

State expands eligibility criteria for benefits

Oregon Employment Department has more flexibility to award benefits when people face barriers to work

By **KATE DAVIDSON**
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — People who have received unemployment benefits in Oregon are probably familiar with the triple A's — a bedrock of the benefits system. Job seekers must attest they are able, available and actively seeking work to get unemployment on a week-to-week basis.

The Oregon Employment Department temporarily relaxed those rules when the coronavirus pandemic forced mass layoffs.

Now the agency says it has learned a lesson from the pandemic. It recently updated its availability requirements so that more people can get unemployment.

"The world of work has changed," said Lindsay Leahy, director of the unemployment insurance division. "The child care crisis definitely put an exclamation point on it."

To get benefits under the old rule, a job seeker would have to be available to work any schedule, on any days, that an employer in their field would normally require. In other words, they had to be completely available.

The amended rule lets the agency consider barriers such as lack of transportation, lack of child care or other caregiving responsibilities before denying benefits to someone with more limited availability.

For example, say a parent looking for a manufacturing job can't work during the day because their kid's child care provider closed.

"You don't have child care for day shift," Leahy posited. "Are you available for swing shift and graveyard? Yes?"

Under the revised rule, as long as a worker is available 40 hours per week during times when an employer in their area would typically offer work, they may now be eligible for benefits. A person doesn't need to be available around the clock.

The same could be true for job seekers caring for an elderly parent or attending classes during certain hours. Or for people whose availability depends on public transportation.

About 19,000 people are currently receiving unemployment benefits in Oregon.

Leahy said the agency doesn't know how many more people will be eligible for benefits because of the rule change. She said some employers raised concerns their tax liabilities could rise if more claimants were paid benefits from the state's unemployment insurance trust fund.

Any impact should be softened, however, by legislation Oregon lawmakers passed last summer cutting employer taxes by roughly \$2.4 billion through 2029.

Leahy said the Employment Department would evaluate the rule change after a year, to see how often it gets used and measure its effect on the unemployment trust fund. She said additional changes could be made in the future.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group
The Swartz Ink sign rests on a heater inside the Fir Street, La Grande, shop on Tuesday, March 29, 2022, two days before the store closed its doors.

Longtime local office supply store owners retire after 25 years of operation

By **DAVIS CARBAUGH**
The Observer

LA GRANDE — A storied local business in La Grande recently closed its doors.

After 25 years in operation, Swartz Ink owners Ed and Sharon Swartz closed their business on Thursday, March 31. Swartz Ink provided a variety of office supplies over the years, such as ink rollers, calculator ribbons, toner remanufacturing and typewriter ribbons, as well as remanufacturing and repair services.

"It just feels like it's time," Ed Swartz said. "We've been in business for 25 years and I just turned 65. With the two of us running the business all the time, I think we'll take a nice vacation for the first time in about 15 years."

Ed Swartz started the business in the late 1990s, looking for a creative outlet for his experience with office supplies and machines and bring a needed service to La Grande. With a background in copier repairs, he found many similarities between the technology associated with laser printers as well.

"I was kind of disenchanted with the work I was doing previously," he said. "I thought that there has to be something better. Some inspiration from God and a lot of footwork went into it."

Swartz Ink specialized in services that were unique to the local shop on Fir Street, services that could not be found at big-chain stores.



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group
Owners Ed and Sharon Swartz pose for a photo inside Swartz Ink on Fir Street, La Grande, on Tuesday, March 29, 2022. After over 25 years of operation, the office supply store closed up shop on March 31 and its owners are retiring.

In starting up the business, Ed Swartz hit the ground running to make connections. Ed and Sharon Swartz traveled to Union, Wallowa, Baker and Umatilla counties to create lasting business connections and become a go-to provider to meet office needs in the region. Once the business was established, Ed Swartz expanded his services to remanufacturing toner cartridges, copier and printer maintenance, typewriter and calculator ribbons and other office necessities.

Beyond professional connections, Ed Swartz noted that being a local business downtown for many years led to relationships beyond just business.

"We've had some real loyal customers through the years and we really appreciate them," he said. "In fact, a lot of them have become friends. That's the part I'm going to miss the most, the interaction with the customers and people that stop by."

Having stayed in the same location for

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A question of balance

Stretching, exercise help partially paralyzed rancher stay positive

By **STEVEN MITCHELL**
Blue Mountain Eagle

SENECA — Since a car accident left him paralyzed from the waist down nine years ago, a strict exercise and physical therapy routine keeps fifth-generation Seneca rancher Alec Oliver in a balanced and positive mindset.

Oliver, 33, said he can still do many of the things he did before, from managing the day-to-day goings-on at the ranch to riding a horse. Still, there is much he misses out on.

Reconciling that, he said, requires a positive outlook.

"It doesn't do any good to sit around and dwell on things," Oliver said. "Everybody has struggles, everybody has different challenges, and nobody knows what it's like to be in somebody else's shoes."

Oliver said part of what keeps him going is exercise and stretching.

He said he does a lot of exercises to keep his balance and his posture in a square position.

The exercises include leg stretches and stretches to his core. Oliver said stretching counteracts the adverse effects of sitting in a chair for 18-plus hours a day.

"If you think about it, if you sit in a chair in the same position for 18 hours a day and how hard that is on the body, and how bad it is. So I try to counter that by doing different stretches," Oliver said.

Since he can't stand on his own anymore, Oliver has a standing frame that he tries to stand in for an hour or more a day. He said this helps him work on his balance and stay stretched out.

Also, Oliver has a stationary bike that he pedals with his hands and tries to ride each day that he is home.

Another thing that Oliver does is instead of wheeling forward in his chair all of the time, he wheels backward to keep balance in his shoulders.

He said finding ways to keep his shoulders strong, in shape and limber to increase longevity is extremely important.

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BOLI is referee between business, workers

By **GARY A. WARNER**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — It's Oregon's mystery political job. One of five elected executive offices — alongside governor, secretary of state, treasurer and attorney general.

The position has been around since 1903 — with different names. It has no term limits — one man served 24 years. Four Republicans and three Democrats held the job before it became a nonpartisan office with the 1996 election.

The mystery office? Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor and Industries, commonly referred to by its acronym as "the BOLI." Often, the job is called by its original name, Labor Commissioner.

The official title has changed several times, with the longest moniker from 1918 to 1930: Oregon Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics and Inspector of Factories and Workshops.

The current commissioner, Val Hoyle, dropped her reelection bid to run for the 4th Congressional District seat of retiring U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Springfield.

The vacuum left by Hoyle's departure from the race drew three veteran political candidates.

• Yamhill County Commissioner Casey Kulla switched from the Democratic primary for governor to the BOLI race.



Andrew Selksy/The Associated Press, File
Oregon Labor Commissioner Val Hoyle shows her oath of office after she signed it Monday, Jan. 7, 2019. Hoyle was elected labor commissioner in May 2018 after serving as a state representative and House majority leader.

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