

# Jobs: ‘Challenging hiring environment for employers’

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He said that goes beyond reinstating federal work search requirements — that people are able to work, available for work and actively seeking work to continue to qualify for unemployment benefits — and registering people for the iMatchSkills system to connect them with jobs.

Starting this past week, he said, several WorkSource offices have reopened for in-person appointments to help people with job searches and training.

All WorkSource offices, which are partnerships between the state agency and others, have been accepting telephone and online appointments for job seekers. They do not process benefit claims.

“Some people are really self-sufficient and know exactly what is needed. It’s pretty easy for them to find a job through iMatchSkills, and there’s not a huge effort on our part to help them find that next job, especially in such a competitive job market,” Gerstenfeld told reporters during a conference call on Wednesday.

“Other people are facing real barriers, such as medical conditions or child care, or it could be they need some additional training to be competitive for a job or the career they want. So there is a lot of individualized work.

“We know there is a lot of pent-up demand from people wanting assistance. So we want to make sure we are as well prepared as possible.”

Agency economist Gail Krumenauer said a couple of studies of the 25 states that chose to end extra federal benefits ahead of schedule on Sept. 4 do not indicate that they have caused massive dislocations for unemployed workers. One study was by the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the other by the national job listing website Indeed.

## Short downturn

Krumenauer said about 32,500 people in Oregon still are unable to come back to work for various reasons related to the pandemic. They may be ailing, have responsibility to care for family members, or unable to obtain child care.

But that total is down from 66,000 last fall, and Krumenauer said the number of unemployment benefit recipients has dropped in recent months.

The two-month plunge from February to April 2020, when Oregon lost almost 290,000 jobs after the pandemic resulted in business curtailments and closures, has now been deemed a recession. The usual federal definition of a recession is a decline in gross domestic product — the measure of goods and services — for two consecutive quarters.

Oregon’s unemployment rate shot up from a record low 3.5% in March 2020 to a record adjusted high of 13.2% in April 2020, and the number of unemployment claims also topped 500,000 within a short period. The rate was 5.6% in June, although Oregon has regained only about two-thirds of the lost jobs. A full recovery is projected in late 2022 or early 2023.

“Given the scale of the impacts to the economy, this was definitely worth an exception to that rule,” Krumenauer said.

Oregon’s job growth in the first six months of this year equaled the number of jobs created in the 22 months prior to the pandemic. But Oregon businesses reported almost 98,000 job vacancies this spring, a record since that statistic was first compiled in 2013.

Krumenauer said there are

several reasons.

“There is a lot of pent-up demand for goods and services,” she said. The Oregon Office of Economic Analysis mentioned in a July report that \$2.1 trillion in savings has been amassed nationally during the pandemic.

She also said there are big changes in the workforce itself, such as a record number of people who voluntarily left their jobs.

Some left for higher-paying careers. While Oregon’s average starting wage in the leisure and hospitality sector remained around \$13 per hour during the first quarter of this year, it rose by \$2 in retail trade to \$17 per hour — and it was \$20 per hour in transportation, utilities and warehousing.

Krumenauer said there’s also competition among businesses within a sector.

“There is more worker movement that increases the hiring needs of businesses,” she said. “They often create a vacancy to replace them.”

The other big change, a continuation of a pre-pandemic trend, is retirements. One of every four Oregon workers is 55 or older, and the ratio is greater in several job sectors. Between 2016 and 2019, the number of people who chose to retire rose by 21%.

Although the pandemic interrupted that trend, Krumenauer said, “we expect they will be on the upswing again” as more post-World War II baby boomers get out of the workforce permanently.

“All of that adds up to a challenging hiring environment for employers,” she said.

## An end in sight

The Oregon Employment Department has paid out \$10.2 billion in state and federal unemployment benefits since March 2020. Much of that money was from several federal programs approved or extended by Congress, but are scheduled to end in September. Technically, the deadline is Labor Day, but Oregon and most states end their claims week on Saturdays.

