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**SENATE BILL 5193**

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**State of Washington 67th Legislature 2021 Regular Session**

**By** Senators Conway, Keiser, Hasegawa, and Wilson, C.

AN ACT Relating to unemployment insurance claim adjudicators; adding a new section to chapter 51.12 RCW; and creating a new section.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  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 well-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 preparing for an economic crisis. During the great recession, there were approximately 61,000 continued unemployment insurance claims in September 2008, and hit 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 than 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 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. A stable pool of adjudicators will ensure quicker claim resolution and benefit payment; thus providing critical economic support during future unemployment crises.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 51.12 RCW to read as follows:

(1) The employment security department must create an annual training program to train qualified persons to perform as unemployment insurance claim adjudicators.

(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 provide opportunities for state employees, who meet the minimum qualifications to work as an unemployment insurance claim adjudicator, to participate in the annual trainings.

(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.

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