

COVID-19 and Unemployment

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Unemployment can be scary and overwhelming, but you don't need to navigate it alone. Here are some things you should know when it comes to unemployment eligibility, benefits and taxes.

What is unemployment compensation? Unemployment compensation is a form of monetary assistance provided by the federal and state governments to people who are out of work. These benefits are mostly funded by taxes that are paid by employers at the federal and state levels.

Am I eligible for unemployment compensation? Generally, employees who are laid off or who lose their jobs through no fault of their own typically qualify for unemployment benefits. Taxpayers who want to receive unemployment compensation must apply for benefits through their state programs. The amount of compensation they receive depends on:

- the amount of time they worked
- their earnings
- the maximum benefit their state allows

How do I take advantage of government benefit programs? Every year, federal, state, and local governments distribute \$1.8 trillion in benefits. From money for food to health care plans, there are government benefit programs that can reduce your day-to-day expenses. Some of the money-saving benefits include:

- health insurance
- food assistance
- low cost gas and electric utilities
- low cost phone service
- low cost auto insurance
- unclaimed funds

What are the tax implications of unemployment? The two big things to consider are reporting the full amount of unemployment compensation you receive, and looking for new ways to give yourself a tax break.

Account for unemployment income: Typically, unemployment income – including the \$600 unemployment compensation that was available with the CARES Act (and \$300 available under subsequent legislation) – is taxable and should be included in your income for the year, especially if you have any other income. Some states also count unemployment benefits as taxable income. When it's time to file your taxes, you will receive Form 1099-G, which will show the amount of unemployment income you received. Form 1099-G will also show any federal taxes you had taken out of your unemployment pay.

Because unemployment income is taxable, one option is to have federal taxes taken out of your unemployment income so there are no surprises when it's time to file your taxes.

Another option is to adjust your withholdings. Once you are able to find a job, take your unemployment income into account when you are filling out a W-4 withholding certificate for your employer.

Unemployment benefits under the CARES Act are something new for the self-employed. If you are an independent contractor, side-gigger, or freelancer, keep in mind that unemployment income will be added to your net income from self-employment and will be taxable. When you get ready to pay your estimated quarterly taxes, you can also take your unemployment income into consideration, if you don't have federal taxes withheld from your unemployment.

New federal exclusion for tax year 2020: If your modified adjusted gross income (AGI) is less than \$150,000, the American Rescue Plan excludes up to \$10,200 of unemployment compensation paid in 2020 from income. If you're married, each spouse receiving unemployment compensation is eligible for the \$10,200 exclusion. Unemployment compensation over \$10,200 for each individual is still taxable and if your modified AGI is \$150,000 or more, you can't take the exclusion.

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