They are:

- Benefits for self-employed and gig workers, many of whom were not covered by the system until the 2020 CARES Act, which created Pandemic Unemployment Assistance.

- Benefits that kicked in (53 weeks total), known as Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation, once someone exhausted regular state benefits of 26 weeks.

- Benefits (an extra \$100 per week) for people who receive regular state benefits, but also earn at least \$5,000 from other income sources, under Mixed Earner Unemployment Compensation.

- Across-the-board benefits of \$300 per week known as Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation. This had started at \$600 per week under the CARES Act, but lasted only four months; it was restarted in January at the lower level and renewed in March.

Gerstenfeld said it is possible a few people may qualify for extended benefits or help from the regular state program, which is funded by payroll taxes on employers.

“We are not anticipating that a work search requirement by itself is going to significantly shift the number of people receiving benefits,” he said. “We anticipate an ongoing decrease in the number of people receiving or seeking benefits. But I believe that is related to a really strong job market, not work search requirements.”

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# Scorched: ‘It’s going to be a long slog’

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Only time will tell how trees will recover — particularly spruce trees that have already endured several seasons of damage from spruce aphids as well as drought, Christine Buhl, a state forest entomologist, told The Astorian.

“I’m seeing more and more the toll the long-term drought in Oregon is having on trees,” Buhl had noted in a statement from the Department of Forestry following the heat wave. “Even trees that usually tolerate drought well are becoming stressed as we see the years with below-average rainfall start to outnumber those with good amounts of rain.”

Goody expects established trees to recover. Most have browning only on one side. They’ll bounce back, he predicts. A small percentage will die — trees that may have already been especially stressed by other conditions like the dry spring or insect infestations.

It’s the seedlings that Goody worries about.

The Department of Forestry estimates it may have lost up to a quarter of seedlings it had planted out on state land in the North Coast region. Some of those young trees may recover. Foresters won’t know the full extent of the damage until the fall, but anticipate some replanting will be necessary.

Other timberland managers are juggling similar concerns.

As wildfires rage in



Photos by Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

**ABOVE: Trees in timberland outside of Astoria were scorched brown in the heat wave. RIGHT: Many needles on trees were scorched brown and red.**



the state, the North Coast remains a relative garden when it comes to fire exposure, though that could quickly change depending on weather conditions.

“It’s going to be a long slog until the rain hits, so we’re pacing ourselves,” Goody said.

Williams said he had never seen anything like the heat wave and its effects on the forest in his career.

For Wentzel, the scorched trees along coastal highways were shocking. The local farmers and gardeners she works with are also in a wait-and-see mode for many of their plants.

In the days after the heat wave, people noticed scorched leaves on certain plants, berries that looked like they had been cooked in place. There was damage even to plants that normally

thrive in warmer climates.

But, Wentzel noted, “our individual plants have only ever lived here on the North Coast.” When temperatures skyrocket overnight, they don’t have time to adjust.

The damaged tissues on a scorched plant may not recover, but there’s a good chance the plant itself will, Wentzel said. For gardeners looking to salvage what’s left, she recommends lightly pruning back scorched leaves and branches, making sure the plant still has some leaves.

## Build in resilience

Wentzel said one of the best things any gardener can do is build in resilience ahead of time by creating as healthy an environment as possible from the beginning. This means establishing consistent and adequate water-

ing practices, ensuring there are enough nutrients in the soil and keeping an eye out for pests and pathogens.

Conditions expected to follow with climate change — higher summer temperatures and an increase in heat waves, for example — will make traditional North Coast gardening more challenging.

Wentzel usually encourages people to buy native plants for their decorative landscapes. However, as the climate shifts, “those could be the plants that struggle the most as the heat continues to rise,” Wentzel said.

“But that being said,” she added, “with both the changing climates and the variety of microclimates we have here, it does mean it’s worth experimenting a little bit in your garden. Be curious and brave with what’s worth trying.”

