Washington
Paid Family & Medical Leave

Program Operational Needs and Resources

Employment Security Department
WASHINGTON STATE

September

2022

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Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5693 (Section 225 (3)) requires the Employment Security Department (ESD) to reassess our ongoing staffing and funding needs for the Paid Family & Medical Leave (Paid Leave) program and submit documentation of the updated need by September 1, 2022. This report is submitted to meet this requirement and seeks to create understanding about the resources needed to support program operations.

The Paid Leave program has been processing applications and weekly claims for more than two-and-a-half years, providing important benefits to Washington state workers and employers. During this first 30 months, Paid Family & Medical Leave has distributed over $2 billion in leave benefits to over 265,000 Washington workers.

Key insights:

- Paid Leave benefit applications continue to increase. We expect to receive at least 223,374 applications in FY23. Based on our updated staffing model for this year, the increased application volume may result in a need to add two additional teams of staff.
- We plan to use underspent funds from the current biennium to fund these positions for FY23. We are submitting a decision package to request funding for these new positions beginning for FY24 and beyond.
- We continue to enhance our technology and processes to improve our customer service and processing times.

Past year experience

In last year's staffing proposal, we asked to add over 100 positions to our Operations teams. We saw a need for additional staff members so that we could keep up with increasing volumes of Paid Leave benefit claims and the associated workload, as well as decrease wait times for customers contacting us or applying for benefits.

Support for implementing that plan directly led to substantial improvements in customer experience. We hired over 100 positions, which filled 18 Customer Care Teams (CCT). From these hires, we now have a dedicated dual-language team supporting Spanish-speaking customers, three Customer Response Teams (CRT), and supporting positions necessary for program operations.

Our CCT staff process Paid Leave benefits and provide customer service to workers and employers. Each team has 12 Paid Leave Specialist 1s or 2s, one Paid Leave Specialist 3 (Lead), and a Customer Service Manager.

Our CRT staff are primarily responsible for handling incoming calls and responding to electronic inquiries. Each CRT has 12 Customer Service Specialist 2s, one Customer Service Specialist 3 (Lead), and one Customer Service Specialist 4 Supervisor.

As a result of this hiring, we have made significant strides on processing times for benefits and customer inquiries. For example, Table 1 shows duration between application submission and first benefit payment, which dropped by about 31 percent between January and May 2022. This includes the full amount of time from when customers first submit a benefit application to when their first payment is approved.[1] A substantial part of this decrease was our drop in leave claim application processing, which dropped by half during the same timeframe. About 75% of customers in May received a determination within 10 days of submitting their application.

Table 1. Time from application submitted to first weekly payment approved

Month	Average Weeks	Median Weeks
January 2022	5.2	3.6
February 2022	4.9	3.6
March 2022	4.5	3.4
April 2022	4.0	2.7
May 2022	3.6	2.3

With the additional Paid Leave specialists and the Customer Response teams, Paid Leave has also been able to double the number of calls handled. With these three teams dedicated to providing customer support, there is a more balanced workload schedule that allows for Paid Leave specialists to handle all aspects of processing benefit applications more efficiently.

Figure 1. Calls handled monthly

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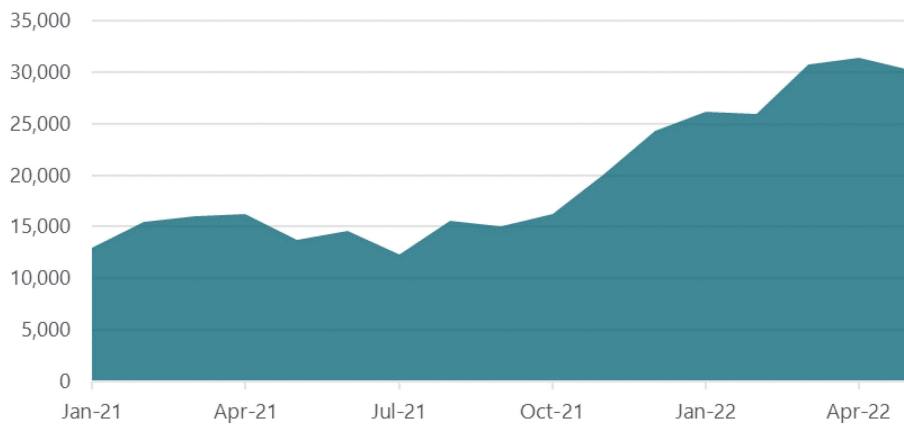
[1] This encompasses all claims, including those requiring extensive fact finding before approval and those that were initially denied and later redetermined.

In addition to handling more incoming calls, phone hold times have decreased dramatically. Table 2 shows the comparison between 2021 and 2022 hold times for customers trying to reach us via phone. In May 2021, average hold time was nearly 52 minutes. By May 2022, that had dropped to under 3 minutes.

Table 2. Phone queue (hold) time comparisons

Month	Queue Time 2021	Queue Time 2022
January	1:06:05	0:12:57
February	0:49:07	0:08:34
March	0:48:46	0:04:56
April	0:42:31	0:04:01
May	0:51:48	0:02:47

Response times to customers contacting us via other methods have also decreased. Our email response time has dropped from more than 30 days to 3.5 days. Secure message response times have decreased from an average of 2 days to 1.3 days. More customers are able to reach us, and they are waiting far less time for our response when doing so.

