



Washington State Coronavirus Response (COVID-19)

Economic Resiliency Team - Joint Information Center, Camp Murray

Business & workers update: April 29, 2020

The Business and Workers update is a weekly newsletter providing news and information to help businesses and workers navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. The information is compiled by the state Economic Resiliency Team (ERT), part of the Joint Information Center at Camp Murray.

Gov. Inslee announces easing of certain COVID-19 social distancing restrictions

Gov. Jay Inslee has announced the state's first steps to ease certain COVID-19 restrictions including allowing certain [low-risk construction projects to restart](#) and allowing the partial re-opening of some [outdoor recreation activities](#)

The governor, during a [news conference on Monday](#), also discussed the state's approach to easing restrictions, which is based on several factors including:

- **Rate of infection:** Case counts overall have flattened and data from the Puget Sound indicates that for each person infected, the disease is spread to just under one additional individual. While that shows social distancing is helping slow the spread, the governor said medical experts warn there is high risk that infection rates could increase again if we modify restrictions too soon.
- **Ability to test:** To accurately determine the rate of infection, the state needs to significantly increase testing. While the state now has the lab capacity to test large numbers of people, it does not yet have enough testing materials including swabs and viral transmission medium to get the samples to the labs. The state is aggressively pursuing options to get more testing materials from the federal government and other sources soon.
- **Contact tracing:** Once the rate of infection is low and testing capacity is in place, the state needs the ability to reach people who come in contact with someone who is infected to make sure they are isolated, as well as their families. That is the only way, currently, to ensure the virus does not spread out of control. The state is creating a contact tracing workforce of 1,500 people, primarily from the Washington State National Guard, local health departments and the state Department of Health.
- **Status of the health care system:** The state wants to ensure the hospital system has the capacity to handle another surge of patients in case the virus again spreads rapidly through the population.

“Not one of these metrics is dispositive,” the governor said. “You have to consider all of these factors together and when they reach the point where we're highly confident that we can reopen our society, then we will make a decision to do that as soon as we can.”

Unemployment Insurance

Last week, nearly \$1 billion in unemployment benefits was put into the pockets of Washingtonians and nearly \$1.5 billion since the start of the crisis.

The state Employment Security Department (ESD) has dramatically increased its capacity and when the wave of nearly 1,000,000 weekly claims began on Sunday, the agency was ready. In addition to the increased capacity, ESD also used extensive communications to level out traffic to other times and days. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people have successfully filed their weekly claims and are continuing to do so today.

Even so, many people are still waiting for the relief they need, and ESD is doing a deep analysis on exactly who is still waiting to receive some form of relief and why. The agency is aware the call center continues to be overloaded and is increasing staffing.

ESD urges businesses to continue using [the partner toolkit](#) provided last week for tools, templates and information. The department also [posted these FAQ's](#) regarding returning to work and unemployment assistance.

Employment Security Department Commissioner, Suzi LeVine on Tuesday noted there are unprecedented complexities around what returning to work will look like in the coming weeks and months. One of the complexities pertains to employees being called back to work by their employers even as the crisis is ongoing. It is important for workers to understand the law should an offer of work be extended and refused.

“Fundamentally, you must have a good cause reason for refusing an offer of work to remain eligible for unemployment benefits, including the additional \$600 per week made available under the federal CARES Act,” LeVine said. “If you do not have a good reason to refuse an offer of work, you are likely no longer eligible for unemployment. That said, if you cannot go back to work for certain reasons due to the COVID-19 pandemic, like you need to care for a child in your household that is unable to attend school or daycare because the facility has been closed, you may be eligible for expanded benefits. It is important to read the information on the website so you know what may be available to you and what steps to take.”

ESD has [posted FAQ's](#) to explain whether people can remain on UI as restrictions are lifted and they have options to return to work. While it seems simple, there is nuance and ESD's policy and communications team have created useful information to assist workers and employers in navigating the return to work process. This information will be sent directly to business contacts through the JIC and will be publicized through ESD's normal channels.

