

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 1, 2024

Media Contact:

Seth Gordon

communications@employ.oregon.gov

May 1, 2024, Oregon Employment Department Media Statement

Update on rollout of Frances Online for Unemployment Insurance benefits

The Oregon Employment Department (OED) is now in its ninth week of using Frances Online for Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits. In that time, we have paid out \$111.3 million dollars in benefits through the new system, and we've seen a significant increase in customers successfully using Frances Online.

For example, the number of timely weekly claims has leveled out to roughly 30,000 for each of the past six weeks. This aligns with seasonal trends for this time of year and demonstrates that most customers have acclimated to the new system.

The percentage of people who are using Frances Online to file their claim has also risen steadily since launch, from 81.1 percent in the first week to 93.1 percent last week. This exceeds the rates we saw in the legacy system and shows that more and more people are learning how to file their claims online with each passing week.

The new technology is working as intended and is proving to be secure and much more flexible. It also provides more self-service opportunities than we had with our legacy systems. While, as with any major new system, there are adjustments to be made, we can see more clearly where people have challenges using the system. We have already made many changes and continue to make things easier for the public and more efficient for us so we can get people their benefits more quickly.

The challenges

While the new technology is working, our customers are frustrated because they

haven't been able to get through to us. Another challenge is the length of time it's taking for us to review and approve some claims. Unfortunately, both challenges were present before the rollout of Frances for UI benefits and still exist today.

We know people are already facing difficult situations with the loss of employment, and we know that waiting any amount of time is difficult. We also acknowledge that it is especially frustrating when they can't get through to us on the phone or have to wait on hold for long periods when they do.

We believe this, along with the time it's taking to adjudicate claims, is driving the majority of customer complaints, but their frustration has been conflated with the rollout of Frances Online, which is understandable.

While more people are using the new system successfully, and we are handling many people's claims quickly, we know this is no consolation to those who are having to wait.

We are committed to providing the best customer service possible, and we have known that there are two big things we need to do that.

- One is having the right tools. We are confident that with the flexibility and improvements we are already seeing, we have that with Frances Online.
- The second thing we need is enough employees to help those relying on us. Our staffing levels remain low compared to our workload because of chronic federal underfunding.

Here is what we're doing to address these challenges.

Hiring push

- Unemployment Insurance
 - Thanks to support from the Legislature and the Governor, House Bill 4035 will provide some much-needed administrative funding for 72 positions. Some of these positions are already filled on a temporary basis, and we will use the funding to make them permanent.
 - Currently there are 409 employees in the UI program. Our goal is to reach 476 with increased productivity and customer service starting in mid-to-late-August.
- Paid Leave Oregon currently has 311 employees, and we aim to have about 365 by the end of June.

Other staffing-related approaches

Because it will take time to feel the customer service gains from HB 4035, we are doing many things in the meantime to help customer service. Some of these will be long-term adjustments, while others are only intended as short-term measures as we work to hire and train more employees in the coming months. These include:

- **Overtime**
 - Our dedicated UI employees have been working an average of 400 hours (10 FTE equivalent) of overtime per week. We are increasing this to 600 hours (15 FTE) or more per week.
 - Staff from other parts of the agency who have the right skills will help with UI work, including adjudication, processing claims, and responding to claimant inquiries. We hope to reach at least 320 hours of additional overtime per week (8 FTE).
- **Expanding support**
 - Employees in our Workforce Operations division will make outgoing calls to UI claimants between serving other customers.
 - UI managers and team leads will temporarily take on more direct claims work themselves.

Operational changes underway

In addition to adding more workers and hours, we are looking at changes to *how* we are doing the work.

- **Adjusting workflows** – We are making it easier to resolve some common issues for both our customers and our employees. This includes changing addresses, creating a Frances Online account, and reducing some redundant mailing to claimants.
- **Dedicated time** – We are considering ways to dedicate time for staff to focus on resolving issues on claims, which would help us process them faster, get people their benefits more quickly, and reduce the number of calls.
- **Update wording** – We are revising our letters, questionnaires, and online messaging to clarify the process more and help the public know what to expect.

