

Employment Security Department Government Leader COVID-19 3.30.2020 Update

This update will address these topics:

- Actions your constituents can take right now regarding benefits
- Key resources for your needs
- Recent changes to Washington State's Unemployment Insurance (UI) program
- The latest data on call and unemployment claims volumes
- A first look at the recent federal legislation and what it means for Washington unemployment benefits

Actions

The best way for your constituents to stay up to date on information about, updates to, and instructions on how to access Unemployment Insurance related to the COVID-19 outbreak is by subscribing to [ESD's COVID-19 action alerts](#).

Constituents can also help their application process by doing these four things:

1. Start with [the website first](#) before they call: On our highest day last week, we had 25K calls, up 1000% from 2 weeks prior. We are updating the information regularly on our website and making it much easier to understand.
2. Apply online if you can *and* read the information on the website before you apply. It will help applicants from getting stuck.
3. Sign up for [ESD's COVID-19 action alerts](#) for the most up-to-date information and changes.
4. Apply for a job with us! [Here's a flyer](#) with more information. We have amazing telework opportunities available in our customer service teams and, as you can tell from the volume, we need the help. These jobs can be done from anywhere in the state!

Key resources

- [COVID-19 Page and FAQ](#) – we have accumulated the top questions from businesses and claimants. This is an evolving treasure trove of answers for you and your constituents. We are updating this daily. Please let us know by reaching us via esdconstituentservices@esd.wa.gov if you have a question not yet listed up there.
- **Checklist for Applying for UI** – To help smooth their process, your constituents who need to apply for Unemployment Insurance should first use our [UI Checklist](#).
- **SharedWork** – This is a powerful tool for your businesses to reduce their staff's hours without having to lay them off. They can reduce the staff hours 10-50% and have Unemployment Insurance provide partial wage replacement for those reduced hours. We are announcing new emergency rules for the program to include overtime exempt employees. These rules also allow new businesses as well as those who have outstanding debt to us to participate. Additionally, with the new Federal legislation, 100% of SharedWork costs will be covered by the Federal Government, therefore not affecting businesses' experience rates. More information about SharedWork, including an online application, can be found [here](#).

- **Coming soon** - We are working with key staff in both the state legislature and the Governor's DC office to help aggregate and triage questions. More to come on that effort soon.

Recent changes to Unemployment Insurance

Reflecting our goal to make UI available for as many people as possible, the department, in consultation with the Governor, has made the following changes to our traditional program:

- Allowed more workers to access standby status for longer periods – standby allows an employer to temporarily lay off some or all of their workforce. We expanded it to include part-time or less than full-time workers and extended it from 4 to 12 weeks.
- Made job search requirements optional – while many employers are hiring, we recognize this situation makes it difficult for some to conduct a thorough job search.
- Lowered the tax impact to businesses who utilize our programs.
- Waived the traditional waiting week – getting more money into people's pockets faster.
- Relaxed penalties and fees for employers and workers who miss key deadlines due to the COVID crisis.

We are working to educate the public about how these changes impact them and what to expect.

Unemployment Insurance claim volumes

Topline numbers from our 3/26 weekly unemployment numbers announcement:

- **133,464 new applications** for unemployment for the week ending 3/21 (it's gone up since then)
- This represented an 843% increase week over week (we had 14,000 applications the week ending 3/14)
- For comparison, this is 5 times the peak week of the 2008/2009 recession
- We also had a 1000% increase in incoming calls over the past couple of weeks
- We haven't seen anything like this in volume and velocity in the history of the UI program – going back to the 1930s.

We are working around the clock to expand the capacity of our systems to respond to the increased need for unemployment benefits. This includes:

- Updating our software so that the automated system accommodates the new rules
- Updating our website with the latest information and explanations about UI
- Increasing the number of call center staff – we are hiring!
- Extending our services hours in the mornings and on the weekends – we're now open starting at 7am and on Saturdays. Sundays we'll be focusing on call back appointments.

Phone and claims center volumes

As you can imagine, this many workers accessing the Unemployment Insurance system is creating congestion in our claims centers. Much of the process is automated through our computer system. This allows many people to access benefits without ever having to speak with our staff.

However, there are a number of issues that may arise which require a claimant to call our claims center and speak with an agent. The best thing people can do is read through our checklists and materials, found at esd.wa.gov/unemployment, and be as prepared as possible before applying online. Mistakes in an application are a major driver for requiring individuals to call in.

Some days, we are seeing a 1000% increase in call volume over a typical day. We recognize and appreciate that this is frustrating for many people and understand why they are trying any path to get service on their account, including connecting with your office. That said, for equity's sake we are not creating workarounds to the standard communication channels – as that slows our staff down in an unsustainable way and actually lengthens the queue. We hope you can understand! For this reason, we ask that you not send constituent requests about individual claims issues to the department at this time. If you have policy inquiries or non UI claim constituent inquiries that require assistance, please direct them to esdconstituentservices@esd.wa.gov.

Federal Stimulus

We are evaluating the federal legislation, but it appears to be a positive and important step toward meeting this agency's priorities and – most importantly – the needs of Washingtonians. To set expectations, it will take us about 3 weeks to get the Unemployment Assistance portion of the legislation up and running (target is 4/18 – the team is working night & day to turn this around quickly) to serve the enormous # of people we know who'll need it.

Right out of the gate, one thing that people can do to stay up-to-date is sign up for [ESD's COVID-19 action alerts](#). We will use this channel, as well as our social media channels [@ESDWAWorks](#), to provide regular updates as this situation quickly evolves.

We are working on a full analysis of the benefits that both Federal Legislative packages affords to businesses and workers. In the meantime, what is clear from the most recent Federal Legislative package is that it will allow for coverage of more people and give them more money for longer periods of time. Some highlights related to Unemployment Assistance:

- It would extend unemployment assistance to those who are not currently eligible for Unemployment Insurance and are impacted by COVID-19 (ie. self-employed and those who've worked fewer than 680 hours in the past 12 months)
- It will increase the weekly benefit amount for everyone on unemployment assistance by \$600/week through end of July
- It extends benefits for an additional 13 weeks

And then, separately, the U.S. Treasury will be providing \$1200/person for those who make \$75K or less or \$2400/married couple who file jointly for wages of \$150k or less – plus \$500/child under 17.

We know there are many questions and we expect to be able to answer people's questions soon about expanded eligibility and benefits. Our hope and plan is to then accurately set expectations for the coming days and weeks and identify clear and specific actions Washingtonians can take.