

The Providence Journal

For those out of work in R.I., a sense of relief

Wednesday, July 21, 2010

By Neil Downing

Journal Staff Writer

CRANSTON — Congress is poised to approve legislation that would restore unemployment benefits for hundreds of out-of-work Rhode Islanders — and extend benefits for thousands of others.

Congress had allowed the programs to lapse in early June, imperiling federal jobless benefits for people who have been laid off amid one of the deepest and longest economic downturns since the Great Depression.

But the Senate broke a logjam through a procedural vote on Tuesday, clearing the way for the bill to be approved by both chambers and sent to President Obama for his signature, possibly later this week. Mr. Obama has said he supports the measure.

Assuming that the measure is enacted, payments will soon start flowing again to about 300 unemployed Rhode Islanders who had run out of jobless benefits altogether since early June as a direct result of the lapse, said Sandra M. Powell, director of the state Department of Labor and Training.

The state labor agency will begin contacting them — first by phone, then by mail if necessary — once the measure is signed; they could begin receiving benefits within five business days following enactment, said Raymond A. Filippone, the state labor agency's assistant director who oversees unemployment programs.

Another aspect of the lapse reduced the maximum number of weeks that an unemployed person could collect benefits. Before the lapse, the maximum was 99 weeks. After the lapse, the maximum dropped to 46 weeks. As a result, between 7,000 and 8,000 out-of-work Rhode Islanders since early June, and another 12,000 or so between now and late November, faced losing out on up to 53 weeks of benefits, said Filippone and agency spokeswoman Laura Hart.

The bill “will provide people more weeks of benefits than they would otherwise have been eligible” for, Powell said. And they will not have to take any additional steps: “We are going to work to transition them seamlessly,” automatically, Powell said.

U.S. Sen. [Jack Reed](#), D-R.I., said in a telephone interview Tuesday night that, overall, “What we’re essentially doing is ... ensuring there’ll be no lack of benefits.” The bill restores federal

jobless benefit programs retroactively to early June, and extends them through Nov. 30. (State jobless benefit programs continue to operate and were not interrupted as a result of the lapse.)

U.S. Sen. [Sheldon Whitehouse](#), D-R.I., said in a statement, “This extension will boost our economy as these dollars quickly flow into local businesses, and families out of work will know that they can put food on the table while our economy struggles to recover.”

The restoration of benefits will help the unemployed “to be able to continue their job search in this very difficult economy,” Powell said. In Rhode Island, where the unemployment rate is 12 percent, jobless benefits average about \$365 a week.

Kate Brewster, executive director of the Poverty Institute, of Providence, a social policy think tank, said that restoration of the federal benefit programs is “welcome news, not only for the thousands of Rhode Islanders who are about to lose their economic lifeline, but also for the state’s economy” because benefits that the unemployed receive is “invested right back into Rhode Island,” she said.

Brian Murphy, 53, of East Providence, was laid off in 2008 from his job as a clerk for a law firm in Providence, and has been unable to find work since. In response to Tuesday’s Senate action, Murphy said, “It’s great to see people finally get help. Better late than never.”

Murphy wants benefits to be extended beyond the 99-week limit. Since his benefits ran out in March 2010, “I’m living on my bank account, which is dwindling daily,” he said.

Rhode Island’s official jobless rate, at 12 percent, is fourth-highest in the nation, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics said Tuesday. About 69,000 residents are officially counted as unemployed. Only about half of them collect jobless benefits; the others either do not qualify or have exhausted benefits, Filippone said.

ndowning@projo.com