

Extend emergency unemployment insurance benefits now

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Thursday, 09 January 2014 15:32



In the last few days of this year, most Americans are wrapping up their holiday celebrations and pondering the promise of 2014. But millions of Americans who have been struggling the longest to find work in our slowly recovering economy are now facing deep uncertainty and despair instead of a Happy New Year. The budget deal Congress finally reached in December did not extend emergency unemployment insurance benefits for the long-term unemployed and 1.3 million struggling jobseekers are losing those desperately needed survival benefits on December 28. Unless Congress acts immediately in the new year to extend these benefits, huge numbers of struggling jobseekers will be affected: the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates almost five million jobless workers will lose benefits over the next twelve months. The President's Council of Economic Advisors estimates that if Congress lets emergency unemployment insurance expire, it will cost the economy 240,000 jobs and impact families with 3.6 million children by the end of 2014.

Federal emergency unemployment insurance benefits were designed to be a critical safety net for unemployed workers who have exhausted regular state unemployment insurance payments. During the recent recession the number of unemployed workers unable to find new jobs before their regular benefits ran out has soared. Although the Emergency Unemployment Compensation program had already started phasing down as the labor market improved, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities points out it's still far too soon to let the program expire completely since almost two-fifths -- 4.1 million of the 10.9 million unemployed — are long-term unemployed who have been looking for work for 27 weeks or longer. Although the overall unemployment rate went down in November, the proportion of long-term unemployed workers rose from 36.9 percent to 37.3, double the rate in 2007 before the recession hit. This is the first time Congress has let long-term unemployment insurance benefits expire when the long-term jobless were more than 1.3 percent of the labor force. Today 2.6 percent of the labor force is long-term unemployed in our still sluggish economy.

New jobs are desperately needed in this "post-recession" economy. One recent example in the nation's capital paints the picture. Walmart was opening two new stores and offering 600 jobs for which 23,000 jobseekers applied. People desperately want to work! Getting a job at Walmart has become as competitive as getting into Harvard. We don't know how many of those 23,000 jobseekers were long-term unemployed workers. What we do know is that employers tend to

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discriminate against those workers and hire people who want to change jobs or have only been unemployed for a short time first. Congress must act to support the millions of Americans and their children who have been tossed around in our stormy economic seas by extending emergency unemployment insurance and focus on creating more jobs.

All of us at the Children's Defense Fund were disappointed when budget negotiators and Congress failed in this budget deal to ask the richest Americans and corporations to pay their fair share or close even the smallest and most egregious tax loopholes that could fund desperately needed investments in children and poor families and strengthen the American economy. Helping workers without jobs who are seeking employment should be an obvious lifeline during periods of economic downturn and recovery. In 2012, 2.5 million people escaped poverty through unemployment compensation including 600,000 children. Many families who lose unemployment insurance benefits, especially long-term jobless workers, will face poverty again. They may have to rely on other government supports like the nearly-disappeared Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) which Congress cut in November and the House of Representatives is threatening to slash again by \$40 billion as part of the farm bill. Allowing emergency unemployment insurance benefits to expire on top of cuts to SNAP and other programs is cruel and unnecessary and asks sacrifices from those least able to bear it.

Please ask your Senators and Representatives to act now to extend emergency unemployment insurance benefits as soon as they return in January to assist those who need help most in this jobless recovery.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.