

House approves additional jobless benefits

By ANDREW TAYLOR (AP) – 21 hours ago

WASHINGTON — Congress has approved legislation to restore unemployment benefits to people who have been out of work for six months or more, ending a seven-week interruption that caused 2 1/2 million people to lose unemployment benefits averaging about \$300 a week.

The 272-152 House vote Thursday will send the measure to President Barack Obama, who has promised to quickly sign it. The House vote came less than 24 hours after a mostly party-line Senate vote Wednesday on the measure, which is just one piece of a larger Democratic jobs agenda that has otherwise mostly collapsed after months of battles with Republicans.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said Thursday Obama will sign the measure as soon as he gets it.

Retroactive payments could go out as early as next week in some states, while in others it could take a few weeks for beneficiaries to receive their money under the legislation, which provides much-needed help to 5 million eligible unemployed workers. About half of those eligible have had their benefits cut off since funding expired June 2.

"Americans who are working day and night to get back on their feet and support their families in these tough economic times deserve more than obstruction and partisan game-playing," Obama said in a statement Wednesday night.

The measure is what remains of a Democratic effort launched in February to renew elements of last year's stimulus bill. But GOP opposition forced Democrats to drop \$24 billion in aid to state governments to help them avoid layoffs and higher taxes, as well as a popular package of expired tax cuts and a health insurance subsidy for the unemployed.

Most Republicans opposed the measure because it would add \$34 billion to a national debt that has hit \$13 trillion, arguing that it should have been paid for with cuts to other programs, such as unspent money from last year's economic stimulus bill, which is earning mixed grades at best from voters as unemployment averages 9.5 percent nationwide.

Thirty-one Republicans, about one in six, voted for the measure, while 10 Democrats opposed it.

"The other side says that these unemployment benefits stretching to almost two years are needed and must be added to the \$13 trillion debt, even as they claim their trillion-dollar stimulus plan has been a success at creating millions of jobs," said Rep. Charles Boustany, R-La. "It makes you wonder if they're looking at the same jobs data as the rest of us."

It's a change of heart for many Republicans who voted for deficit-financed unemployment benefits in the past, including twice during George W. Bush's administration. Earlier this year, Republicans allowed a temporary unemployment measure to pass without even calling for a roll call vote.

Opinion polls show that deficits and debt are of increasing concern to voters, however, especially with Republicans' core conservative supporters and the tea party activists whose support they're courting in hopes of retaking control of Congress.

Democrats countered that many economists say unemployment benefits boost the economy since most beneficiaries spend them immediately, injecting money into the economy. But any such effects are likely to be modest when measured against a \$14.6 trillion economy.

"Unemployment benefits protect those who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own but would lead to more jobs, higher wages, and a stronger economy for all Americans," countered Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif. "The money will be spent immediately on necessity, injecting demand into the economy, creating jobs."

The first 26 weeks of jobless benefits are paid for by the states. Thursday's legislation renews a federally financed program providing up to 73 additional weeks of benefits in states with high unemployment rates.

About half of those eligible have had their benefits cut off since funding expired June 2. They are eligible for lump-sum retroactive payments that are typically delivered directly to their bank accounts or credited to state-issued debit cards.

In states like Pennsylvania and New York, the back payments should go out next week, officials said. In others, like Nevada and North Carolina, it may take a few weeks for all of those eligible to receive benefits.

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Eric Bilderback, left, holds his resume as he talks with Mike Watson, a business employment specialist at WorkSource Oregon Tuesday, July 20, 2010, in Portland, Ore. The U.S. Senate voted on Tuesday 60-40 to end a Republican-led filibuster of legislation that would extend unemployment benefits for an estimated 2.5 million Americans. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

Map

