

Meeting:	<b>Paid Leave Oregon Advisory Committee</b>				
Date/time:	<b>01/29/2026   1:00-2:30 p.m.</b>				
Location:	ZoomGov				
Attendees:	P (Present) A (Absent) S (sent sub) N (notetaker)				
	Facilitator: Ellie Johnson Scribe: Michael Orosco				
<b>Members</b>		<b>Staff</b>		<b>Guest</b>	
A	Juan Serratos	P	Ellie Johnson	P	Belen Koenig
P	Andrew R. Stolfi	P	Tjorven Sievers	P	Paloma Sparks
A	Amanda Dalton (employers)	P	Karen Humelbaugh	P	Blosser Alex
A	Jenny Dresler (employers)	A	Accacia Nepote		
P	JaJetta Dumdi (employers)	P	Rachel Bruneau		
P	Rich Reynolds (employers)	P	Ayesha Khalid		
P	Odalis Aguilar-Aguilar (employees)	P	David Genz		
P	Anna Richards Roberts (employees)	A	Kaitlynn Chritton		
P	Delina Biniam (employees)	P	Kaia Shire		
P	Catie Theisen (employees)	A	Jack Patterson		
		P	Kandi Quezada		
		A	Rebeka Gipson-King		
		N	Michael Orosco		

## Agenda/Notes

Docket #	Topic	Purpose	Presenter
1.0	<b>Welcome &amp; Introductions</b>	Inform	Ellie Johnson
1.1	Member Roundtable		
1.2	Approval of November Notes		
<p><b>Ellie Johnson</b></p> <p>Good afternoon, everyone. I am Ellie Johnson, I use she/her pronouns. I am currently serving as the acting deputy director for Paid Leave Oregon. I am covering for Juan, since he is out of the office. I'm happy to be here with you this afternoon, addressing some important topics.</p> <p>Thank you so much for joining our meeting today. I appreciate your time and insights.</p> <p>I'd like to start with a quick introduction of the folks on the call. We can go in order on the attendee list here on the zoom call.</p> <p>I want to double-check with advisory committee members if you have any roundtable items or topics to share at this time.</p> <p>Next, I would like to double-check: Mike do we have a quorum to approve the notes from our last meeting in November? If there are no corrections or changes from the committee, we will assume these are approved. If there are no objections. I will pause for a moment to allow for any feedback.</p>			

As a reminder, the Paid Leave Advisory Committee is advisory to the program, its leadership, and the agency director. To be fully transparent, we invite the public to attend these meetings, but only committee members and program staff can participate in the discussion.

*(Posted in Chat) Call us at: 833-854-0166 or contact us from our website at [paidleave.oregon.gov](https://paidleave.oregon.gov)*

If you have feedback, questions, concerns, or ideas please contact the program through the methods in chat. We would love to hear from you.

In terms of our agenda for today, Tjorven will give us a quick update on the upcoming short legislative session and Karen will lead a conversation on the legislative concept (LC) 220 which includes the language we are seeking to update the program's statute. This update is to align with the accounting method we have discussed previously and that we are pursuing to be in compliance with the IRS ruling on medical leave taxability. We would also like to gather any feedback and advice you have on the LC.

We will then have Anne Polak, project manager with Paid Leave and Alex Caicedo, Paid Leave outreach program analyst, who are going to share some information and ask for feedback on our website update. Our Connector Program supervisor, Amanda Parson, will give you an update on the Connector Program.

And, as usual, I will share our program performance data with you. As you will see, we are moving toward a model that analyzes data quarterly and, over time, potentially identifies trends across quarters.

November notes are approved.

### **Questions**

Q: Did Paid Leave stop deducting taxes on medical leave benefits for this calendar year?

A: Not for this calendar year, the tax ruling has given us another year to implement, until January 2027.

Q: So, does that mean you can't stop taking out taxes now? Because I think the notes sort of said that could happen regardless.

A: At our last meeting in November, we hadn't yet received the extension from the IRS, so it was a little up in the air what our approach was going to be in terms of withholding. But in December we did receive the extension so that ruling doesn't become effective until January 2027.

Q: It sounds to me like you've gotten an opinion from the IRS that those aren't taxable? Does that mean that people can claim that they shouldn't have been taxed? It seems like a year of folks getting lower payments than they should.