State Department of Commerce update

A healthy workforce is necessary for a healthy economy. Washington state will take steps to get people back to work in a way that protects them and their communities.

The Department of Commerce will develop an operational plan that works for business, workers, and the public by convening industry representatives and business leaders, along with representatives of labor and workforce interests. The department will start where essential businesses have already put protections in place and include the Department of Health and Labor & Industries early to provide advice and guidance. Working together, we can coordinate industry specific plans to meet health and safety approval and determine when the plan can be implemented.

"Public health is our number one priority and the economy immediately follows," said Commerce director Lisa Brown. "Data and science are our guiding lights through this pandemic. We want to get people back to work as quickly as possible, but we also understand that our workplaces may look very different than they did prior to the outbreak, and that may be the case for some time to come. We're going to partner with our business community to understand what a safe return to work looks like for each industry."

U.S. SBA funding: Congress passed a second coronavirus relief expansion bill late last week which refunded the U.S. Small Business Administration's (SBA) Paycheck Program (PPP) with \$320 billion. The SBA [resumed accepting PPP loan applications](#) on April 27 from approved lenders on behalf of any eligible borrower. The SBA is encouraging all approved lenders to process loan applications previously submitted.

Rent and energy assistance funding: [\\$9 million in rent and energy assistance crisis funding](#) will be distributed through Commerce's statewide network of community action agencies, and is expected to serve an estimated 5,000 eligible households.

To qualify for the COVID-19 crisis Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) benefits, a household must be at 125% of the federal poverty level and have received – or will receive – a LIHEAP or Low-Income Rate Assistance Program (LIRAP) benefit in the current program year.

ScaleUp, COVID-19 Edition: Commerce has created ScaleUp to help small businesses navigate the current economic climate while building resiliency. One hundred businesses across the state will be able to register for the online classes. The virtual classroom will help owners improve their strategic thinking and decision-making, create operational efficiencies and strengthen the bottom line in times of uncertainty.

The ideal candidate for ScaleUp is the president/owner of a business that has been in operation for two years and has annual revenues in excess of \$100,000. [Registration for the free course opens Thursday, April 30 at 10 a.m.](#)

Business Response Center Update: The ERT's Business Response Center has answered more than 1,600 general business inquiries around financial help or other business assistance since coming online April 8.

The center's team, composed of people from the Department of Commerce, the Joint Information Center and volunteers from throughout state government, are reviewing incoming questions and responding as quickly as possible. They are currently able to answer questions as quickly as they are received. If you're a business owner or operator with a question, [you can fill out a form that goes to the center for response](#).

ERT Outreach

The Economic Resiliency Team has posted business communication resources on the state portal, coronavirus.wa.gov, to address common concerns about the coronavirus.

All resources are completely free to use, so please download and distribute as you wish. Current materials include printable posters for businesses, such as [What does six feet look like?](#) and [Grocery shopping tips](#). The ERT will continue to add to this page as new resources are developed. Please check back often.

New webinar: The Joint Information Center's Economic Resiliency Team holds a weekly webinar with the Association of Washington Business. The audience includes hundreds of Washington businesses and industry associations. In the [most recent webinar](#), Employment Security Commissioner Suzi LeVine addresses concerns over unemployment payouts and eligibility for expanded unemployment insurance. Chris Green, Director of Economic Development for the Department of Commerce, discusses small business relief efforts and the troubles of the Paycheck Protection Program. All the episodes are [archived online](#).

New "The Impact: Road to Recovery" episodes: TVW has posted two new episodes in its series, "The Impact: Road to Recovery," which discusses how businesses and workers can navigate their way through the COVID-19 pandemic. [All the shows are archived on TVW](#). Recent episodes include:

- [How are small businesses faring? How can various sectors plan for a re-open?](#) Host Mike McClanahan interviews [Kris Johnson](#), CEO of the Association of Washington Business.
- [How can businesses work with the state to develop safety plans to resume operations safely?](#) Host Mike McClanahan [Joel Sacks](#), Director of the Department of Labor and Industries.