Staffing calculations

As our program continues to evolve and change, we learn more about the work that needs to be done and how much time it takes for our staff to complete various tasks. Last year, we introduced a staffing model and methodology that uses claim volumes to determine the number of Paid Leave specialists needed to process applications and claims, along with the work that accompanies those processes. We also created employer support staffing models because there is an employer related workload that our Paid Leave specialists undertake as well. Shown in Table 3 are current estimated timings for each benefit-application-related task and the ratio of related tasks to one benefit application. We combine this information with projected claim application volumes to determine how close we are with staffing needs.

Table 3: Current task timing per each initial leave claim application processed

Task	Ratio Quantity	Timing (in minutes)	Total Staff Time
Leave Claim Application	1	35	35
Phone Calls	1.3	15	19.5
Weekly Claim	3.5	3	10.5
Redetermination	0.2	19	3.8
Request for Review	0.3	19	5.7
Electronic Inquiry	0.7	7	4.9
		Total	79.4

Table 4 shows the same data from last year's staffing model. Comparing table 3 to table 4, the time required on benefit claim applications and related tasks has decreased by 5.4 minutes overall for each leave claim application submitted.

Table 4: 2021 task timing per each initial leave claim application processed

Task	Ratio Quantity	Timing (in minutes)	Total Staff Time
Leave Claim Application	1	43	43
Phone Calls	0.7	18	12.6
Weekly Claim	3.6	4	14.4
Redetermination	0.2	26	5.2
Request for Review	0.2	26	5.2
Electronic Inquiry	0.4	11	4.4
		Total	84.8

Projections and staffing needs

For the coming year, we expect incoming leave claim applications to increase from about 212,000 in FY22 to at least 223,374 in FY23 if current volumes continue. Looking forward to fiscal year 2024, leave claims submitted are estimated to rise to over 234,000. Still in the initial growth period of the WA Paid Leave program, there remains considerable uncertainty around the timing and volumes at which we will see growth level off as the program moves from this initial growth period into maturity. Program changes add some additional uncertainty as well. For example, 2SSB 5649 sunsets the collective bargaining agreement exemption as of December 31, 2023.[2] This will affect incoming applications starting in calendar year 2024, but the size of this impact is unclear.

Using the current staffing models described above, similar methodology to the models created in 2021 and updated with 2022 historical data, we expect to need an additional two Customer Care Teams and related staff providing necessary support in order to keep up with the increasing workload by the end of FY23. With the uncertainty around benefit application projections during this initial growth period, it is possible that volumes will grow more than anticipated this year. Since we have not seen substantial indications of growth slowing, it is unlikely that we would grow less than anticipated this year.

That said, we also added more than 100 staff this past year, including some teams that began in early 2022. These teams may become more efficient as they gain experience throughout the year. In addition, we have made substantial improvements to our products (e.g., technology system, forms, instructions), which we believe will increase customer self-service, decrease fact-finding, and decrease incoming questions that Paid Leave and Customer Response specialists would need to answer.

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[2] RCW 50A.05.090, amended by 2SSB 5649.

While we anticipate needing two more teams to keep up with the increasing benefit volume by the end of FY23, we would plan to hire in waves as needed during the year. Our plan is to closely monitor incoming volumes, customer responsiveness, and benefit processing data, adding staff as needed to maintain the success in these areas that we achieved this past year. We are planning on using underspent funds to fund these new positions in FY23 but would need additional resources to continue to fund them in subsequent years. ESD is submitting a decision package to request funding for these new positions beginning in FY24 and beyond.

Table 5 illustrates the current Paid Leave operations FTE and the proposed new additions to maintain this year's customer responsiveness improvements while keeping up with the anticipated increased workload in the coming year.

Table 5: Operations current staffing and proposed new additions

Job Classification	Current FTE	Proposed New Additions
Paid Leave Specialist 2	217	24
Paid Leave Specialist 3	65	2 (Leads)
Customer Service Specialist 2	31	
Customer Service Specialist 3	3	
Customer Service Specialist 4	3	
Management Analyst 3	8	
Management Analyst 4	4	
Management Analyst 5	1	
Office Assistant 3	11	1
Administrative Assistant 3	2	
Administrative Assistant 4	1	
WMS 1	14	
WMS 2	2	
WMS 3	1	
EMS 3	1	
Customer Service Manager (Supervisors)	21	2
Secretary Senior	1	

At current processing capacity, to maintain a time to initial application decision of under two weeks, we need to carry no more than around a 5,000 to 7,000 backlog of unprocessed initial applications at any given time. Without these additional staff, the increasing application volume would result in our backlog growing to over 21,000, with upwards of 5-6 weeks to initial application decision. Prior experience indicates that other workload items, such as phones, tend to increase when we have longer application

processing times, so we would anticipate an increase in customer response times (phones, emails, request for reviews) as well.

This upcoming fiscal year, we are also dedicating attention to further develop the compliance staffing models to better represent all tasks related to employer services, employer reporting, and auditing.

As the program continues to grow and change over time, we will continue to closely monitor incoming claims and processing data and will adjust staffing plans accordingly. We will keep the Office of Financial Management, legislature, the Governor's Office, and our Advisory Committee[3] apprised of significant changes to program needs and resources.

For questions about this report, contact John.Mattes@esd.wa.gov

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[3] The Paid Family & Medical Leave Advisory Committee consists of eight voting members, four representing workers and four representing employers. An ESD representative and the Ombuds are ex-officio members. Created under RCW 50A.05.030.