

Local & State

Legislators not satisfied with Employment Dept. answers

■ Agency has been criticized for sluggish response to more than 400,000 claims filed

By Peter Wong
Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon lawmakers will get a new chance to question officials about the much-criticized performance of the Employment Department in handling a record number of claims during the shutdown of business activity in the coronavirus pandemic.

The House Business and Labor Committee scheduled a session this morning.

Members on Wednesday, May 28, heard from two agency officials, who did virtually all the speaking during an hourlong presentation that allowed no time for questions.

House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, released a statement Thursday:

“Chair Paul Holvey was unsatisfied with what the committee heard from Oregon Employment Department Director Kay Erickson and her deputy David Gerstenfeld and asked the speaker (Kotek) yesterday afternoon to provide an additional opportunity to hear from them to further answer the committee’s questions.”

In addition to processing a record 400,000-plus regular unemployment claims since Gov. Kate Brown’s executive orders took effect in mid-March, the agency has had to handle three new programs passed by Congress that extended benefits and expanded eligibility.

Also, 38,000 of the 400,000 claims still remain unprocessed. A processed claim, however, does not mean that the person is receiving benefits.

“I appreciate the new programs you are having to manage, which is difficult,” Holvey said when he closed the meeting Wednesday. “But we still have a lot of people in need ... and we need to help people as quickly as possible.”

Rep. Shelly Boshart Davis, R-Albany, protested the lack of time for direct questioning of the officials in a statement she issued after Wednesday’s meeting. She said she has heard from many who have been unable to get through to

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— State Rep. Shelly Boshart Davis, R-Albany

someone at the agency.

“The horror stories are endless and have been well documented by the press,” she said. “I am incredibly frustrated that lawmakers were not given an opportunity to ask questions of the department’s leadership.”

Public apology

In her opening statement Wednesday, Erickson offered a public apology.

“We have done a lot. We have accomplished a lot. And yet there is still much more to do,” she said.

“To our customers, I know in these uncertain times, waiting for confirmation of your unemployment benefits can be agonizing. For the thousands of Oregonians who are still waiting, I do apologize. In the coming weeks, we will be doubling down on our efforts to get to a better place.”

On Tuesday, Erickson announced a new effort, Project Focus 100, to process the remaining 38,039 claims of more than 400,000 that have been filed since March 15. The agency has processed about 90% of the total, though some people still await benefits because of unresolved issues. The agency goal is to process 90% of new claims within three weeks of filing.

She said some of the most experienced claims processors — the total staff has jumped from 100 to 700 in recent weeks — will be assigned to resolve what are often the most complex claims.

During the Great Recession a decade ago, Oregon lost 147,000 jobs at its low point, which took a year to reach.

“We are doubling down on the people who have been waiting the longest to get them benefits quickly,” Gerstenfeld said. “But it is not possible to do all of the work

at once.”

New programs

The new effort takes in two other programs passed by Congress in the CARES Act, which was signed March 27.

The Employment Department is one month into processing claims from a newly eligible group of workers — self-employed people, independent contractors, part-time and gig workers — but also required states to determine whether they qualify for regular benefits. So far about 50,000 people have applied. They qualify for a minimum benefit of \$205 per week, for up to 39 weeks, and some may eventually get more.

The department started May 21 to process claims for 13 weeks of extended payments to people who have already exhausted their standard 26 weeks of benefits.

“These programs added layers of complexity,” Erickson said. “We were asking people who worked for us for just weeks to quickly navigate those systems using our current technology.” Under a third program, all recipients will get \$600 per week on top of their unemployment benefits through July 31. There are no extra requirements for people to qualify.

The Employment Department presentation took an hour, and it was the first time officials faced a legislative committee.

WorkShare

The officials also touched on WorkShare, a program started in 2016 to enable businesses to tap unemployment benefits to aid workers whose hours have been cut by 20% to 40%. Federal funds will pay all benefits through Dec. 26, and under a federal law, the range is now between

10% and 60%.

“It has made it more appealing for reimbursing employers to use WorkShare than it ever has been in the past,” Gerstenfeld said. “Because of that and the general economic crisis we are in, we are seeing a huge increase in the number of WorkShare plans.”

Until mid-March, 168 employer plans affecting 3,018 people were processed during the past year. Since then, 1,009 plans and 10,195 claims have been processed. Gerstenfeld said WorkShare requires more data entries into the system.

Other issues

On other issues:

• Antiquated computers: The Employment Department has a mainframe computer system that dates back three decades, and depends on COBOL, a computer language first unveiled in 1959. The agency has developed workarounds, but Erickson said, “They are not fully integrated with each other and have limited compatibility with today’s technology.”

• Waiting week: Gov. Kate Brown said she wanted the waiting week abolished so that benefits can get paid faster, but it would require computer changes that Gerstenfeld said were deemed less urgent than processing thousands of claims.

• Fraud: The Washington State Employment Security Department recently disclosed that hundreds of millions have been paid out in fraudulent claims that are believed to have originated overseas, based on stolen personal information. “Oregon is aware of these issues and is actively taking measures to prevent them,” Gerstenfeld said.

Link to Employment Department presentation to House Business and Labor Committee:

<https://olis.oregonlegislature.gov/liz/201911/Downloads/CommitteeMeeting-Document/222016>



LOCAL BRIEFING

Community Connection has money available for food and shelter programs

Baker County will receive \$6,792 from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and \$9,683 from the CARES Act’s emergency food and shelter program. Organizations that provide those services to Baker County residents can apply for some of the money through Community Connection of Baker County.

To request an application, call Joe Hayes at 541-523-6591, extension 11, or email to joe@ccno.org. Application deadline is June 12 at 4 p.m.

