

Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

And Now the Rest of the Story... Florida Legislature Letting Hundreds of Thousands of Unemployed Workers LOSE Current Federal Extended Benefits

Tallahassee - Within minutes after the Florida House passed legislation concerning Florida's unemployment insurance system, the House Majority Office issued a press statement touting their chamber's passage of SB 1736; a bill they claim will help over 100,000 Floridians with 14 weeks of extended unemployment benefits. However, as with most issues at this late date in the legislative session, the devil here is in the details. While it is correct that the legislation does add 14-weeks of federally funded extended benefits, those benefits will **EXPIRE** on June 1st even though the federal government is widely expected to enact additional extensions of the program throughout the year. This means that during this historic recession hundreds of thousands of unemployed workers will lose their major lifeline this summer.

SB 1736 contains a date certain provision, one that forces the termination of the extended benefits program for Florida's families currently in the system. Worker advocates realized the problem and offered a simple amendment authorizing an automatic extension of the extended benefits program in Florida, if done so in Congress. Despite public claims by Republican leaders to address the oversight, the amendment was denied on the House floor.

Representative Kevin Rader, who offered the amendment, said, "By stating a specific date for participation in statute the Florida Legislature is jeopardizing our ability to participate in future extensions of unemployment benefits should they be granted by Congress when the Legislature is not in Session."

Some legislative staff have argued that there are constitutional issues with leaving the date open, that this in essence would grant too much authority to the federal government; but, Representative Richard Steinberg disagreed. He said, "That is absolutely an unfounded concern. This is a specific circumstance, tied to a very specific and narrow issue that requires Congressional action. It is continuation of a program that the State is currently participating in, it costs no state money and the Legislature would clearly be stating their intent to implement any extension of unemployment benefits that is 100% federally funded. They have already changed the date to comply with Federal extensions a number of times since last Session."

(more)

Following the vote, Representative Geraldine Thompson said, "It is hard to comprehend why this is proving to be such a difficult issue to resolve. Budget decisions are being made contingent upon Congressional action to extend the enhanced FMAP (Medicaid dollars) and that doesn't seem to be a problem, why is taking action to ensure that unemployed workers and their families are taken care of such a confounding problem?"

It is important to note that the benefits granted workers under the extended benefits program are 100% federally funded. These benefits do not negatively impact the state system and do not raise rates for Florida's businesses. These are tax dollars that Floridians pay and that should come back to our state to stimulate Florida's economy. These benefits are not part of the contentious modernization program discussed early on in the Legislative session. Twenty-three states have an "open" trigger while only three states have a "closed" trigger similar to the one enacted in SB 1736.

According to Arthur Rosenberg of Florida Legal Services, "Should we fail to enact this extended UC benefits provision, and Congress enacts another extension to the end of 2010, over 240,000 unemployed Floridians will not get federally funded benefits and Florida will be deprived of \$290 million."

There is still time for the Florida Legislature to act to correct this problem so that when Congress approves the next extension, Floridians will receive the benefits they desperately need. If the Legislature does not act now, there must be a special session later in the year. If not, the hundreds of thousands of Florida families currently struggling through the recession will lose critical funding that is helping to keep them in their homes and food on their children's plates.

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