawmakers concluded with the exact same language used in Davis’ letter: “The benefit of being unemployed should not outweigh the benefit of working.”

The letter comes as COVID-19 cases decline while vaccinations rise statewide, signaling the pandemic is largely waning. That’s why some officials decided to call for an end to the federal benefits now, even as several Eastern Oregon counties with disproportionately high infection rates have reported some of the lowest vaccination rates in Oregon.

“In a time when vaccination numbers are up, COVID cases are coming down and hospitalizations, you know, it’s a time that we need to consider” ending supplemental unemployment benefits, said Wallowa County Commissioner Todd Nash.

Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said there’s “no question” that federal unemployment relief was “a great deal” during the pandemic’s earlier stages.

“At that point, businesses were closed, people were not going to work, and people were laid off,” he said. “That’s changed. They’re

now open, they have jobs and people who are worried about COVID have had multiple opportunities to get vaccinated. Our businesses are struggling because so many people don’t want to go back to work.”

‘It’s not just poor people’

Mark Gomolski, the executive director of Agape House, a nonprofit food bank in Hermiston, said it was sad that several of the people the organization serves have no incentive to go back to work because they are making more money sitting at home.

“I know if I was a parent, how does that look that we’re just waiting for a paycheck and not going to work and staying home and watching TV?” he said. “Some people are being productive and doing things around their homes or volunteering. But they should get back to work. Our economy’s hurting.”

In May, David Gerstenfeld, acting director of the Oregon Employment Department, announced Oregonians soon will have to actively search for a job to receive unemployment, as required under federal law before Congress waived the requirement early in the pandemic when businesses closed to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Those requirements will resume over the next two months, Gerstenfeld said.

The state, however, did not specify when workers will need to demonstrate they’re looking for work and did not set a timeline for when it will reinstate the job search requirement.



Jana Peterson/Oregon Department of Forestry, Contributed Photo

The Joseph Canyon Fire viewed from the east side of Cottonwood Creek late Saturday, June 5, 2021.

FIRE

Continued from Page 1A

of the fires.

Weather wreaked havoc and aided to the early demise of the fires. A Wednesday update from Northwest Team 7, the lead on the fire, said five hours of precipitation Tuesday helped dampen remaining hotspots.

Between .25 and .4 inches of rain was predicted for the fire locations over June 9 and June 10. The good news was the rain would come in showers and not heavy downpours, reducing the threat of slides and washouts. Humidity recovery was forecasted to be near 48% at ridge tops with 5 to 10 mph winds coming from the north and northwest. Afternoon and evening gusts could be up to 25 mph and a slight chance of lightning.

The rain and fog were listed as potential factors that could hamper mopping up the fire with helicopter water drops, but fire activity was predicted to diminish even

further. Team 7 Section Chief John Larson said remaining crews and air support would work on securing the fire line and mopping up where possible in the coming days.

Crucial to the success of putting out the fire and firefighter safety in canyon country were “human repeaters,” fire crew members who could receive radio communication and deliver messages to those in areas where direct communications were hampered by steep cliffs and deep canyons. Larson said now that the fire was in mop-up mode, “human repeaters” and lookouts would not be necessary as communications would be conducted in areas easier to reach by radio.

Spike camps where crews were camped on the fire line were scheduled for clean up with equipment and trash flown out via helicopter.

The Nez Perce Tribe has temporarily closed the Precious Lands Wildlife Management Area within the Joseph Canyon Fire footprint.

GRADS

Continued from Page 1A

OHSU on Saturday, June 12. The OHSU School of Nursing, La Grande Campus, commencement will be conducted in conjunction with Eastern Oregon University’s ceremony. The two are closely linked since the nursing program has been based on Eastern’s campus since it was founded more than three decades ago.

Elysa said that being a full-time mom with a family

of five children and a full-time nursing student has been an uncommon challenge the past three years.

“I honestly don’t know how I did it,” said Elysa, who graduated from EOU in 2018 with a bachelor of science degree in psychology.

She credits support and help from her husband, Joseph, with making a big difference.

“He has been our biggest fan,” Elysa said.

Elysa, in the course of her studies, has inspired Katelyn to also pursue a career in nursing. Katelyn became

interested in the field after reading one of her nursing textbooks.

“She has found her passion,” Elysa said.

Elysa said her daughter’s early graduation gesture is especially meaningful because she had her at a young age when she believes she was not ready to be the best mother she could be.

“I was a teenage mom. I felt like I was a failure. This makes me feel like I’ve done something right,” Elysa Nason said.

She has already received three job offers in the nursing

field and plans to work in Northeast Oregon. Elysa is excited about starting her career and also about the chance to spend more time with her sons and daughters after three years of intense study in nursing school.

“I will get to be a mom again,” Elysa said.

QUEEN

Continued from Page 1A

Kachira Phillips hopes to spend the next few years traveling while she pursues her phlebotomy and EKG technician certifica-

tions. She currently works as a certified medical assistant in Union and Elgin and hopes to become a registered nurse and one day return to Eastern Oregon to give back to her community.

“I would like to thank my community because they have been supporting me for

the last five or six years and it’s been constant support,” Phillips said. “People see me coming and they’re like, ‘oh, what rodeo are you in this year?’ It’s just always unwavering support, and hopefully by becoming a nurse I’ll be able to help them just as they’ve helped me.”