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For Long-Term Unemployed, Payments Near End

By [PATRICK MCGEEHAN](#)

Tens of thousands of New Yorkers have had the unfortunate distinction of collecting unemployment benefits longer than anyone in the state's history. But last week, state officials began warning the long-term unemployed that Congress has not approved another extension of unemployment insurance payments.

That lapse will leave about 37,000 residents of the state, like Robert C. Brannigan, without benefits this week, and will force others to contemplate applying for food stamps or other forms of welfare that they had never considered.

Mr. Brannigan, a 26-year-old construction worker from Mastic, received his final weekly payment of \$430 last week, but he still is No. 20 on a waiting list for jobs assigned by his union in Manhattan. When he checked the [State Labor Department's Facebook](#) page for news about a pending extension, he found a video explaining how to apply for food stamps and other assistance from the state.

"That was weird to me," Mr. Brannigan said. "I don't want food stamps. I want what I paid for and what I will continue to pay for when I go back to work. Unemployment is unemployment. It's not welfare."

But unemployment insurance was created as a stopgap, a short bridge to the next paycheck. In New York, it already has been stretched out for a longer period — 79 weeks — than in any previous recession, according to state labor officials.

Senate Democrats in Washington agreed on Thursday to extend payments for an additional 20 weeks in states with high unemployment rates, including New York, whose rate rose to 9 percent in August. If enacted, the extension would make it possible for some New Yorkers to collect for 99 weeks, or nearly four times as long as basic unemployment benefits are supposed to last.

The Democrats' proposal is a compromise intended to appease senators from states with relatively low unemployment. It would make extended benefits available for 14 weeks in every state, plus an additional six weeks in states whose unemployment rates, averaged over three months, exceeded 8.5 percent.

But Senate Republicans prevented a quick approval of the proposal last week. The measure, which is expected to be brought to the floor for a vote, would be effective immediately upon its enactment. But that will not be in time to prevent a gap in payments to the long-term unemployed in New York — even though they would be eligible to resume receiving benefits.

The [National Employment Law Project](#), an advocacy group for the unemployed, estimates that 400,000 Americans have already exhausted their benefits during this recession and that an additional 900,000 would by the end of the year.

But not all of those at or near the end of their benefits would get a reprieve from another extension.

Some unemployed New Yorkers, like Karin Gehm Barrett, are not eligible for extended benefits because they did not lose their jobs soon enough.

Ms. Barrett, who lives with her husband in Bayside, Queens, said she lost her job as a human resources manager at an advertising firm in Manhattan more than a year ago. The last of her benefits are scheduled to run out in January, but because she was on disability for several weeks after being laid off, she did not begin collecting unemployment until November 2008. Extended benefits have been available only to those who started collecting regular benefits before Oct. 27, 2008.

Ms. Barrett, 47, said she was already concerned about exhausting her benefits in a few months. In three previous bouts of unemployment, she was able to land a new job within three or four months, she said. But this time, the closest she came was being hired as a part-time consultant by her previous employer, she said.

“If in nine months I haven’t been successful, it’s a little daunting that in the next to two to three months I will have success,” Ms. Barrett said. “It really is tough out there. I put on my calendar at least two to three hours a day to dedicate to my job search. There’s not enough out there to devote that much more time.”

Still, Ms. Barrett, whose husband has a union job as a phone technician, is much better off than some New Yorkers whose benefits are running out.

Ruby Sievers, 47, a construction laborer who lives in Binghamton, said she had not been able to find work for two years. She collected the last of her extended benefits of \$430 a week on Wednesday and feared that she might again have to resort to temporary assistance from the state to pay her rent and feed herself and her 11-year-old son, she said.

Ms. Sievers said she received welfare benefits this year during a lapse in unemployment benefits in New York.

She has been impatiently awaiting word that Congress will pass the extension to limit the gap in her income.

“If it doesn’t, I’m not going to be in real good shape,” Ms. Sievers said. “I couldn’t even get \$7 an hour if I wanted to. It’s just not there.”

Like Ms. Sievers, Mr. Brannigan said he had applied in vain for a variety of jobs at stores and companies near his home.

“I’ve been to every store at the Tanger outlet mall,” he said. “I’ve been to every deli around here.”

Foremost, he hopes to be called in to work by his union, Local 20 of the Cement and Concrete Workers. His best bet, he said, is a job as a flag waver on a job site, but he is 20th on the waiting list for one of those spots.

“If they call me in for anything, I don’t care what it is, I’ll run right there,” Mr. Brannigan said. “If they tell me I got to stand on a pole and juggle, I’ll do that. I want to work.”

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