A: The IRS didn't say that medical leave isn't taxable. It only said if employer contributions are used to fund medical leave, then they are both subject to income and payroll tax. Because of this additional payroll tax, that isn't something we're currently doing. We now have this bill that Karen will speak about today, bill 1520, that would give us rulemaking authorities, so going forward we wouldn't use employer contributions to fund medical leave. At which point you're correct, then medical leave would no longer be taxable. But that's not currently the case and the bill is still working its way through the legislature, so this year we're still withholding. But then next year, we would no longer be withholding, and medical leave would no longer be taxable if the bill passes and we can make all the changes that we plan.

Q: If I am understanding correctly from our last meeting, folks that are running into technical difficulties online and need help via phone, can they schedule a phone call appointment?

A: I think you're referring to our Connector Program, where we meet in person at some of our work source locations. We do have some updates that Amanda Parsons will be sharing today.

Q: So, no, you can't schedule a call?

A: Correct. That isn't an option. The previous meeting was referencing the Connector Program and our in-person appointments.

2.0	<b>2026 Short Session</b>	Inform	Tjorven Sievers &
2.1	<b>Budget Limitation Increase Request</b>		Karen Humelbaugh
2.2	<b>LC 220</b>		

**Tjorven Sievers**

As mentioned during the caucus meetings at the beginning of the month, Paid Leave requested an increase in budget and staffing limitation from the legislature to make important system enhancements.

The Joint Interim Ways & Means Committee recommended that the request be approved during the 2026 session in a budget reconciliation bill.

To briefly reiterate why we made this request: We continue to see a steady increase in the number of claims we receive, which have caused delays and impacted program efficiency and customer experience. Claim volume is projected to keep increasing by approximately 5% per year between 2026 and 2028.

We intend to address the existing inefficiencies by implementing important system enhancements.

We will make every effort to make these improvements in a fiscally responsible manner.

As described at the caucus meetings earlier this month, key projects we have identified are establishing a health care provider interface, streamlining the application process and strengthening ID verification and fraud investigations.

We envision enhancements to be made as projects over the course of 2026 and 2027, so we will be engaging with customers as we work on making changes to gather feedback and address potential concerns.

This is something that we already do now. For example, we regularly meet with HR representatives of other state agencies, who have communicated that letters currently going out to employees and employers cause confusion and make it more challenging for HR departments to do their work. Based on feedback like this, we plan to improve customer letters as part of streamlining the application process.

Regarding the health care provider interface, we similarly intend to do outreach to learn what would be most useful to providers. Objectives would be to reduce paperwork for employees and providers, because providers would be able to enter and update information online, leading to more timely decisions. It would also minimize the risk of fraud on health care provider documentation, as it would be sent directly by the provider.

We would welcome any feedback you have, or that you hear from employees or employers, on any of these proposed projects.

**Karen Humelbaugh**

We re-shared the legislative concept with you a few days ago and you can see a summary of the language on the screen. Juan will also share regular updates with you throughout the legislative session, e.g., after hearings regarding the status of the bill. To give you a quick recap, Senate Bill 1520 would allow us to adopt rules establishing an accounting system for contributions made to and benefits paid from the fund. The bill discusses what this accounting method means, how we would restrict the use of contributions in the trust fund to pay benefits for specific leave types.

Importantly, the bill does not give OED the authority to change the statutory 1% maximum contribution rate, or to change the statutory 60/40 employee/employer split of the total contribution rate. It also doesn't affect our ability to set the contribution rate each year, up to the 1% maximum statutory rate.

Today, we mainly wanted to reserve some time to gather any additional feedback or advice that you may have prior to the start of the legislative session, and to hear your thoughts. If the bill passes, we anticipate taking next steps as shown on the screen:

- First, we plan to adopt a rule on contributions allocation by July 1, 2026, as part of batch 15 Paid Leave rulemaking. Given that the administrative rulemaking process is lengthy, we have started our internal work on rule drafting and review. We plan to share a draft of the rule with all of you in late February or early March, so we can address any feedback you may have before the Rulemaking Advisory Committee (RAC) meeting. We anticipate that the RAC meeting will take place on April 1, 2026.
- Second, we plan to amend our administrative rule on the wage definition of Paid Leave benefits and tax withholding by Jan. 1, 2027.

