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JOBLESSNESS: Nevada lawmakers call for new level of jobless benefits

Titus, Berkley support 13 or 26 more weeks of aid

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STEPHENS WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON -- The safety net under people who are having trouble finding jobs even after being out of work for close to two years should be extended for an additional 13 or 26 weeks, according to two Southern Nevada lawmakers.

As the recession persists, more people are exhausting the maximum 99 weeks of unemployment benefits allowed by current law. The Department of Labor estimates 1.4 million people have been out of work that long.

The federal agency does not keep figures by state, and the state Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation, which handles jobless claims, could not produce an estimate Wednesday of the number of Nevadans who have hit the limit after four tiers of extensions.

But Rep. Dina Titus, D-Nev., said they are making themselves known in her district, the epicenter of the jobs and foreclosure crises in the state with the highest U.S. unemployment rate at 14 percent.

"We get a lot of calls on that," Titus said.

She supports a proposal to create a Tier 5 of jobless benefits as something "that is certainly worth fighting for."

Rep. Shelley Berkley, D-Nev., said she would back an additional 13 or 26 weeks of jobless payments in a new tier.

"Given the situation in the state of Nevada, I think it is going to be the difference between surviving and not for many Nevada families," Berkley said. "Perhaps we can do something for the hardest hit."

Titus suggested that aid to the long-term unemployed might be distributed like the Obama administration's \$1.5 billion "hardest hit fund" for troubled homeowners. That plan targets five states -- Nevada, Florida, Michigan, Arizona and California -- for foreclosure prevention funding.

While the number of long-term jobless might be hard to come by, Al Gualtier of Henderson says he is among the "99ers."

Gualtier, 59, worked as a maintenance engineer for 15 years at the Luxor before he was let go in a

dispute with a supervisor in April 2008. He was unable to be hired at other MGM Mirage resorts and said he could not find other work.

Gualtier's weekly benefits of \$358 expired in May, although he does get some retirement pay. He said he and his wife, Cindy, who he said cannot work because of a disability, "are down to the bare minimum."

"I've been going around to every place I can looking for work," he said. "There are a lot of other people out there who are like me."

He said he could use an additional 13 to 26 weeks of unemployment benefits.

There is a movement to raise awareness of the long-term unemployed. In a letter this week to President Barack Obama, employment activists including Cindy Paoletti, who was laid off by J.P. Morgan Chase in December 2007, recommended he enact a means-tested program of emergency cash aid "to help us keep our homes, maintain our health and keep our dignity."

"Until sufficient jobs are created, whether private or public sector, the number of long-term jobless Americans who have exhausted their unemployment compensation will soar," according to the letter, posted online by Donalee King, a Southern California blogger out of work since 2007.

There is no evident movement on Capitol Hill to add more weeks.

Indeed, lawmakers have struggled to extend the unemployment insurance program already in place.

Many Republicans want the \$33.9 billion cost of providing extended benefits through November to be offset with budget cuts elsewhere, a demand resisted by Democrats who contend it should be considered emergency spending.

Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., believes Congress needs to find ways to pay for current benefit extensions and also ways "to create real jobs," according to spokeswoman Jennifer Cooper. "Until that happens, creating new tiers of benefits will not solve the problem."

There also are those who say the safety net should have its limits, that it provides a disincentive to work.

"Unemployment insurance was intended as temporary relief for the jobless," Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, writes on the organization's website. Repeated extensions "may be bad for workers in the here and now."

"It is simple human nature that people are a little less motivated as long as a check is coming in," Tanner says.

When it comes to further extensions, he says, "One has to ask: Is there a limit? Unemployment insurance cannot be a guaranteed wage for life. Congress risks turning unemployment into just another welfare program -- with a correspondingly low standard of living for its recipients."

Berkley said that argument sounds "as if people enjoy living on the brink. These are not people who are unaccustomed to work."

"I can tell you without fear of contradiction you cannot get laid off at one (Las Vegas) hotel where there is no business and high unemployment and walk across the street to another hotel and expect to get a job, because they are laying people off as well," she said.

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