

State agencies, financial institutions prepare to roll out \$500 checks for unemployed

Amounts will not count against unemployment benefits

By Peter Wong
Oregon Capital Bureau

Thousands of Oregonians who await unemployment benefits, whose claims were denied or who never filed in the first place will soon have a chance to obtain one-time \$500 checks from a state fund.

Legislators, who set aside a \$35 million fund at a meeting of the Emergency Board on July 14, are preparing to roll out the program with the help of two state agencies and participating financial institutions. Applicants will have to meet some eligibility requirements, but the application form will be kept simple.

"The goal of this is to provide a small amount of payment as quickly as possible," said Lisa Taylor, a spokeswoman for Senate President Peter Court-

ney, D-Salem. "We wanted to make this with as low a barrier as possible."

She said more details will be announced after the participating institutions — mostly credit unions but believed to include at least one bank — sign contracts with the Department of Administrative Services and Department of Justice. The Employment Department is not involved. She said lawmakers do not want to prompt a run on participating institutions.

Taylor did say that legislators expect the entire \$35 million, which comes from the state's share of federal coronavirus relief funds, will be spent.

An official of SELCO Community Credit Union confirmed Friday that the credit union is one of the participants. She said people will not have to be members of the participating credit unions to apply for money.

"We just see it as a way to help out our fellow Oregonians when it's clear a lot of people need help right now," Tiffany Washington, a SELCO senior



vice president, said in an interview. "For a credit union, that is at the core of what we do. We had an opportunity to do our part in helping deliver this money to people."

SELCO has most of its branches in Eugene/Springfield (six) and Bend/Redmond (five), but also in Portland, Salem, Albany and Burns.

"A lot of work has been put in to create a really simple application," Washington said. "Our hope is that people will be able to visit a credit union and

leave with their money."

The amounts will not count against unemployment benefits. To qualify for \$500 checks, people will have to be at least age 18, prove their identity and their current Oregon residence so that there is no duplication and no out-of-state beneficiaries. They also must attest on the application form that their monthly pretax income was \$4,000 or less — and that they are experiencing severe or indirect financial hardship resulting from Gov. Kate Brown's executive orders that virtually shut down business activity and public life during the coronavirus pandemic.

If applicants submit false information and are caught, they will have to repay the money.

Also, check recipients must not be current on their unemployment benefits. "Current" means that, except for the current claim week, they have received all of their regular unemployment benefits or federal benefits under the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program. The latter program is for people newly eligible for benefits, such as self-employed workers, independent contractors, freelancers and gig and temporary workers.

If people are "current" in their benefit payments, Taylor said, "you are not eligible for this program."

The Employment Department recently cleared a backlog of 70,000 applications for that federal program. But because the agency is required under federal law to determine

whether applicants may be eligible for regular benefits — which are drawn from a state trust fund — thousands are awaiting adjudication of their claims before they draw any money. The agency is beginning to advance benefits to some of these people.

"Current" excludes the supplemental \$600-per-week federal benefits that Congress authorized under the CARES Act back in March. That program expired July 31 — the actual qualifying week in Oregon ended July 25. Employment Department officials say people who were eligible for the supplemental benefits before July 25 will still receive them.

A top state administrator warned legislators that it might take weeks to set up the program. But it is being launched in about four weeks, which Taylor says is akin to light speed for government.

"I get the sense that everybody is pedaling as fast as we can," SELCO's Washington said.

Lawmakers move ahead with special session bills

By Peter Wong
Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon lawmakers were poised Monday to achieve their special session aims by cutting spending and rebalancing the state budget, and passing other bills affecting unemployment claims and further limiting police use of chokeholds.

The main committee for the Legislature's second special session this summer pushed through most of the bills during a six-hour meeting on Monday. Members did so despite complaints about access restrictions resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, which has closed the Capitol in Salem to the public.

"We cannot continue to do public policy with no committees and no public input," Senate Republican Leader Fred Girod of Lyons said.

The 10-member committee handled 11 of 13 bills, including all related to the budget, that Democratic legislative leaders had drafted for the session. Most of the debate was not about the budget, but over bills relating to unemployment claims.