We will also continue establishing an internal tracking system and updating our accounting structure, to ensure employer contributions are not used to fund medical leave benefits. At the same time, we will work on the limited required Frances system changes, such as stopping withholding on medical leave benefits by Jan. 1, 2027.

### Questions

Q: Just to confirm we should be holding time on the 1st for a RAC meeting?

A: Yes. We are planning for April 1.

### 3.0 Paid Leave Oregon Website Update

Inform

Anne Polak & Alex Caicedo

#### Anne Polak

Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Anne Polak and I'm a project manager leading Paid Leave's Website Refresh project. We started this project late last year and are making our way through the first phase, which includes a comprehensive review of the website. I'm going to hand it over to one of our project team members, Alex, to share more about the work we've done so far before opening it up for your feedback.

#### Alex Caicedo

Thank you, Anne, and thank you all for being here today. My name is Alex Caicedo and I'm helping gather feedback for our analysis. First, I want to share some background for this project. When Paid Leave Oregon was launched, the website was built to introduce a new program. The homepage reads "It's time for Paid Leave Oregon." Now that the program is more established, it's time for the focus to shift to what customers are looking for now. We also made it our goal to make substantial updates to our website and materials – guidebooks, fact sheets, checklists, and more – every five years. This project combines that scheduled update with a targeted effort to reorganize and refine the site for today's users.

Our objective is to revise and update the website's content, improving accessibility and fine-tuning site structure for ease of use. Our goal is to deliver an improved, user-friendly website that helps customers navigate benefits confidently.

To accomplish this goal, we've been reviewing the site's data analytics, gathering feedback from staff and community partners, and conducting surveys and facilitating focus groups to make sure that we are truly aware of our customers' needs. This week, we wrapped up our series of virtual focus groups that have helped us gather deeper insights and brainstorm solutions.

These discussions have included employees, employers, self-employed individuals, advocates, and health care providers – many of the communities you all represent. We've gathered a lot of great information, and we want to hear from you all as well. I'm going to hand it back over to Anne who can also answer any questions you might have.

#### Anne Polak

Thank you, Alex! As Alex mentioned, the information we gather as part of this process will help shape the next phase of the project.

We have some time now to answer questions or hear your feedback. You may also send feedback by email to [Anne.Polak@employ.oregon.gov](mailto:Anne.Polak@employ.oregon.gov).

**Questions and Feedback**

Q: I had a question on the cost of this?

A: Everything we are doing now is covered within the maintenance retainer that we have now with the vendor. If there are design elements that would require more developer work, we would talk about that at that time but right now there is no additional budget needed for this project.

F: There is lots of information geared towards employers about what they can do but not a lot of what your rights are as employee as far as how the program interacts with Paid Leave. That’s something I would love to see on the website.

F: It can be confusing when people know the due date but are not sure if the baby will actually come at that exact time. So more practical tips on specific questions and how to fill out the form, step by step, with FAQs.

A: We are working on a set of short videos that will be posted on a variety of platforms that cover specific topics. We are aware that our clients cannot get some information through our website, and we believe the videos are a better way to support a lot of the FAQs. For this refresh we are definitely focusing on more practical information for application process and what needs to happen and in what order.

4.0	<b>Quarterly Program Performance</b>	Inform	Ellie Johnson
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**Ellie Johnson**

The trust fund ended 2025 with 8.1 months in reserve, which is more than projected at our last meeting, due to updated actual numbers. The forecast shows about 7.9 months reserve by end of 2026. This is a slight dip compared to end of 2025 due to projected higher benefit payments. 2024 applications: We projected 131,000 applications; we received about 134,000 finalized applications and approved 101,246. 2025 applications: We projected 135,000 applications, received about 162,000 finalized applications, and approved 125,133. In 2025, we received an average of 339 finalized approved applications per day. This is an increase to 2024, when we saw an average of 280 finalized approved applications per day. In 2026, on average we are expecting to receive about 390 approved applications a day. We are encouraged by fund stability and optimistic that we will continue to see very slow growth in reserves. We’re still monitoring the fund closely due to program age and evolving trends.

