

# Long-term unemployed in Washington State to start losing benefits next week

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As a result of legislation signed by President Obama after a deal with Congressional Republicans last month, unemployed people in the state of Washington will see their long-term unemployment benefits reduced from 99 weeks to 73 weeks.

When federal extended benefits end on April 21, Employment Security officials estimate that approximately 12,500 people in the state of Washington will immediately lose their benefits. More than 11,000 more will exhaust their benefits in the following eight weeks, and 40,000 will run out in the next six months.

An end to extended benefits has been justified by the fact that official unemployment in the state fell to 8.2 percent in February. However, according to the unemployment map from Indicators Northwest, only 8 of 39 counties had an unemployment rate of 8.3 percent or less in January.

Many areas in Washington are still experiencing rates of 9 percent or higher. Longview, for example, had a rate of 11.8 percent for February, the last month for which BLS statistics are available. Unemployment in the Kennewick-Pasco-Richland area actually rose to 10.1 percent from January's 9.8 percent. Yakima unemployment stands at 11.9 percent, up from 11.8 percent in January, and Pacific county is at 12.2 percent. Those who have given up looking for work are not even counted in these figures.

The supposed "economic recovery" comes as Washington experienced the third-highest number of March layoffs in the country. Microsoft, a major employer in King county, recently announced hundreds of layoffs in its marketing department, most of which would be in Redmond. Snokist Growers of Yakima announced late last year that they would lay off more than 600 full and part time workers in February.

State employees have also been hit by layoffs, and more are expected in the summer.

Funding for job centers has dried up, with Seattle area centers able to aid less than five percent of those who applied last year.

Though details of the recently-passed state budget proposal have not been released, and Democratic Governor Christine Gregoire can still veto parts of it, it calls for some \$300 million in cuts—primarily in the social services. The proposal includes cuts to pensions for future retirees, and \$177 million in cuts to the Department of Social and Health Services. It is likely that further cuts will be made, given that the proposal leaves only \$320 million in reserves, and a large part of the balancing act relies on a delayed redistribution of \$238 million in state sales taxes.

A tax on roll-your-own cigarette machines has been advanced to continue the funding of state food assistance programs. The legislature estimated that this could raise \$12 million dollars for the vital programs. The regressive "sin tax" scheme does not guarantee the funds, and the budget does not account for those thousands who will be losing their benefits and be thrown into destitution.

Changes are also proposed for the pensions of state workers hired starting in May 2013, which would penalize early retirement.

Much has been made by Governor Gregoire and the state legislators about the fact that K-12 education will not be cut. However, the legislature did repeal voter-approved Initiative 728 which called for reducing class sizes. Education has been a major issue in all of the legislative sessions, both regular and the three supplemental budget sessions called by Gregoire.

The education budget only dodged further cuts when the state Supreme Court found Washington in violation

of the state's Constitution, which mandates that "basic education" be fully funded. The ruling came immediately before a special legislative session in January and touched off a push for charter schools, which have been voted down three times at the ballot box.

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