



Oregon Law Center

WORKING TOGETHER TO ACHIEVE JUSTICE FOR LOW INCOME OREGONIANS

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To: House Committee on Labor and Workplace Standards
From: Martha Sonato, Legislative advocate at Oregon Law Center
Re: Support for HB 2125
Date: February 5th, 2025

Chair Grayber, Vice-Chairs Muñoz and Elmer, and Members of the House Business and Labor Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill 2125 on behalf of the Oregon Law Center (OLC). Our mission is to achieve justice for the low-income communities of Oregon by providing a full range of the highest quality civil legal services.

HB 2125 directly addresses the urgent needs of Oregonians who find themselves suddenly without income due to circumstances beyond their control by authorizing the Director of the Employment Department to waive the unpaid waiting week for unemployment insurance during state-declared emergencies related to severe weather.

Currently, the Governor of Oregon has the authority to waive the one-week waiting period for unemployment insurance if a state of emergency has been declared,¹ as the Governor did during the COVID-19 pandemic.

HB 2125 will expand this capability by providing the Director of the Oregon Employment Department (OED) with discretionary authority to waive the one-week waiting period when the Governor has declared a state of emergency.

Severe weather emergencies are becoming increasingly common in Oregon due to climate change. For example, the 2021 heat dome resulted in record-breaking temperatures that caused widespread disruptions, health emergencies, and even fatalities. In 2024, Oregon had a record-breaking wildfire season, exposing communities and workers whose jobs are outside to wildfire smoke.

We have clients in agriculture, forestry, construction, factories and warehouses, whose jobs are prone to sudden disruption due to extreme heat, extreme cold, and other climate-related disasters. When severe weather disrupts their ability to work, the loss of even one week of income can lead to devastating consequences, including food

¹ ORS 401.165

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insecurity, inability to pay rent or utilities, and mounting debt. The current waiting week requirement delays essential financial support when it is needed most.

To maximize its impact on workers, we recommend strengthening the bill in two key areas.

1. Clarification of "Severe Weather Emergency"

The bill references waiving the one week waiting period during state-declared emergencies but lacks clarity on what qualifies as a "severe weather emergency." It is unclear if "severe weather emergency" covers weather related/natural disaster events such as but not limited to: wildfires, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, excessive heat, tornadoes, winter storms, snowstorms, freezes, hail, smoke, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and other adverse weather events.

2. Mandatory Waiver of the Waiting Week

The bill currently gives discretionary authority to the Employment Department Director to waive the one-week waiting period during severe weather emergencies. We recommend making this waiver automatic when a Governor-declared emergency prevents individuals from working. This change would provide workers with assurance of timely support, eliminating uncertainty about eligibility.

With these improvements, the bill would more effectively protect workers' livelihoods during weather emergencies.

HB 2125 is a positive step toward ensuring Oregon workers have access to financial support during extreme weather events. The bill underscores that the current one-week waiting period for unemployment insurance is outdated, originally designed for manual claim processing.² This delay no longer aligns with modern technology and workforce needs.

We urge your support for HB 2125 to protect Oregon workers in times of crisis

Sincerely,

Martha Sonato

² National Employment Law Project. (2015). *Avoiding Waiting Weeks: How States Can Prevent Unnecessary Delays in Unemployment Insurance Benefits*. Retrieved from <https://www.nelp.org/app/uploads/2015/10/2E-Avoiding-Waiting-Weeks.pdf>