**Amanda Parsons**

The Paid Leave Oregon Connector Pilot Program was developed to help customers facing challenges to access Paid Leave, particularly limited digital access, language and cultural nuances, and disabilities by offering in-person, one-on-one support. Since November 2025, we have supported 299 customers through the Connector Program, and 899 in total, continuing to make a real impact in our community. Our average appointment time has decreased, dropping from 35 minutes to 32 minutes, which indicates we’re serving more people efficiently. Services are still primarily requested in Spanish and English, reinforcing the importance of bilingual support. Technology remains the leading reason folks seek our help, accounting for 66% of all appointments, showing just how critical digital access is. However, preference for in-person interaction as a reason for an appointment has increased by 6%, signaling that people value face-to-face interaction. Looking at our recent program participation, we have seen growth across our locations in the second half of 2025. In Q3 of 2025, we assisted 266 customers, and in Q4 of 2025, that number jumped to 382 customers, a sign of increasing demand and impact.

Most customers are walk-ins. These results come from our three current locations: Salem, Woodburn, and Beaverton. Salem has had a connector available five days a week, while Woodburn and Beaverton each operated with a connector two days a week. Starting in January, Beaverton has expanded back to four days a week, and Woodburn will follow suit in the coming weeks.

The close of 2025 marked the end of our pilot phase. We recognize a strong ongoing need for this program and approved an expansion plan that will add 10 new locations starting in 2026 and continuing into 2027. These locations include Hermiston, Grants Pass, Redmond, Klamath Falls, Eugene, Ontario, Coos Bay, Roseburg, The Dalles, and Gresham. These sites were strategically selected based on factors like internet access, rural communities, and areas with aging populations—all places where we know support is critical. By adding these locations, most Oregonians will have a connector within one to two hours of where they live. Internally, we've added an Employment Services Specialist role to centralize supervision of our connectors. This will help streamline communication, improve consistency, and ensure quality service delivery statewide.

### **Ellie Johnson**

This slide shows the number of customers we have served since 2023. Over the life of the program, almost 220,000 working Oregonians have submitted claims. We have received 347,810 finalized applications and paid out over \$1.6 billion in benefits. 93% of all distinct applications have been approved, and only 6.9% of distinct applications have been denied. Denial decisions may be appealed.

This slide shows a breakdown of the type of leave applications we have received since 2023. Over the life of the program, we have received close to 350,000 finalized applications. Finalized applications have passed the ID-verification process. This includes a total of about 267,000 approved applications. Medical leave still accounts for the largest share of applications with 54%, followed by bonding and family leave. Safe leave accounts for roughly 1% of claims. Pre-placement leave is the newest leave type, and we have received 90 finalized applications for pre-placement leave thus far, accounting for about 0.5% of applications.

This slide shows the average number of days it takes us to process an application from when we receive it to when we make a decision. Processing times have fluctuated over the past 12 months.

Looking back at 2025, we received the least number of new applications during the month of February, with around 11,700 applications. In October we received our high for the year, with around 15,000 applications. After a dip in October, processing times increased slightly in November and December 2025. This may be partially due to an unexpected higher number of staff on leave during the holidays and can potentially also be attributed to a higher claims volume received in the fall. Even though our claims processing time frame across all teams was at about 27 days in December, we can share that our customer care team – which has the highest volume of claims - issues decisions on claims in about 22 days.

This slide shows data on how many calls we receive each month and how many are answered by our staff within 15, 30 and 60 minutes. Call volume since July has fluctuated, with a slight decrease in volume overall. Compared to September, our average speed of answer increased. In November it was about 37 minutes but decreased to 39 minutes for the month of December. In October and November, we also saw the percentage of calls answered in over an hour decrease to just 16% but saw an increase to 26% at the end of the year. I would like to highlight that Paid Leave has just hired 21 new public service representatives, who will be answering phones, so we are hoping that this will help reduce wait times and decrease call length. We are also rolling out a new on hold messaging service to improve the customer experience while they are on hold.

Since Q3 2025, we have approved three more grant applications (two for replacement workers and one for wage-related costs). As mentioned in our last meeting, assistance grant request denials are fairly high. This is generally due to misunderstanding of the grant qualifications. As an example they are not a small employer, or an employee is actually not out on leave.

This is an area we intend to look into more, and to reach out to other states who offer support for small businesses, to ensure that the grant is actually serving employers.

We received 219 applications from self-employed customers in Q4 2025. Since the end of Q3, we have approved an additional 37 applications and denied 194 applications. The processed applications also include some of the open applications that were pending at the end of Q3. The main denial reasons are individuals not showing enough income from self-employment in the prior year, or that documentation is not sufficient.