Harvest Christian Academy has open enrollment for all grades for the fall

Harvest Christian Academy in Baker City is enrolling students in all grades for this fall. The school is open for students age 3 through 12th grade. The school uses the Abeka curriculum for all grades.

Costs and other information are available at www.bakercityharvest.org

Baker County’s 4 soil and water conservation districts plan meetings

Baker County’s soil and water conservation districts have scheduled June meetings. All meetings will be teleconferences. For call-in information call 541-519-2496.

A request for an interpreter for the hearing impaired or for other accommodations for people with disabilities should be made at least 48 hours before the meeting.

The meeting schedule:

- Burnt River — June 2 at 5:30 p.m.
- Baker Valley — June 4 at noon
- Eagle Valley — June 15 at noon
- Keating — June 16 at noon

Applications available for Baker County Livestock Producers scholarship

Applications are available for the Baker County Livestock Producers Foundation scholarship for the 2020-21 school year. Applicants must be residents of Baker County and either attending or been accepted for a second year or higher at an accredited college or vocational school. Additionally, applicants must be pursuing an agriculturally related course of study. Applications are available at the Baker County Extension Office, 2600 East St., and are due by July 15. More information is available by calling the Extension Office at 541-523-6418 or Kay Markgraf at 541-519-2203.

Enterprise man charged with attempted murder in attack

EO Media Group

ENTERPRISE — Phillip Milton Evans of Enterprise faces second-degree attempted murder and related charges stemming from an attack the night of May 24.

Enterprise police arrested Evans after his roommate, Michael Zanello, reported Evans attacked him with an ax.

Passers-by about 9 p.m. on May 24 found the injured Zanello on West North Street and called 911. The witnesses said Zanello was bleeding and collapsed onto the grass but gave them his name and details of the attack. His most obvious wounds, they said, were to his head.

Enterprise police, Wallowa County sheriff deputies and a Wallowa Memorial Hospital ambulance arrived minutes later. Zanello, who was bleeding from multiple wounds, according to police, said his roommate attacked him with an ax.

An ambulance took Zanello to Wallowa Memorial Hospital, where an air ambulance flew him to a Boise hospital, according to Enterprise Chief Joel Fish.

Wallowa County District Attorney Rebecca Frolander said Zanello remains in the hospital. She said Wednesday afternoon she was waiting on confirmation of his medical condition.

Evans retreated to his residence at 509 W. North St., about 100 yards from the scene of the assault, where Enterprise police and Wallowa County sheriff deputies broke down the dead-bolt-locked front door, entered the building and about 10 minutes later emerged with Evans in handcuffs.

Frolander’s office on Tuesday filed preliminary charges against Evans, 42, for attempted murder, assault, unlawful use of a weapon, all felonies; and menacing, a misdemeanor. The charging documents refer to the weapon as a hatchet.

Evans’ next court appearance is June 24.

State court records also show Evans has several criminal convictions in Wallowa County, including in 2016 and 2019 for felon in possession of a restricted weapon. He remains in the Umatilla County Jail at Pendleton in lieu of \$165,000 bail.



Evans

Man who missed 2019 sentencing arrested

By Chris Collins
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A Baker City man who failed to appear for sentencing after forging a plea agreement with the District Attorney’s Office last May is back in custody.

Police Chief Ray Duman said Steven Lynn Whitney, 53, was arrested at 11:24 a.m. Wednesday after investigators learned that he was back in Baker City.

Whitney is being held at the Baker County Jail in lieu of \$50,000 each on two drug cases and could be released after posting 10% of that bail.

He also is being held on a charge of failure to appear in Baker County Circuit Court on May 24, 2019, as he had agreed to for sentencing on multiple drug-related charges. Whitney would have served 45 months in prison under the plea agreement.

District Attorney Greg Baxter said Friday that Whitney is not bound by the former agreement if he has changed his mind in the interim. The District Attorney’s Office will move forward with the charges.

The first case accuses him of unlawful delivery, manufacturing and possession of methamphetamine, bribe giving, felon in possession of a firearm, first-degree theft and

supplying contraband on March 3, 2017.

The second case accuses him of three counts of delivering methamphetamine on Dec. 17, 2016, Dec. 21, 2016 and Feb. 20, 2017.

Duman said four members of the Baker County Drug Task Force arrested Whitney at a house where he was known to have been staying recently. The house at 2715 Second St. was owned by Victoria McLean.

“It has been known as kind of a trap house where a lot of illegal activity has been going on over the course of the last couple of years,” Duman said.

Officers had received information about activity at the house from some of the neighbors, and one of the officers thought he had seen Whitney back in town several weeks ago, Duman said.

Duman said Lt. Ty Duby obtained a search warrant for the house and Whitney, who was in bed when police arrived, was arrested without incident.

Whitney was arraigned Thursday in Baker County Circuit Court. His next court appearance is set for 1:45 p.m. on June 19.

At The Library

Patrons can reserve materials in advance online or by calling 541-523-6419. Drive-in hours are Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from noon to 4 p.m.

FICTION

- “Truth and Justice,” Fern Michaels
- “To Wake the Giant,” Jeff Shaara
- “A Week at the Shore,” Barbara Delinsky
- “The Last Trial,” Scott Turow
- “The Talented Mr. Varg,” Alexander McCall Smith

NONFICTION

- “Janesville : An American Story,” Amy Goldstein
- “A Little Bit of Dirt,” Asia Citro
- “Into the Garden,” Robert Hass
- “Fringe-ology,” Steve Volk
- “Ancient Places,” Jack Nisbet
- “Up in Smoke” (Comedy, 1978)

DVDS

- “By the Grace of God” (Drama)
- “Dark Waters” (Drama)
- “Dolittle” (Family)

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Veteran Service
will be closed on
June 1-5 and open for
business on
Monday, June 8th