

Extend Jobless Benefits, Illinois Democrats Urge

By T. Shawn Taylor - Chicago Tribune

April 20, 2004

Saying Republicans are too embarrassed to admit their economic policies have failed, a group of Illinois Democrats on Monday called on President Bush to support a third extension of federal jobless benefits.

At a news conference at a Loop federal building, Sen. Dick Durbin, U.S. Reps. Danny Davis, Rahm Emanuel, Bobby Rush and Jan Schakowsky and state Rep. Kenneth Dunkin (D-Chicago) sent a strong message that the extension is not a dead issue, despite the creation of 308,000 jobs last month.

"We are recommitting ourselves to try to convince Bush and leaders of the House and Senate" to support the extension, Davis said. "It's a good political decision to make. Mr. President, understand what the American people need."

The Democrats downplayed March's job growth and said an extension would stimulate the state's economy by up to \$602 million.

"You don't develop economic strategy based on one month's report," Emanuel said. "There's nothing to be gleeful about."

But they acknowledged passing an extension is less likely since the March report.

"I think the chances are slim. Republicans don't see it as a priority. An extension would say the employment picture in this nation is not improving," Rush said.

On Monday, the lawmakers, accompanied by three jobless workers, contended the job situation is worse now than when the first 13-week extension was approved by Congress in March 2002. The number of long-term jobless--those unemployed six months or more--have reached historic highs of more than 2 million, and an increasing number of people have given up looking for work, they said.

They also released a study showing the local impact of the administration's failure to support the extension. An estimated 52,800 Illinois workers--35,410 in metropolitan Chicago--have exhausted their regular benefits in the three months since the extended program expired in December.

By June, those numbers will increase to 91,928 statewide and 61,600 in metro Chicago, according to the study. Unemployment statewide is 6 percent; in Chicago, the rate is 6.8 percent.

The prior extensions were passed by Congress at the urging of Bush, who has signaled no support for extending the program a third time.

The five lawmakers talked about the hardships on people like Robert Ostrow, 42, of Niles, an Army veteran and former account executive for a cellular phone company who recently had to cancel his wireless phone service because he can no longer afford it.

Ostrow, who has been getting \$1,400 a month in unemployment benefits, said he and his two sons, ages 9 and 10, have \$3.10 left after bills. He will receive his last state benefits check this week.

"I was told I could apply for food stamps. I still can't believe that answer," Ostrow said. "I'm down to zero."

Ben Turner, 52, a repair technician from Chicago, exhausted his state benefits at the end of February. He said he pays \$700 a month for medication.

"I'm wondering how President Bush can project a picture of economic recovery when there are thousands in economic limbo," Turner said. "I have to make a choice between eating and medicating myself."

In February, the House approved a measure extending the benefits program, but it was mostly symbolic because Republican leaders would not permit a vote releasing the funds.

There is an estimated \$15 billion in the federal unemployment benefits trust fund, Durbin noted. He said the Republicans' motivation to let the program end is clear.

"It's an election year," he said. "Republicans are afraid to acknowledge this is a jobless recovery."