# Homeless: Lack of housing adds difficulty

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Putting a face to the homeless in Seaside and finding adequate shelter for them was one of the goal’s of Wednesday’s meeting. Nelle Moffett and Rick Bowers, who founded Friends of the Unsheltered, moderated the event.

The event followed four previous sessions focused on finding answers to the complex web of need and resources for the city’s unsheltered.

“I think my first thought would be to remember that the homeless community, bottom line, they are people,” Seamus McVey, who facilitates a recovery clinic working with addicts, the mentally ill and homeless in Seaside, said. “They may have been you, or you, or me — all deserving the same basic levels of respect.”

Not having a place to go or access to resources are the biggest issues, McVey said. “Agencies in the area are not set up to help those actively

on the street,” he said.

A lack of housing availability throughout Clatsop County makes matters more difficult.

“We have the ability to help people get into housing, deposits, sometimes a few months rent — the trick is to find a place,” Cheryl Paul, a homeless liaison with Clatsop Community Action, said. “And for most of the programs, the trick is, they need to find a place. And guess what. There are just no places right now. ... When they do come open, they go very quickly. There’s just no place to put anybody.”

Some homeless are working, and their transition to housing should come first, Moffett said. “One strategy is to house the easy ones, low-hanging fruit, so to speak, get the people who are not crazy, not addicted, that are working,” she said. “Let’s get them housed, and then work on the next group of people and we can solve the problem for them.”

“Everybody loves to live

on the beach, but it’s not cheap to live at the beach,” Bruce Rosebrock, a resident, said. “I’m in favor of transitional housing. If you’ve got taxpayer money or donor money, they want to see some success with their money. But how do you make that work? I think the average person has a good heart, but we don’t all have bottomless pocketbooks. To see success, the community wants to see results.”

Changes to city ordinances removing panhandling laws or sleeping in vehicles could decriminalize homelessness and ease the burden on law enforcement. A limit on the number of vacation rentals in the community could also be enacted to free up available housing.

Kathy Kleczek, who serves on the Planning Commission, suggested a food and beverage tax to take the burden off local taxpayers. “We’re tiptoeing around the systemic issue,” she said. “It would be a great idea to find

a different source of how to fund our infrastructure. We need a tax from those who come to visit, who have the money in their pocket.”

The tax, like the proposed 5% food tax in Cannon Beach that could go to voters in November, is a valuable means of raising funds for the community, Kleczek said.

City Councilor Tita Montero, who helped organize the homelessness forums, said the next step is brainstorming. “You put all those ideas out there, no matter how crazy they are,” she said. “You don’t say ‘no’ to anything, you don’t judge anything. You get it all on the table. And then you start sorting through, ‘Where can we do this one, where can we do this one?’”

“If you don’t do anything, you won’t get anywhere,” Montero added. “At some point, we have to take that step of faith and say, ‘We’re going to try this.’ And we’re going to see what happens.”

# OLCC: ‘We really have to help all of our licensees’

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products, as well as new methods for testing hemp in fields.

Two southern Oregon counties, Jackson and Josephine, will be a focal point of attention for the commission due to their recent increase in illegal cannabis growth.

“What’s going on in southern Oregon with the cartel takeover of cannabis growing through the

guise of hemp and our role in being able to enforce that is all incredibly important,” said Steve Marks, the commission’s executive director. “We and our partners are poised to begin eradicating this illegal activity, to bring stability to disrupted communities starting in Jackson and Josephine counties, and to ensure that our legal, licensed, taxpaying cannabis licensees aren’t being undermined by illegal market activity.”

“Where this agency has to go, we really have to help all of our licensees,” he added. “The hospitality industry, alcohol and cannabis move on to post-COVID recovery. We’ve got a lot

of challenges there for the industry over the next two years. To make sure Oregon’s economy is strong and we do our part with that with the resources given to us.”

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