

FEBRUARY 14, 2002

SCHAKOWSKY BLAMES REPUBLICANS FOR DELAYING HELP TO WORKERS

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Today, we had the opportunity to follow the lead of the Senate by passing a 13- week extension for Americans who have been unable to find work but whose unemployment benefits have run out. I have received many, many letters from constituents who are concerned about losing their homes, paying for their health bills and buying food for their children. Today, we had the opportunity to help them by passing the Senate provision and sending it to the President's desk. Instead, the Republican leadership chose to play politics with the lives of unemployed persons and their families, once again putting forth a bill that they know cannot be enacted into law.

In the last quarter of 2001, nearly 860,000 unemployed men and women exhausted their unemployment benefits. In December alone unemployment benefits ran out for 300,000 workers. In my state of Illinois, 42,299 workers exhausted their benefits in the last three months of last year - an increase of 88 percent from the previous year. Faced with serious fiscal pressures, no state has stepped forward to extend assistance as they have in the past. Hundreds of thousands of Americans are now struggling to pay their bills as they look for work in the middle of a recession.

I believe that we need a real economic stimulus plan and that we can do a great deal more than we're doing to create jobs and prevent additional layoffs. We should be providing assistance to states, funding the construction and repair of housing and schools, expanding transportation options, and investing in clean water projects. We should be assisting laid-off workers and their families obtain affordable health coverage through COBRA and Medicaid.

My colleagues on the other side of the aisle don't agree with those job stimulus proposals. They would rather give money to the wealthy and mega-corporations than invest in targeted and proven job creation initiatives. They would rather provide unemployed men and women with an insufficient tax voucher than guarantee health coverage through Medicaid.

We disagree on those questions and it will take time to resolve them. In the meantime, we should take a simple action today. We should pass a 13-week benefits extension that will provide immediate relief to over one million workers. We could take that step. Sadly for this institution and tragically for those workers, the House leadership has decided it would rather make a political point than make a difference in people's lives.