



Oregon

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FOCUS PUA Oregon Employment Department

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These past three months have been extraordinarily stressful for the more than 243,500 Oregonians who lost their jobs—and livelihoods—as a result of the pandemic. While we've been able to get unemployment checks into the hands of a historic number of Oregonians, we know that far too many families are still waiting for relief.

The Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program has proven extraordinarily challenging to implement, and has caused perhaps the most frustration for Oregonians who have been waiting many weeks for these benefits. In response, we are launching **FOCUS PUA**, a focused initiative which will allow us to shift more of our resources toward paying PUA benefits much more quickly.

Following is an update on the Oregon Employment Department's (Department) plan for processing PUA program benefits. While this is a high-level overview, we will be providing more specifics, as well as weekly updates on the progress as we are able to speed up claims processing.

BACKGROUND

PUA was first created on March 27, 2020, as part of the CARES Act. Here are some of the challenges the Department has faced:

- The PUA program is designed to give benefits to people that our existing unemployment insurance program was designed to not pay benefits to.
- We have had to create an entirely different claims process outside our normal system.
- Every PUA application requires that we do everything needed to process a regular UI claim first, then do extra work on top of that.
- It is a highly manual process, requiring employee work for each individual application to be approved, for each review of whether someone is eligible for more than the minimum benefit amount, and for each individual week of benefits claimed by each person to result in benefits being paid.

PUA CLAIMS PROGRESS

Because this program is a highly manual process, the Department has struggled to provide data on the number of claims received and processed. Below are preliminary numbers **as of June 17, 2020**, which we plan to update weekly:

- **Total number of PUA claims received:** 97,000
- **Amount of benefits paid:** \$90 million
- **Claims entered in system:** 24,000
- **Number of claims paid:** 16,800
- **Claims to be processed:** 70,000

FOCUS PUA PROJECT PLAN

Learning from the things that worked well in Project Focus 100, we are shifting substantial resources towards **Focus PUA**. This project centers around three key elements:

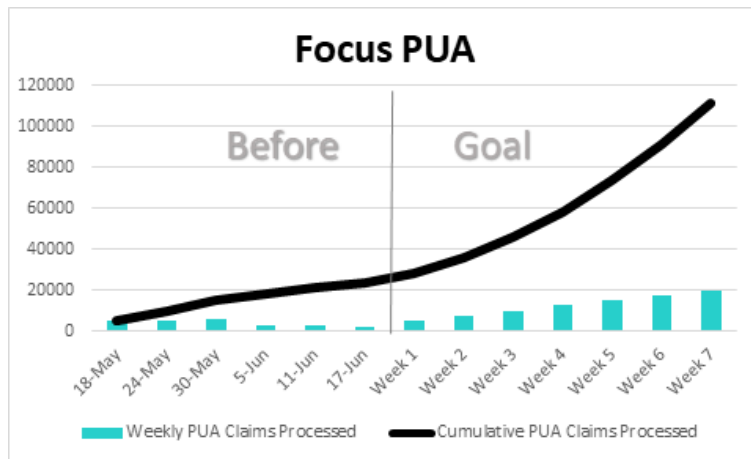
- Improving the speed at which we can process claims over time.
- Improving the technology used to receive and process claims.
- Increasing proactive claimant communications through increased staffing and phone line improvements.

Increasing Speed of Claims Processing

Over time, we will be able to more quickly process claims as the process is improved and staff become more experienced. We anticipate having the capacity to increase how many PUA claims we process by 2,500 claims each week. That looks like:

- Processing 5,000 next week, processing 7,500 the following week, 10,000 the next week, etc.
- Some of the complicating factors that still have some unknowns are:
 - We aren't able to determine claim dates until claims are manually entered into the system. As we enter applications in, we prioritize people who have been waiting the longest.
 - Estimating those who were denied regular unemployment, but were eligible for PUA. Some people did not apply for PUA until very recently, but have been waiting months to get benefits.
 - Of course, none of us knows the course of the pandemic and how many new PUA claims we will receive.

Below is a graph that shows the anticipated increased progress over the next seven weeks:



Improving Technology and Increasing Staff

We are continuing to work with a private technology company to automate PUA applications and improve phone line capacity. To meet the increase in claims processing, we are also shifting current staff who are skilled in processing claims over to PUA and continuing to hire more employees. PUA did not get passed into law until March 27. As we were getting federal guidance on how to operate this federal program and building that program, we also were creating training materials and hiring a new team dedicated to PUA.

- During the week of April 20, we hired the initial team of 70 to process PUA claims.
- We now have more than 200 staff processing PUA claims. Next week we will add an additional 60 staff, and many more in the weeks after.
- We added 138 phone lines last week and will add 150 more lines over next two weeks.

The Oregon Employment Department is committed to transparency and accountability. We know that many Oregonians are counting on us. We are focused and committed. We will provide weekly updates, with the next PUA data updates being shared on June 24, 2020. For media questions, please contact Ariane Le Chevallier at ariane.lechevallier@oregon.gov or 971-201-1214.