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Jobless Claims Decline as Agency Continues Processing Historic Numbers Seeking Unemployment Relief

OKLAHOMA CITY – The number of jobless claims filed with the Oklahoma Employment Security Commission (OESC) for the week ending May 9, 2020, were about one-third of the record number of claims filed the previous week.

For the week ending May 9, 2020, unadjusted initial claims in Oklahoma totaled 32,794, a decrease of 61,091 from the previous adjusted week of 93,885, revised up 25,648 from the initially reported total of 68,237.

Nationally, the seasonally adjusted initial claims totaled 2,981,000 a decrease of 195,000 from the previous week's revised level of 3,176,000. The advance seasonally adjusted insured unemployment rate for the country was 15.7 percent for the week ending May 9, up 0.3 percent.

“It's too early to consider this week's numbers a trend,” said Secretary for Digital Transformation David Ostrowe. “We're hopeful the incredible numbers of job loss and business closures will begin reversing course now that Oklahoma is moving into Phase II of Governor Stitt's reopening of the state. Our neighbors are ready to get back to work and jumpstart our economy.”

Almost $587 million in total benefits have been paid to claimants during the COVID-19 crisis with more than 410,000 filing for unemployment relief by the week ending May 9, 2020.

“The agency continues to resolve issues regarding claims with pending eligibility concerns,” Ostrowe said. “While a myriad of issues can cause a stop to occur on a claim, OESC is working as fast as humanly possible to identify and resolve each and every one.”

More than 11,000 claims have been identified as fictitious with many more falling into that category. The agency is seeking additional information from claimants on thousands of claims to assist in completing the processing of each.

The rollout of Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Assistance (PEUA), expected by the end of this week, will provide an additional 13 weeks of benefits to individuals who exhausted regular
Unemployment Insurance benefits. These claims may be backdated as far as March 29, 2020, the date OESC signed its agreement with the US Department of Labor, and continue through the week ending December 26, 2020.

Recipients are also receiving the $600 in additional benefits paid out across the spectrum from regular unemployment claims to Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) claimants who don’t qualify for regular unemployment benefits.

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 may be struggling with trying to reopen at a time when some employees are reluctant to return to work due to the continued threat of COVID-19. While the concern is valid, those individuals who do not fall within an identified risk group are expected to return to work or accept work when it is available.

Unemployment claimants should be aware that not returning to work when recalled or when work is available 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 remains focused on connecting Oklahomans with available employment through https://okjobmatch.com/.

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

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 5,422 to 56,469 for the week ending 5/09/2020.
The advance unadjusted number for continued claims totaled 176,194, an increase of 21,523 from the previous week. The continued four-week moving average increased 21,966 to 144,432.