

Arkansans financially impacted by the coronavirus pandemic can now apply for aid through the federal Lost Wages Assistance Program (LWAP), as the state's total number of COVID-19 cases has surpassed 66,000.

The state added 294 new coronavirus cases, bringing the cumulative total to 66,021. The state also reported 5,154 testing results in the past 24 hours. The number of those hospitalized with COVID-19 is now 409, an addition of 10. Those on a ventilator also increased by 10 for a total of 84. Nine more Arkansans have died from COVID. The death toll is now 917.

Only three counties in the state added more than 20 cases. Cross county had the most with 30, which the Department of Health reports is due to an outbreak at a nursing home. Washington county added 29, while Pulaski county added 28.

Speaking during the daily coronavirus briefing, Commerce Secretary Mike Preston spoke on the \$300 qualified Arkansans can earn on a weekly basis from the Lost Wages Assistance Program, a program from the Federal Emergency Management Agency that President Donald Trump approved through an executive order.

“This is on a week by week basis now. So we've been approved for the week of August 1 and we'll work with our counterparts at the federal government going forward. As funds become available and are released to the state, we will be able to make those funds available. As we're required to put up a 25% match and we're using our traditional unemployment insurance payments to cover that 25% match,” Preston said.

This program follows the expiration of the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, which provided \$600 on a weekly basis. Preston said in mid-August that adding the 25% match in the form of an added \$100 to the new weekly payments would have exhausted the state's allotted CARES Act funds.

According to Preston, Arkansans are eligible if they receive a weekly unemployment payment of \$100 or more, though the self-certification that one's unemployment is due to the pandemic is required. Claimants should self-certify at the number (501) 907-2590 or through ARKNET.

Arkansans who received payments through the expired Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program are automatically eligible, with no need to self-certify.

For the roughly 7,500 Arkansans who do not earn at least \$100 in weekly unemployment payments, but still receive unemployment payments from the state, Preston said while they would not qualify under the FEMA program, the state is going to make some Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF funding available that will match \$300 a week FEMA is providing.

State data shows that in the time from August 30 through September 5, the growth rate of new COVID-19 cases in 18 to 24 year olds is over 16%, which is more than double any other age range and around triple the 25-44 age range.

During his daily briefing on the coronavirus pandemic Tuesday, Gov. Asa Hutchinson spoke on that higher percentage rate for that age group.

“Part of that is that hopefully that’s a very low level of hospitalizations, so we won’t see serious illnesses as a result of that we hope, but it also reflects a higher number in the 65 plus. And so this age group needs to be mindful that they can impact the 65 plus age group,” Hutchinson said.

According to the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville’s COVID dashboard, the university has a total of 923 COVID-19 cases, with 912 of them students. When asked about UA, Fayetteville’s response to the pandemic, Hutchinson said he and Health Secretary Dr. Jose Romero spoke with UA Fayetteville Chancellor Joseph Steinmetz this morning on the university’s practices

“We’re both satisfied that the university has a very good plan. They took aggressive steps early on whenever they saw the spike in cases among the students and we’re hopeful that that will result in a leveling off of those new cases,” Hutchinson said.

Last week, the state said there would be a delay from when cases showed up in college data to when they appeared in state numbers.