A different six-member panel cleared a bill (House Bill 4301) to limit police use of chokeholds by requiring police to give a warning and allow a "reasonable opportunity" for someone to cease resistance. Lawmakers during their first special session in June limited chokeholds to instances where police can employ the use of deadly force. Both bills stopped short of an outright ban on the practice.

Some issues did not make it onto the legislative agenda.

Among them was legislation to disconnect Oregon's tax code from three federal tax breaks included in the CARES Act. Supporters said it would recoup potential losses of \$225 million for state coffers, but business groups argued that the federal provisions were designed to lower their tax liability and let them retain needed cash. The House Revenue Committee heard the proposed bill on Thursday.

Also left hanging was whether lawmakers should approve a liability shield for businesses, schools and others against lawsuits arising from the coronavirus pandemic.

Budget work

Lawmakers did much of the budget work weeks ago, after budget committee leaders unveiled their plan to eliminate a gap of more than \$1 billion



File photo

Oregon legislators in a special session Monday completed most of the session goals, including balancing the state budget.

between declining tax collections and previously approved spending for the current two-year budget. Budget subcommittees heard testimony July 22-24.

The plan maintains a \$9 billion state school fund — about half of which already is spent — but lawmakers will have to draw \$400 million from an education reserve to do it. About \$400 million will be left in that reserve, and lawmakers do not plan to tap the state's rainy-day fund, which will be just under \$1 billion by mid-2021.

The main bill cuts \$481 million in other spending from the tax-supported general fund, including debt repayments for building projects that now are suspended. That total exceeds the \$387 million target originally set by the budget committee leaders.

"Practically every agency with general fund was reduced," John Borden, a legislative fiscal analyst, told the committee.

Unlike the original budget-balancing plan, the main bill will leave open two state prisons.

Shutter Creek Correctional Institution, a 260-bed minimum-security prison in North Bend, would have closed in September. Warner Creek Correctional Facility, a 400-bed minimum-security prison near Lakeview, was scheduled for closure at the end of the budget cycle in mid-2021.

The main bill also would leave an ending balance of about \$100 million, down from the nearly \$1 billion projected for mid-2021, before the pandemic resulted in shutdowns of business activity and public life and ate into tax collections.

The Emergency Board, which consists of 20 lawmakers who handle budget matters between sessions, will have \$200 million more for pandemic and wildfire emergencies. The state emergency fund was down to \$10.3 million.

Unemployment claims

The main special session committee cleared two of three bills relating to unemployment claims.

One bill (Senate Bill 1703) will allow the Department of Revenue to share information on tax returns, which are confidential, with the Employment Department. Some sharing already takes place, and for regular claims against the state unemployment trust fund, the Employment Department can check payroll records of wage earners. But without this bill, the Employment Department was slowed in processing claims by people that the CARES Act made newly eligible for unemployment benefits in a federal program. Among them are self-employed people, independent contractors and freelancers, gig and temporary workers. Many do not have payroll records, but all have filed tax returns.

A second bill (Senate Bill 1701) will allow a higher threshold for earnings — \$300 per week, rather than 10 times Oregon's minimum wage at \$132.50 — before unemployment benefits are reduced. This change will expire at the end of 2021.

State Labor Commissioner Val Hoyle put forth the idea after she consulted with her counterpart in Georgia. She said the change would allow some workers to earn more money without losing benefits, and some employers to take on more workers. It won the endorsement of Jason Brandt, president of the Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association, who said, "We decided to share our position because we think this is the right thing to do."

Oregon's leisure and hospitality industry has been affected most by the pandemic downturn.

A third bill (Senate Bill 1702) failed. It would have facilitated unemployment benefits for employees of public and private schools other than teachers, researchers and administrators — maintenance workers, cooks and other staff — and removed them from state adjudication of claims that usually takes weeks.

Four of five House members on the committee voted for it, but Democratic Sen. Betsy Johnson of Scappoose joined two Republican senators to oppose it. The bill required majorities from House and Senate members to advance.