- **Provide more detailed claim status information** – We are improving and expanding language in Frances Online to give customers additional detail about why their claim is being reviewed and what, if anything, they need to do. A small example is that claims will be marked as “Under Review” as opposed to “In Suspense.”
- **Paid Leave Oregon is improving how it communicates** – Using feedback from the first six months of the program, Paid Leave is improving communication with insurance carriers, employers, and health care providers to get needed information more quickly so that people can get their claims approved faster.
- **Update weekly certification follow-up process** – We are making it easier for claimants to tell us when they have made a mistake answering weekly UI eligibility questions so we can resolve the issue more quickly.
- **Adjusting how we handle UI issues that started in our legacy system** – We are moving all existing claims fully into Frances Online from our legacy system. This may cause duplicate mailings to some customers, but we expect this to reduce the average time for our employees to resolve issues from 9 to 2 days.

Operational changes completed

Here are some improvements we’ve already made to improve customer service:

- **Updated language and system functionality** – Based on customer feedback, we are continuously adjusting Frances Online to be even more user-friendly. Examples of changes include how people identify their employer in the system; the timing of when we send some letters to claimants; making it easier to amend already filed claims; and shortening the timeframe employers have to respond, when appropriate, to speed up claim processing.
- **Improved training and employee guidance/resources**
- **Created a comprehensive set of resource materials** – On our websites, customers who need help with Frances Online can find walk-through guides, videos, and answers to many frequently asked questions (FAQs).
- **Improved the UI identity verification process** – We are giving claimants more time to respond (due to mail delivery delays, some people did not have enough time to respond). We will soon be able to give more up-front

notification that, if they request certain changes to their account, it may require them to re-verify their identity.

- **Improving support for live chat** – This option improves the customer experience and allows our employees, as they gain proficiency, to handle more simultaneous online chats to help multiple UI customers at one time.
- **UI assistance in WorkSource Oregon offices** – Our Workforce Operations employees help people in several ways including:
 - Providing computers and telephones for those who do not have access to them to log into their accounts, file claims, and otherwise get assistance
 - Helping people create accounts, file initial or weekly claims, and check on the status of their claims
 - Verifying claimants' identities
 - Updating how people receive their benefit payments
 - Changing addresses and restarting claims

Demonstrated progress

We are already seeing signs of increased efficiencies (which in turn means improving customer service).

- More than 90% of claimants are using Frances Online to file their weekly claims, compared to the average of 80% who did so in the legacy system.
- Due to staff training, the average time it takes our UI employees to handle a call has decreased from 17 minutes to approximately 11 minutes – meaning we can answer more calls.
- The average number of work items our employees can complete in Frances has also increased significantly – from about 3.3 items per hour on average right after we went live, to 6.8 items per hour.
- Adjudication process efficiencies – Since Frances went live, the average time for staff to resolve an issue on a claim, once they start working it, has decreased from 9 days in the legacy system to 2 days with Frances Online.

Rolling out a new system for both Unemployment Insurance and Paid Leave Oregon, particularly following the historic strains of the pandemic and then drastic staff losses due to inadequate federal funding, has been a major endeavor.

While we are already seeing major performance improvements, we know it will take more time to further refine these programs, which impact almost every worker and every employer in the state.

We know how important these programs are to Oregonians. Our work is not done. We are committed to continuous improvement and to keeping the public informed on our challenges, opportunities, and progress.

###

The Oregon Employment Department (OED) is an equal opportunity agency. OED provides free help so you can use our services. Some examples are sign language and spoken-language interpreters, written materials in other languages, large print, audio, and other formats. To get help, please call 503-947-1794. TTY users call 711. You can also send an email to language@employ.oregon.gov.

El Departamento de Empleo de Oregon (OED) es una agencia de igualdad de oportunidades. El OED proporciona ayuda gratuita para que usted pueda utilizar nuestros servicios. Algunos ejemplos son intérpretes de lengua de señas e idiomas hablados, materiales escritos en otros idiomas, letra grande, audio y otros formatos. Para obtener ayuda, por favor llame al 503-947-1794. Usuarios de TTY pueden llamar al 711. También puede enviar un correo electrónico a language@employ.oregon.gov.