

Group pushing to further extend unemployment benefits

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Nearly 50,000 New Jerseyans could receive their last checks by the end of the year

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With job losses continuing, almost 1.5 million Americans, including more than 47,000 in New Jersey, could exhaust their unemployment benefits by the end of the year.

Of those, about 500,000 unemployed workers will receive their last standard benefit checks by the end of September, according to an analysis by the National Employment Law Project, a New York-based advocacy group.

Many qualifying workers already have seen their benefits extended to 79 weeks, the longest period since the federal unemployment insurance program was created in 1935.

Job losses appear to be slowing in some areas and sectors of the economy. Nationwide, the average monthly job loss in May through July was about half that seen in November through April, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Non-farm employers cut about 247,000 jobs last month, down from more than 400,000 in June, according to the BLS.

But the agency reported the number of long-term unemployed, those out of work for 27 weeks or more, jumped by 584,000 to 5 million. Another 796,000 Americans are not counted as unemployed but as "discouraged workers," because they have given up looking for work, according to the BLS.

"Long-term unemployment reached epic proportions in July," said Christine Owens, the NELP executive director.

Her group praised previous steps taken by Congress and the Obama Administration, citing a report by chief economist Mark Zandi of Moody's Economy.com that federal stimulus aid saved 500,000 jobs in the second quarter.

Zandi's reports are available here.

But Owens said the persistent unemployment figures show the need for further extensions. It seeks a minimum of 10 more weeks of checks for workers in all states, rising to 20 more weeks in those with unemployment rates surpassing 11 percent.

Congress is expected to consider legislation on the issue later this year. Action could help New Jersey, which unemployment rose to 9.3 percent in July, its highest figure in 32 years.

Over a three-month period, New Jersey averaged 8.8 percent unemployment, near the middle of the pack among the states, District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands, according to the NELP.

The group's state-by-state projections are available here in PDF format.

The demand for benefits has strained New Jersey's unemployment compensation fund. Although supported by payroll taxes, the fund suffered periodic raids by Republican and Democratic administrations alike before Gov. Jon Corzine took office.

At a press conference at Richard Stockton College, a Mays Landing woman, Zona Johnson, described her experiences looking for work since she was laid off last year. Both Johnson's health insurance and her unemployment benefits are set to expire soon.

"You look over your bills, and you worry," she told the Press of Atlantic City.

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