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Thursday, May 21, 2020

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First-Time Jobless Claims Fall, Remain High as Oklahomans File for PUA and PEUC Relief

OKLAHOMA CITY – The number of jobless claims filed with the Oklahoma Employment Security Commission (OESC) for the week ending May 16, 2020, were down from the previous week and remain high compared to the pre-COVID-19 and Oil Industry crises.

For the week ending May 16, 2020, unadjusted initial claims in Oklahoma totaled 23,880, a decrease of 15,199 from the previous adjusted week of 39,079, revised up 6,285 from the initially reported total of 32,794.

Nationally, the seasonally adjusted initial claims totaled 2,438,000 a decrease of 249,000 from the previous week’s revised level of 2,687,000. The advance seasonally adjusted insured unemployment rate for the country was 17.2 percent for the week ending May 16, up 1.7 percent.

“It’s good to see the numbers declining even though initial claims for unemployment remain at historic levels,” said Secretary for Digital Transformation David Ostrowe. “Some of last week’s initial claims can be attributed to individuals who don’t qualify for regular unemployment and to claimants filing for extended unemployment benefits known as PUA and PEUC relief.”

To file for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) or Pandemic Emergency Unemployment (PEUC) Compensation, an individual must first be denied regular unemployment insurance (UI) benefits.

PUA is designed for gig workers, independent contractors, and other self-employed individuals who do not qualify for regular unemployment relief.

PEUC is 13 weeks of additional unemployment benefits for individuals who have exhausted the traditional UI assistance of 26 weeks. These programs run through the week ending December 26, 2020 and are backdated to March 29, 2020.

More than $736 million in total benefits have been paid to claimants during the COVID-19 and Oil Industry crises with more than 450,000 filing for unemployment relief by the week ending May 16, 2020.
“Tier 2 agents will be working Memorial Day making outbound calls to claimants to resolve issues on their applications for relief,” Ostrowe said. “We remain committed to resolving every claim to pay out benefits to out-of-work Oklahomans.

Identified fictitious claims totaled 14,856 for the week ending May 16, 2020. The agency is reaching out for additional information from claimants on thousands of claims to identify those that are fraudulent and assist in completing eligibility on legitimate claims.

In addition to regular unemployment, PUA, and extended weeks of benefits, claimants are also receiving the $600 in Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) benefits paid out across the spectrum through the week ending July 26, 2020.

Individuals seeking unemployment benefits under the CARES Act 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 unemployment information into one location.

“Oklahoma is reopening more and more everyday as the engine of our state’s economy revs up,” Ostrowe said. “It’s important that individuals with COVID-19 related job loss return to work when recalled.”

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 is an excellent resource for people looking to re-enter the job market by 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 declined 5,704 to 52,336 for the week ending 5/16/2020.
The advance unadjusted number for continued claims totaled 132,894, a decrease of 45,228 from the previous week. The continued four-week moving average increased 5,146 to 150,059.
Monday’s Memorial Day Holiday will impact claimants in various ways.

Agency Tier 2 agents will be working Monday making calls to claimants in its ongoing effort to resolve eligibility issues with regular and PUA applications. Inbound call center function will resume regular hours on Tuesday, May 26, 2020.

The holiday is also affecting typical banking operations. Claimants should be aware that payment will be delayed for the week ending May 23, 2020. Individuals receiving payment to the debit card will have the payment released on Tuesday, May 26, 2020. Direct Deposit payment will be issued to banks on May 28 or 29, 2020, depending on when a claimant’s bank completes the transaction.

Claimants should timely file their weekly attestation on Sunday, May 24, 2020, to prevent any additional delays in processing benefit payments.

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