**Employment Security Advisory Committee**



|  |
| --- |
| **Meeting details** |
| Date: Monday, October 25, 2021Time: 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.Location: Virtual [Webex]Committee members in attendance:* Mike Gempler
* Mark Johnson
* Chelsea Mason-Placek
* Anne Paxton for John Tirpak
* Mark Riker
* Rod Van Alyne
 |
| **Minutes** |
| **Welcome and introductions**Nick Demerice welcomed committee members and other guests to the Employment Security Advisory Committee (ESAC) meeting.**Update on Reemployment Services**Jairus Rice, Director of Employment Connections, gave an update on reemployment services activities [[link](https://media.esd.wa.gov/esdwa/Default/ESDWAGOV/ESAC-files/2021/reemployment-services-esac-oct2021.pdf)]. Right now, Employment Connections is working on reaching out to customers who are on the other side of the digital divide or need more intensive care, particularly customers who need to come into WorkSource for in-person assistance. In addition, there have recently been a lot of in-person job fairs across the state.Jairus gave an update on the Trade Adjustment Act (TAA), which is a federally-funded program to retrain people for in-demand jobs. Over 900 people are currently retraining through TAA statewide right now.Jairus also discussed WorkFirst, where ESD partners with DSHS for reemployment for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients. Work search activities weren’t mandatory for WorkFirst recipients during the height of the pandemic, but DSHS reinstituted work search requirements in September, and since then the number of referrals has increased. A lot of people who are in WorkFirst are using online services right now.YesVets is partnering with the Seahawks for a statewide hiring event on November 17. The event will include a 100-booth virtual hiring platform, and ESD will present the ESD Commissioner’s Hire-A-Vet Employer of the Year award for small, medium, and large employers.**Unemployment Insurance Update: Operations / Policy**Julie Lord, Director of Unemployment Insurance Customer Support (UICS), gave an update on UICS activities [[link](https://media.esd.wa.gov/esdwa/Default/ESDWAGOV/ESAC-files/2021/unemployment-insurance-customer-support-esac-oct2021.pdf)] with the assistance of Jill Will, UICS Policy and Implementation Manager. In August, the Claims Center had a workload increase as the result of the Potential New Claims issue, but the phone volume began returning to normal in September. The Claims Center continues to experience phone-related challenges, in part because many of the staff who process UI claims also answer Claims Center phone calls.To help, ESD recently added 43 additional staff and is adding 130 staff on November 4 and 104 by early December. However, bringing in additional Claims Center staff isn’t a long-term solution. Our phone system doesn’t currently let claimants get information about their claim, and currently agents can’t quickly adjust the queue to respond based on call volume. To address these problems, ESD is implementing a UI Virtual Assistant Project, which will let claimants ask commonly-asked questions. Phase 1 went live on October 4. ESD is also working on a project called Contact Center as a Service, which involves replacing the current UI telephone system to make the phone process more seamless for claimants. Julie said that ESD wants to have vendor on board by April 2022 and fully implement the project by December 2022.Jill Will, UICS Policy and Implementation Manager, said that many Employment Security Department (ESD) staff are currently involved in implementing ESSB 5193 ([link](http://lawfilesext.leg.wa.gov/biennium/2021-22/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/Senate/5193-S.SL.pdf?q=20210809181620)), a bill that passed in the 2021 legislative session. Although the title is “Unemployment Insurance – Claims Adjudicators,” the bill also affects many additional areas besides adjudication. The largest project for the new bill is what ESD calls the Letters Project, which involves revising and plain-talking all correspondence regarding specific claimants’ cases. ESD has finished revising the first set of documents, including but not limited to the determination and redetermination temples. Implementing 5193 also involves several other projects, such as the online data dashboard. Scott Michael, Legal Services Coordination Manager, discussed rulemaking on UI issues. ESD is currently working on turning the pandemic-era UI emergency rules into permanent rules and, in January, will go live with major change to existing hours of availability rules. Right now, claimants must be able and available for all hours customary for their occupation (so this can sometimes include 24/7 availability), but this will change as a result of this rule.**Commissioner’s Update** ESD Commissioner Cami Feek thanked the committee members for their work on ESAC and said that ESD has moved out of emergency mode and is focusing on rebuilding and moving forward.She provided updates on some additional ESD work, including the WA Cares program, which is the first long-term care program in the nation. Seven in ten Washington families will need long-term care that they’re not financially able to provide, so this program will fill that gap.ESD will collect premiums and handle exemptions. The Department of Social and Health Services is the overall lead for handling benefits, and the Health Care Authority is paying providers and tracking benefits usage. The State Actuary will ensure the WA Cares Trust Fund’s continued solvency. Cami also discussed the Paid Family and Medical Leave program. Benefits launched January 2020, so the program is close to its two-year anniversary. Starting January 1, the base rate will move from .4 to .6 and the employer / employee split will change.In regard to unemployment insurance, Cami said that ESD has reached a point of relative stability although there’s still a lot of work to do to close out the CARES Act and other related work. There’s still a high workload across the agency, and in all programs – especially unemployment insurance – the agency is focusing on equity and improvement in service delivery, especially regarding language access and usability. Mark Johnson of the Washington Retail Association asked what will happen if the federal government passes a national PFML bill. Cami explained that Washington would then decide whether to continue the existing Washington PFML program or move to the new federal program, possibly continuing our state program using the “legacy state” feature. **Subcommittee to Address Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Issues**Ayanna Colman, Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, said that ESD recently formed an ESAC subcommittee to address equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) issues. ESD held the first subcommittee meeting in October, and the subcommittee will continue to meet once a month for the next year.**ESD’s 2022 Decision Packages and Request Bill**Carole Holland, Chief Financial Officer, explained that the federal government has reduced ESD’s federal funding, so ESD’s state budget requests for the upcoming legislative session reflect this change. She mentioned that ESD is asking for $4.7 million for staffing for UI caseloads, and she described some of the decision packages that ESD submitted this year, such as requesting permission to use our own funding for the Workforce Administration System Replacement project. **Trust Fund Update**Steven Ross, Director of Labor Market Information, gave an update on the state of the labor market and the unemployment insurance trust fund [[link](https://media.esd.wa.gov/esdwa/Default/ESDWAGOV/ESAC-files/2021/state-of-labor-market-esac-oct2021.pdf)]. He said that from February 2020 through May 2020, Washington lost 421,200 nonfarm jobs. In contrast, the state gained 310,700 jobs between May 2020 and August 2021. As of September 27, the UI trust fund balance was $1.8 billion, which is enough to pay over four months of benefits. |

The meeting adjourned at 3:00 p.m.