

RCW 50.12.360 Unemployment insurance claim adjudicator training program—Report. (1) The employment security department must create a training program to prepare a reserve force of skilled unemployment insurance claim adjudicators who can be available quickly when claims volume demands.

(2) The program must:

(a) Be open to both state and other public employees and private citizens;

(b) Be of sufficient quality that persons completing the training and any required continuing education would be ready to work as an unemployment insurance claim adjudicator within one week of commencing employment with the employment security department; and

(c) Provide a certification of completion to participants who complete the program.

(3) The office of financial management must collaborate with the employment security department to assist the department in identifying agencies with current state employees who meet the minimum qualifications for unemployment insurance claims' adjudicator. Employees at other agencies, who meet the minimum qualifications of the unemployment insurance claims' adjudicator classification, may, upon approval of their agency, attend required training provided by the department. In designated times of high unemployment claims, current state employees who have completed required training and who are otherwise qualified may be selected to assist the department in processing unemployment insurance claims or related activities. The office of financial management may adopt rules or issue guidance to assist in the implementation of this provision.

(4) By October 1, 2021, and each year thereafter, the employment security department must provide a report to the house of representatives committee on labor and workplace standards and the senate committee on labor, commerce, and tribal affairs, or successor committees, on the number of persons with current certifications under subsection (2)(c) of this section, the number of people employed by the department and over what period of time, and the adjudicator training and hiring costs. [2021 c 271 s 2.]

Findings—Intent—2021 c 271: "The legislature finds with roughly \$4,700,000,000 in the state unemployment insurance trust fund, Washington entered the COVID-19 pandemic with one of the strongest and best-funded trust funds in the nation. During an unprecedented time, the state's unemployment insurance trust fund provided critical economic support to Washington workers and businesses through unemployment benefits and helped bolster the state's economy.

The legislature recognizes that the employment security department maintains a recession readiness team that prepares the agency to respond to economic changes, helping employers and employees plan for the future. Based on experience with past recessions, the employment security department's readiness team prepared contingency plans for a possible economic crisis. During the great recession, there were approximately 61,000 continued unemployment insurance claims in September 2008, rising to a high of approximately 173,000 claims in January of 2010, a period of 16 months. During the first three months of COVID-19, unemployment insurance claims were more than double those filed during the great recession, a time period that was seven times longer. From February 2020 to April 2020, unemployment insurance claims went from approximately 62,000 to approximately

447,000 claims. The sudden magnitude of claimants overwhelmed the system; contributing to Washingtonians waiting months for their earned benefits and facing deep economic insecurity.

The legislature finds that, despite conscientious economic emergency planning by the employment security department, claims processing issues are central problems encumbering the employment security department's ability to timely meet a suddenly increased demand for benefits. Immediate additional measures to facilitate rapid and equitable provision of unemployment benefits now, and enhanced preparation to do so in future economic downturns or emergencies, are critically important.

The legislature further finds that a federal retroactive funding model that looks back instead of preparing for potential economic shocks ahead was a major contributing factor to the challenges faced by all states during the COVID-19 pandemic in quickly paying benefits to unemployed workers. Our employment security department cannot quickly scale up for increased workloads and new programs if its administrative funding is based on funding that looks backward instead of forward.

Amid an unprecedented need for benefits and stresses on our unemployment insurance program, the legislature intends to create a pool of qualified unemployment insurance claim adjudicators, reduce claimants' need for assistance, assure transparency of claims processing performance measures, and make other system enhancements. Together, these systems enhancements will ensure quicker claim resolution and benefit payment; thus providing critical economic support during future unemployment crises." [2021 c 271 s 1.]