



Job training in crossfire of deficit battles

By [Dan Chapman](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

4:55 a.m. Friday, March 4, 2011

Carol Mullins is all for putting the nation's fiscal house in order. But something else tops the Tyrone widow's Washington wish list.

A job.

Mullins, jobless since June 2010, is one of the faces behind Georgia's record unemployment rate. The state Labor Department reported Thursday that 10.4 percent of job-seeking Georgians couldn't find work in January, unchanged from December and close to the rate a year earlier. The economic recovery seems to sail on by the 485,000 unemployed Georgians.

Mullins hopes her fortunes turn with the help of a federal job-training program that proponents say leads to full-time work for three of every four participants. She is wrapping up five months of computer training. IT is one of the state's hottest growth industries.

Congress, though, is considering killing the \$3.6 billion job training and assistance program. Georgia received \$65.2 million in Workforce Investment Act (WIA) money last year, along with \$88.3 million in federal stimulus money for job training. The labor department says the schooling helped thousands of Georgians get back to work.

"The people in Washington who are making these decisions have no idea what's going on," said Mullins, a fifty-something former special ed teacher in Fayette County. "I really don't think they care."

U.S. Rep. Phil Gingrey, a Republican from Marietta who voted to end the program in the House budget bill, empathizes, though he doubts the job-creation claims of WIA proponents.

"Spending on largely ineffective programs -- although well intentioned -- is a detriment to fostering real job growth," he said in a statement Thursday. "To create employment we need to stimulate the economy, and to stimulate the economy we need to cut spending and reduce the deficit,"

Unemployment in Georgia has topped the nation's rate, currently at 9 percent, for the last 40 months despite a slew of economic indicators pointing toward recovery.

Labor and business officials tout WIA as a way to get jobless Georgians off the unemployed rolls. From July 2009 through June 2010, 27,398 Georgians enrolled in WIA training programs, the Labor Department says. Seven of 10 found work within three months of their training and 83 percent of those workers remained employed for an additional six months.

“At a time when we’re seeing the highest unemployment rates in years, any resource that helps people get back to work, and get our economy back on track, is essential,” said Andrea Harper, an assistant Labor Department commissioner.

President Obama’s proposed fiscal 2012 budget cuts 5 percent from the U.S. Labor Department’s budget but maintains WIA funding. The House budget calls for zeroing-out all WIA money. The Senate has yet to weigh in. Compromise, perhaps before the training money runs out in July, is possible.

Roughly 3,000 “one-stop career centers” across the country, including seven offices run by the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), could close without WIA extension. Teenagers, veterans, the long-term unemployed and other job-seekers frequent the centers to get help with resumes, career counseling, computer assistance and more.

The ARC spent \$8.9 million of Georgia’s \$65 million, and some of that went to re-train 2,300 people at centers in Clayton, Cherokee, Douglas, Fayette, Gwinnett, Henry and Rockdale counties. Students taking computer programming, medical billing, accounting, welding or truck driving are eligible for up to \$5,000 a year.

Mullins hopes her daily Microsoft computer lessons pay off. She’s desperate. Mullins was laid off last summer after five years with Fayette County schools, preceded by 27 years at Delta Air Lines. She filed bankruptcy and lost her Peachtree City home. She lives in a duplex with a roommate, but the lease runs out this spring. She fears homelessness is next.

Hundreds of resumes peppered with the occasional job interview have turned up nothing. Target and Sam’s Club wouldn’t hire Mullins, a magna cum laude graduate from the University of Cincinnati. Some Delta retirement income and \$277 weekly in unemployment pay keep her afloat.

“I have nothing anymore. I can’t sleep. I shake all the time,” Mullins said slowly. “I don’t know what I’m going to do. I’m tired, so tired, of being in this situation. I keep looking at people in jobs and saying, ‘I can do that. I’m intelligent. I have a degree.’”

Rep. Gingrey and other conservatives say retraining is an unnecessary and unaffordable role for the federal government.

“We’ve got huge deficits, ballooning debt and no sign that the folks in Washington will get these things under control,” said Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst for the libertarian Cato Institute. “And the private sector has a natural incentive to train workers. It’s simply not a federal function.”

DeHaven cites a January report by the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office (GAO) that chronicles “some duplication” with the retraining programs. During the 2009 fiscal year, nine federal agencies spent \$18 billion administering 47 training programs. The watchdog agency added that “little is known about the effectiveness of the employment and training programs.”

“This high price and lack of results is an unacceptable use of the tax dollars paid by hard-working Americans,” Gingrey said.

Still, GAO said the programs “play an important role in helping job seekers obtain employment.”

-- Janel Davis contributed to this report

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