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SC lawmakers to return Oct. 27 to deal with glitch that left 7,000 without unemployment cash

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Associated Press

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COLUMBIA, S.C. — South Carolina lawmakers said Monday they will return to the Capitol next week to ensure thousands of state residents receive extended unemployment benefits.

House Speaker Bobby Harrell and Senate President Pro Tem Glenn McConnell, both Charleston Republicans, agreed to the extraordinary move and criticized the state Employment Security Commission for failing to get the Legislature involved in heading off a problem that this week made 6,700 of the state's unemployed ineligible for extended benefits.

"The General Assembly will take quick action to fix this oversight by the ESC to ensure that unemployed South Carolinians will not suffer further by being denied this federal benefit," Harrell and McConnell said in a joint statement.

"It is unfortunate that the Legislature must return to fix this problem, this oversight was completely avoidable" and shows the need to overhaul how the commission operates.

Even before the new wave of workers lost benefits, the state had more than 113,000 people who had exhausted all state and federal regular and extended benefits in the midst of an 11.5 percent unemployment rate, which is the nation's sixth highest.

The federal government made stimulus money available for 20 weeks of extended benefits.

To get the final seven weeks, states had to tie emergency jobless relief to the unemployment rate. But South Carolina's emergency payments are instead tied to people receiving jobless checks. Because legislators didn't temporarily change that law, the extra benefits weren't available. South Carolina was the only state that needed to make the change that didn't, according to the National Employment Law Project in New York.

Sue Berkowitz, executive director of the low-income advocacy group South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center, said the Legislature's return to deal with the problem will be a big help.

The unemployment checks mean "the difference between paying the rent and mortgage and keeping the lights

on. It will have a huge impact on their lives," Berkowitz said.

Legislators had no plans to return to Columbia before their regular two-year assembly resumes in January but were discussing the possibility of an early return to begin impeachment proceedings against Gov. Mark Sanford.


The Republican governor is dealing with an ethics investigation regarding his travel and campaign finance practices and legislators also say he should be impeached for abandoning the state for five days to meet his lover in Argentina.

McConnell had said Friday he'd favor bringing the Legislature back into session if it would only deal with the issue of unemployment benefits and the topic could be handled under the narrow rules that let the lawmakers reconvene before January.

And a quick, one-day return means legislators won't be in town when the State Ethics Commission releases a report that would fuel more impeachment discussion.

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