FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Weekly Unemployment Claims Spike

OKLAHOMA CITY – As Oklahoma businesses begin to reopen, the number of initial Unemployment Insurance claims filed with the Oklahoma Employment Security Commission (OESC) reached its highest weekly reported level since the onset of the Energy and Covid-19 crises.

For the week ending May 2, 2020, unadjusted initial claims in Oklahoma totaled 68,237, an increase of 15,737 from the previous adjusted week of 52,500, revised up from the initially reported total of 42,577.

Nationally, the seasonally adjusted initial claims totaled 3,169,000 a decrease of 677,000 from the previous week’s revised level of 3,839,000. The advance seasonally adjusted insured unemployment rate for the country was 15.5 percent for the week ending May 2, up 3.1 percent.

“The jump in initial unemployment claims show the impact the energy crisis and coronavirus are having on our state's economy and the need for Oklahomans to safely return to their livelihoods,” said Secretary for Digital Transformation David Ostrowe. “The record claims numbers include individuals who don’t qualify for regular unemployment benefits but don’t completely account for the spike that occurred last week.”

Almost $432 million in total benefits have been paid to claimants during the COVID-19 crisis with more than 375,000 filing for unemployment relief by the week ending May 2, 2020.

OESC began processing claims for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) during the week ending May 2nd. That process has increased dramatically over the past four days.

“We still have over 8,000 potential PUA applications that haven’t been completed,” Ostrowe said. “We encourage individuals who don’t qualify for regular unemployment to complete the PUA application.”

PUA applicants must first be denied regular unemployment insurance benefits before applying for the relief provided by the CARES Act. PUA is intended for gig workers, independent contractors, self-employed individuals, and claimants who have exhausted their regular unemployment benefits and are out of work due to COVID-19 related job loss or business closure.
Claimants should go to https://ui.ok.gov and create an account with the Get Started button to connect their social security number and pull all their information into one location.

Businesses are starting to reopen with the expectation that employees return to work. The ability to reopen the state’s economy requires employees to fill available job openings. Governor Stitt, the CDC, and other institutions have established guidelines to help employers develop certain protocols to ensure the safety of employees returning to work.

Unemployment claimants should be aware that not returning to work when recalled or the waiver to actively seek employment during the crisis is lifted, could potentially be disqualified from receiving unemployment benefits.

Employers may report this activity by emailing returntowork@oesc.state.ok.us, calling 405-962-7524, or mailing OESC at P.O. Box 52006, Oklahoma City, OK, 73152-2006.

If a claimant returns to work fulltime, they should keep their unemployment claim open with OESC and not certify a weekly claim. If they return part-time, a claimant may continue to certify their weekly claim and must report all gross earnings for the week to potentially receive a partial benefit. Eligibility for continued benefits is determined on the circumstances of each individual claimant.

OESC is also focused on connecting Oklahomans with available employment through https://okjobmatch.com/.

If a PUA eligible claimant reopens their business as the state revives, they will still receive backdated unemployment benefits to when their COVID-19 related job loss or business closure occurred.

“As we’ve noted previously, the pandemic has provided an opportunity for criminals seeking to game the system by filing fraudulent claims for unemployment benefits,” Ostrowe said. “It’s important for any business owner receiving fictitious claims or claimants who suspect their identity has been used to commit fraud to contact the agency,”

OESC is working with the Attorney General, OSBI, and FBI to comb through tens of thousands of suspected fraudulent claims. Please email fraud@oesc.state.ok.us if you are notified of a potentially fraudulent claim or a claim filed in your name.

The national weekly seasonally adjusted initial claims report is one of ten components in the Composite Index of Leading Economic Indicators. To smooth out the volatility in the weekly initial claims data, a 4-week moving average is used to assess trends.

In Oklahoma, the less volatile initial claims four-week moving average climbed 1,926 to 55,479 for the week ending 5/02/2020.
The advance unadjusted number for continued claims totaled 154,330, an increase of 19,788 from the previous week. The continued four-week moving average increased 24,827 to 122,382.