

# The Providence Journal

## R.I. implements federal unemployment benefits bill

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CRANSTON — The state Department of Labor and Training Wednesday began implementing provisions of a bill on unemployment benefits that was passed by the U.S. Senate on Tuesday night and signed into law by President Obama.

Key provisions involving federal jobless benefits expired Sunday night. But the new law continues them through April 5, said Raymond A. Filippone, assistant director of the state labor agency who oversees unemployment programs.

The nearly 39,000 people who are collecting unemployment benefits through the agency will see no interruption in their weekly payments, said Filippone and agency spokeswoman Laura Hart.

For example, out-of-work Rhode Islanders who had been collecting under one tier of federal extended benefits will automatically move to the next tier without interruption (assuming that they remain eligible for benefits), Filippone said.

State information technology specialists made changes to the agency's computer systems so that there will be no disruption, Filippone said.

Because there was a gap between the time that one federal law expired and the other took effect, the agency will have to manually make adjustments for some people — but there should be no interruption in service as a result, and the process will not result in any additional backlogs or delays, Filippone said in an interview Wednesday at the agency's headquarters in Cranston.

The bill was signed into law by Mr. Obama Tuesday night, shortly after the Senate approved the measure, 78 to 19, according to a statement the White House issued Wednesday. Rhode Island's two senators, [Jack Reed](#) and [Sheldon Whitehouse](#), voted in favor.

Kate Brewster, executive director of the Poverty Institute in Providence, which analyzes tax and budget policies on behalf of low-income people, said Wednesday, "It's a very good step for those who continue to suffer the effects of the recession, and it's also good because it's money that will continue to flow into the [Rhode Island] economy. It's a double bang for the buck."

The state labor agency is distributing about \$17.1 million in state and federal unemployment benefits each week, according to agency figures as of Feb. 24.

The bill's fate had been closely watched in Rhode Island, which has an unemployment rate of 12.9 percent, third-highest in the nation behind Michigan and Nevada.

Without the measure, about 2,000 out-of-work Rhode Islanders would have run out of benefits altogether between now and July, and thousands of other laid-off workers would not have been able to collect benefits for as long as they had planned.

The new law also extends a subsidy to help the unemployed pay for employer-sponsored group health insurance under terms of the federal COBRA law.

Reed and Whitehouse said in a statement Tuesday night that they favor extending, through the end of this year, federal unemployment benefits and the COBRA health insurance subsidy.

“We need a longer extension that will directly boost our economy and allow Rhode Islanders hit hardest by the recession to feed their families and keep their health insurance while they look for a job,” Reed said. “Extending unemployment insurance and COBRA benefits is one of the most cost-effective, direct ways to aid our economic recovery,” he added.

Whitehouse said, “Much more needs to be done to provide for a longer extension of these critical safety-net programs and to create jobs and revitalize our economy.”

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