

# Continued unemployment claims rising as Phase I begins

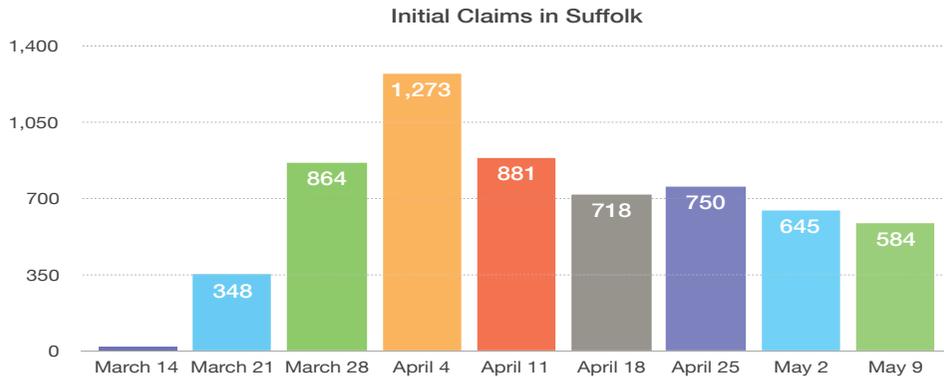
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STAFF WRITER

Even as continued unemployment claims continued to rise across the Western Tidewater region, initial unemployment claims mostly declined.

Virginia has been under a statewide order that has closed non-essential businesses since March 25, but that is set to be lifted Friday as the state enters Phase I of its reopening for all but Northern Virginia, Richmond and Accomack County on Virginia's Eastern Shore. Those localities will delay reopening by at least two weeks.

In Suffolk, 584 people filed initial claims for the week ending May 9, down from 645 the previous week, according to the Virginia Employment Commission. The city has seen 6,089 initial claims filed since March 14. Suffolk has 3,682 people with continued claims for the week ending May 9, up 331 from the previous week.

Initial claims in Isle of Wight and Southampton counties fell slightly, while in Franklin, initial claims



SOURCE: VIRGINIA EMPLOYMENT COMMISSION

went up from 81 to 83. Continued claims in those three areas rose by a combined 103 people — from 1,849 to 1,952.

Seasonally unadjusted initial claims were 52,139, down 7,492 from the previous week, while more than 95,000 people in Western Tidewater and South Hampton Roads filed initial unemployment claims through the week ending May 9.

“Not only are we observing a historic contraction in employment, we project the labor force in Hampton Roads is contracting,” Robert McNab, director of Old Dominion University’s Dragas Center for Economic Analysis, said in a news release. “The

gains of the last decade in jobs have been wiped out, leaving many workers disaffected and unwilling to participate in the current labor market. By the end of May, if current trends continue, we estimate that almost one in five workers in Hampton Roads will be unemployed or working at reduced hours.”

Statewide, initial claims filed from mid-March through the May 9 filing week were more than 16 percent of pre-pandemic, non-farm employment, according to state employment commission data. The Dragas Center projects the state’s unemployment rate to edge close to 15 percent by the end of May.

Preliminary figures from

the May 9 filing week indicate that the accommodation and food service sector — including hotels and restaurants — continued to see the highest percentage of initial claims for unemployment at 19 percent. That, according to the VEC, “reflects impacts of public health and safety measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic,” but is down from the 45 percent of initial claims in that sector from the week ending March 21.

“Though the 12.6 percent weekly decline indicates that the volume of initial claims has retreated from its recent peak, it may not return to pre-pandemic levels for some time,” the commission stated in a

news release.

Nationwide, there were 2.98 million seasonally adjusted initial unemployment claims for the week ending May 9, down 195,000 from the previous week. Initial claims nation-

wide have declined for the sixth straight week, according to the Department of Labor. Total initial claims have reached 36.5 million. Through May 2, the country’s unemployment rate is 15.7 percent.

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