Office workers will have to wear masks indoors as COVID-19 emergency extends into fall

Rules expected to be announced this week

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

Office workers will be required to wear masks indoors to help keep Oregon on track to suppress the growth of COVID-19, Gov. Kate Brown said Friday.

"It's a small act that can make a big difference," Brown said.

The rules for face coverings in the workplace are being finalized and could be announced as early as next week.

Brown made the comments during an Oregon Health Authority media briefing on the pandemic's impact on Oregon.

Official state statistics show 20,636 cases and 348 deaths from the virus.

On Friday, the state reported 423 new cases and nine deaths. The fatalities were in Deschutes, Umatilla, Jefferson, Marion, Malheur, Clackamas, Jackson, Malheur and Yamhill counties. Eight of the dead were over 75 years old. The youngest was a 64-year-old man in Klamath County.

Despite the daily numbers, state officials said overall trends show the rate of growth of new COVID-19 cases has improved.

Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state's top infectious disease expert, said after more than two months of increases, the rate of COVID-19 infection statewide was leveling off. Currently, each case leads to one additional case, a rate that would keep infections at or near current levels.

Maintaining the flat rate is the key to keep Oregon moving toward allowing some in-class instruction at K-12 schools and colleges, the state officials said. Hospitals will have enough hospital beds and ventilators to take care of the state's COVID-19 cases.

"Rather than just a plateau we would like to see our curve and cases drop off," Sidelinger said.

Until a vaccine is created and widely distributed, health officials can only try to suppress growth in cases, while medical researchers find ways to decrease severe cases with a mix of medicines and treatment.

Sidelinger noted that Oregon was holding at a high rate



Oregon Capital Bureau file photo

Gov. Kate Brown details steps Oregon is taking to limit the spread of COVID-19 at a press conference in Portland on March 12.

of infection and that even a 10% increase in cases would lead to an exponential rise in hospitalization that could swamp the state health care system and quickly drive deaths up.

Progress has not been uniform. Infections have been spiking in Morrow and Umatilla counties, where restrictions on businesses and public gatherings have been rolled back under a directive from Brown.

Umatilla County was moved from Phase 2 to baseline, which includes the "stay-at-home" order in place prior to the phased reopening of counties in May. Morrow County moved from Phase 2 to Phase 1 after volunteering to institute local voluntary controls.

The latest list of zip codes with the highest rates of infection were topped by Hermiston in Umatilla County and Boardman in Morrow County. Warm Springs, in Jefferson County, was third and has seen its rate of infection continue to rise. The majority of zip codes with the highest rates of infection are in Eastern Oregon.

The state currently has nine counties on its watchlist of places where the infection rates are worrisome: Baker, Hood River, Jefferson, Malheur, Marion, Morrow, Multnomah, Umatilla and Wasco.

Brown said COVID-19 would continue to challenge the state and she expected to renew the state of emergency she declared March 8 when the current order expires Sept. 4.

Health officials have said the largest driver of new infections was informal get-togethers that extended beyond immediate family.

"Keep your social circle very tight," Brown said. "Keep your bubble small and consistent."

While state health and worker safety officials have inspected thousands of businesses for compliance, the state will count on residents' common sense to follow the rule of no more than 10 people at private gatherings.

"I'm not going to be the party police and knocking on people's doors," Brown said.

Future plans to curb COVID-19 include possible travel restrictions. Brown first floated the idea last month, but has said since that the target was unnecessary leisure travel and that any restrictions had to be worked out with neighboring states and not impact commercial or business travel. Any restrictions would be done in concert with neighboring states that adopt the same policies. No action is imminent, Brown said.

Despite pressure from medical and education groups, Brown said she was not inclined to change rules that allow bars to stay open. Critics have said that bar patrons have difficulty maintaining social distancing and that strangers interact, making virus tracing more difficult.

Health officials said many people go to bars with small groups of friends, whom they can identify if there is an infected person in the group.

Brown noted she had ordered bars to close earlier — 10 p.m. — and limit customers to no more than 100. Inspectors from the Oregon Liquor Control Commission were actively inspecting for compliance.

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