As of Q4 2025, there are just over 375,000 individuals or 16.7% of employees in Oregon who are covered by an equivalent plan. Roughly 1,900 large employers and 1,100 small employers in Oregon have equivalent plans. Compared to our last meeting in November, we saw an increase of 1.3 percentage points in the number of large employers with an equivalent plan, and another small decrease in the number of small employers with an equivalent plan.

We are carefully watching the income levels of folks we serve as well. At our November meeting, we identified that between Q2 and Q3 2025, the share of applicants in lower income brackets increased, compared to our prior review in August 2025, which covered applications through Q2. We are making a similar observation now. Looking at Oregonians who had a Paid Leave claim in all of 2025, we see an increase in representation of income brackets up to \$34,999 and a slight decrease in represented income brackets from \$35,000 upwards.

We also continue to monitor other demographics, such as geographical distribution, race and ethnicity, and gender identity. However, these data have remained stable over the last three quarters of 2025. We therefore will not go over these numbers in detail today but are happy to share the slides with you if you are interested.

### Questions

Q: Bonding leave can be covered by employer contributions without being taxed, right? That's why you think we'll have enough money to cover all the things besides medical leave. We aren't seeing any problem with running out of funds for medical leave, right?

A: Correct. We're not forecasting any issue covering those.

Q: What are the days of the week that Beaverton and Woodburn currently have running?

A: Currently Woodburn operates on Monday and Tuesday. Beaverton, we have someone there Monday through Thursday, with Friday being the only day we do not have a connector in the office.

Q: When you go to four days in Woodburn will that also be Monday to Thursday?

A: That is going to be Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. The connector did not have availability on Wednesday.

Q: When will that start?

A: We are just waiting on a security badge for the Chemeketa building. So as soon as we have that, that staff member will be ready to start.

Q: When would Gresham start?

A: Ideally, we would like to roll out by the end of quarter one or early quarter two. We are finalizing conversations with workforce operations to make sure that we have approval to go ahead and move forward in those two offices.

Q: Will this information be available on the Paid Leave Oregon website?

A: At this time, it isn't. We have trained schedulers that take customers through an assessment to assess the need for that in-person connector appointment because of the limited availability that we've had. That doesn't mean down the road, that is not a possibility. So, we can definitely look into that.

Q: With the 21 additional staff, you're adding FTE as opposed to replacing folks?

A: Yes. We brought on a round of new hires. They are currently still training, but there are 21 additional folks.

Q: Is there an increase to FTE hours allotted to answering the phone as part of the additional staff?

A: Yes. The staff who are onboarding are public service representatives and their focus is phones. They will also help out with web notices.

Q: What's going to be better about being on hold?

A: Soon we will have a new service that will play streams of music and we'll have more flexibility to record messages that will play between songs. For example, it's 1099 season and if something happened to the 1099s, we can get a message up so people do not have to wait on hold for an hour just to hear what's happening. It will help us answer some questions that people are calling about, so they don't have to wait. The idea is to not have them wait at all, but if they're going to wait, maybe it can be a little bit more helpful and pleasant. That will be rolling out in the next few months and we will have it available in all the languages that we offer on phones at Paid Leave.

Q: The languages availability was going to be my next question. So if you press 2 for Spanish, then you'll hear the announcements in Spanish while you're waiting?

A: Yes.

Q: You said that 93% of distinct applications have been approved but looking back at notes I remember a 30,000 delta. That seems like more than 7%. Am I remembering that wrong?

A: It could be coming from a few different numbers that we're looking at. There's approved applications, meaning finalized applications. These have gone through ID verification, and their claim is fully submitted. Then there is whether we are approving or denying their application and then there are times where no decision was ever made. It's discarded, someone cancels their application and some that might still be currently waiting on a decision. So, there are some that live in that middle number. If you notice I referenced 350,000 finalized applications, but if you look at the approved and denied, it doesn't total to that because there's that 3rd variation to those buckets of claims.

Q: If one fills out their entire application and submits it with all the paperwork that's required, then people are only being denied 7% of the time?

A: In these slides we are just talking about the claims that have been approved or denied. Some claims may be stuck because we don't have the proper documentation but those have not been approved or denied. These slides are not talking about those.