

Employment Department hopes to fix phone mess by year's end

By **MIKE ROGOWAY**
The Oregonian

SALEM — A year into the pandemic, and the steepest economic fall in Oregon history, placing a phone call to the Oregon Employment Department remains an onerous chore.

Jobless workers spend an average of 70 minutes on hold when calling the agency. Its obsolete computers keep spitting out automated letters instructing laid-off Oregonians to call for help even though they would likely get a much quicker response online.



Gerstenfeld

“We recognize that we need to make it easier for people to get in touch with us,” Acting Director David Gerstenfeld said on his weekly media call last week. For the first time, Gerstenfeld set a target date for resolving the phone mess.

By the end of June, Gerstenfeld said the department aims to answer 80% of calls within 15 minutes. And it aims to resolve 90% of online inquiries, made through its “Contact Us” form, within a week. Currently, it resolves no more than 21% of those online contacts within seven days.

By year's end, Gerstenfeld said Oregon wants to return to its pre-pandemic standard, answering 90% of calls within 5 minutes. Currently, only 15% of calls are answered that quickly.

The department hopes new hires, thorough training and a gradual easing of the economic crisis will enable it to get on top of the situation — albeit not for another nine months.

The employment department's phone lines have been a nightmare since the outset of the pandemic.

Nearly 1 in 8 Oregon workers lost their jobs in the first month of the pandemic, 260,000 altogether. In that time, the state's jobless rate jumped from a historic low of 3.6% to an all-time high of 13.2%.

Callers flooded the employment department seeking help with unemployment benefits. The vast majority of callers encountered only busy signals. Those who did get through spent an average of more than three hours on hold, and even then most calls were never answered.

The huge volume of calls was just part of the problem, though. The employment department and its personnel struggled to adapt to expanded jobless benefits Congress authorized in March 2020. The agency's antiquated computer system couldn't keep up either, sending out misleading or incorrect information to unemployed workers — adding to confusion and fueling more calls.

The situation has improved somewhat in the intervening year, but it's far from resolved since callers typically spend more than an hour on hold and many still can't get through at all.

The department has hired hundreds of personnel over the past year to process claims and deal with questions and comments. Gerstenfeld said the department now processes 99.9% of new claims within three weeks.

Faster processing doesn't always mean faster payments — many claims require additional work — but it's a big switch from last spring, when some claims were stuck in a bureaucratic purgatory for months at a time.

“We know we're not yet meeting the service levels we need to, but we're seeing real improvements,” Gerstenfeld said.

Another rural-urban divide — remote working

By **SUZANNE ROIG**
The Bend Bulletin

BEND — Residents of rural areas think working from home is temporary and as soon as the threat of the pandemic ends, everyone will return to the office.

What's more likely to occur is increased flex time, where work is split between the office and home, said Dan McCarthy, High Lakes Health Care regional administrator. Post-pandemic, McCarthy said, the company that employs about 350 people throughout Central Oregon will still have remote workers.

“We found that a hybrid approach that balances work from home with office hours

is something that will be here to stay,” McCarthy said. “I believe there is something lost when working virtually 100% of the time.”

Working from home misses checking in with each other, developing a sense of community and the dynamic interaction of problem solving, he said. Virtual platforms just don't cut it.

McCarthy's views mirror about 601 people who were surveyed March 5 to 10 as part of the Oregon Values and Voices project, a nonpartisan charitable organization



Rosenberg

that partnered with Pamplin Media Group, EO Media Group, which owns the *East Oregonian* and *Hermiston Herald*, and the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center.

The survey consisted of 49 questions sent to a random sample about changes caused by COVID-19 that will become permanent in Oregon. This is the second such survey orchestrated by the group on the effects of COVID-19.

In one question, 47% of the people who live in rural Oregon say they felt working from home was only temporary, compared with 37% in the Willamette Valley and tri-county area around Portland who said it's tempo-

rary. Since workers in urban and suburban communities are more likely affected by congestion, their commute times are longer, making working from home more attractive, said Adam Davis, Oregon Values and Beliefs Center co-founder.

“As a result of the coronavirus and how it has affected life at home and employment, a strong majority of Oregonians feel more of us in the future will work from home,” Davis said. “This feeling is shared across all population subgroups with many feeling the change will be permanent.”

Cheri Rosenberg, Pendleton Chamber of Commerce CEO, said the small-town

feel has created a tight bond between employee and employer. The population of Pendleton, according to U.S. Census Bureau's most current estimates, was 16,733.

“Because we tend to have a more personal relationship between our employers and employees, it's a conversation we are able to have,” Rosenberg said in an email. “For those who are able and prefer to work from home, those steps are being taken. For those who are ready to get back into the office, those steps are being taken there as well.”

“We're able to have the best of both worlds due to the ability to be very open and candid with one another.”




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