

The Post and Courier

Don't deny aid to S.C. jobless

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Tens of thousands of South Carolina's unemployed residents who are losing jobless benefits need prompt action to assure that those benefits are extended. The Legislature should meet in a special session unless there's a quicker way to fix the problem.

Congress made funding available for extended benefits in the stimulus package, and only minor legislative action was required last session to ensure that the payments would be forthcoming.

Federal officials made the information about extended benefits available to the S.C. Employment Security Commission, which unbelievably dropped the ball.

The Appleseed Legal Justice Center, a Columbia-based advocacy group, notified legislators about the need to take action. Unfortunately, the message didn't register.

As a result, South Carolina, which has one of the nation's highest unemployment rates, isn't eligible for the payments that would pay the rent and keep food on the table for tens of thousands of jobless residents.

To obtain the benefits, those who are unemployed would have to meet the same standards for regular payments. Mainly, they have to be actively seeking employment.

More than 120,000 jobless South Carolinians could be affected. The potential funding loss is estimated at \$60 million.

The problem, brought to light in Katy Stech's report in Friday's Post and Courier, has the attention of key legislators. House Speaker Bobby Harrell and Senate President Pro Tempore Glenn McConnell say they are trying to determine how the omission can be quickly resolved. Sen. McConnell says that if "an appropriate legislative vehicle" can be found on which to attach the requisite bill, a special session of a day might be sufficient.

Rep. Harrell, meanwhile, says the failure of the Employment Security Commission to notify the Legislature of the pending deadline for action confirms that an overhaul of the agency is overdue.

"They are totally inept, and this is a prime example," Rep. Harrell says. "This screams for the need of the Employment Security Commission to be reformed from top to bottom."

Gov. Mark Sanford made that point late last year, citing shortcomings in agency operations, disbursement of unemployment funds and lack of cooperation with the Commerce Department on economic development.

Momentum to put the agency in the Cabinet was unfortunately lost in the squabble between the

governor and the Legislature, when Mr. Sanford opposed accepting stimulus money for schools, colleges and law enforcement.

The national recession is easing, and the state has seen some impressive economic development initiatives bear fruit recently. But the jobless rate remains high, even in comparatively prosperous counties.

It is essential that the state secure additional benefits for the remainder of the year.

Meanwhile, there's no better evidence of the necessity to revamp the Employment Security Commission. Clearly, it can't be counted on to do its job.

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