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Without extension, thousands in R.I. could lose jobless benefits June 2

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NARRAGANSETT — Thousands of unemployed Rhode Islanders will run out of federal jobless benefits starting next week unless Congress acts to extend the programs.

The programs were last extended in early April, but only until June 2. Sen. [Jack Reed](#), D-R.I., said Monday, “If we don’t do anything [by] next week,” the programs will expire.

Legislators are scheduled to leave Friday for a week-long Memorial Day recess, but, “we’re going to stay in [Washington] as long as it takes to get this done,” Reed vowed in an interview Monday in Narragansett.

The issue is being closely watched in Rhode Island, which has the nation’s fourth-highest unemployment rate (after Michigan, Nevada and California), according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

About 31,800 out-of-work Rhode Islanders are collecting some type of unemployment benefit through the state Department of Labor and Training, said Raymond A. Filippone, the agency’s assistant director who oversees unemployment programs. The agency is distributing about \$15 million in jobless benefits each week — including \$6.7 million in federal extended benefits, he said.

Kate Brewster, executive director of the Poverty Institute, of Providence, a social policy think tank, said, “Given that our unemployment rate is still fourth-highest in the nation, at 12.5 percent, it’s clear that the Ocean State is still not out of the woods, and extended relief is needed now as it has been throughout the recession.”

If the federal benefit programs expire, out-of-work Rhode Islanders would be affected in a number of ways, Filippone said. For example:

- A laid-off worker would generally be able to collect for a maximum of 46 weeks, compared with the 99-week limit now.
- People who are newly laid off would not receive the extra \$25-a-week benefit that was implemented as part of a federal economic-stimulus law last year (though people currently receiving the additional amount would generally continue collecting it).

•Someone now collecting under a federal tier of benefits would not be allowed to move to the next federal tier. (Most would be able to collect under a state extended benefits program, but some might not be eligible.)

Overall, about 2,000 unemployed Rhode Islanders would be affected in June alone if the federal benefit programs expire, Filippone said. (The number would grow in future months.) Nationwide, up to 1.2 million jobless workers would be affected in June, according to the National Employment Law Project, a New York-based group that focuses on workplace policy issues.

People drawing jobless benefits have been on a roller-coaster ride in recent months. In some cases, federal benefit programs have been allowed to expire, then renewed again; in other cases, Congress has waited to the last minute to extend them. But legislation now under consideration (H.R. 4213) would extend federal jobless benefit programs through the end of this year.

The state labor agency is reviewing its records to determine exactly how many people would be affected should the federal benefit programs expire next week, Filippone said.

The agency plans to send out notices, on a weekly basis, to those affected, but will wait until at least next week before distribution, he said.

The legislation would also extend through Dec. 31 a subsidy to help the unemployed obtain employer-sponsored health insurance under federal COBRA law.

It would also extend through Dec. 31 favorable rules that applied for 2009 for claiming a loss for property damaged in a federally declared disaster area.

This provision would aid those who suffered losses in Rhode Island's floods.

BY THE NUMBERSTax breaks

Legislation to extend certain federal jobless benefit programs through Dec. 31 would also extend some tax breaks that have benefited many Rhode Islanders:

17,491

Number of Rhode Islanders

claiming deduction for college tuition and fees16,761

Rhode Islanders claiming

deduction for schoolteacher out-of-pocket expenses16,228

Rhode Islanders claiming itemized deduction for state sales taxes

Source: House Ways and Means

Committee, based on December 2009 IRS figures

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