

CALIFORNIA EMPLOYMENT ON THE MEND: JOBLESS BENEFITS TO END



State officials have cautioned that nearly a hundred thousand jobless Californians will lose 20 weeks of federal unemployment benefits in three weeks. The federal government had started the benefit program known as FED- ED, or Federal Extended Duration Benefits, in March 2009, as an addition to the existing unemployment benefit plan to tide the long-term unemployed over the worst recession in over half a century. This special assistance, the fifth of similar addition of benefits, is set to expire, following improvements in the state's economy and an increase to 11 percent in the unemployment rate. The deadline set for the expiry of the benefits is the 12th of May. State officials said that owing to the increase in the unemployment rate, California no longer qualifies for the extension program. EDD spokeswoman Patti Roberts accepted that California's total unemployment rate remains high, but clarified that the three-month average is not "10% higher than it was during the same three-month period during one of the last three years as required by the federal program," hinting that the perhaps the state did not merit ineligibility. Unemployed workers, who were beneficiaries of the scheme, have reported receiving notices from the California Employment Development Department informing them that FED-ED benefit payments are nearing closure. Incidentally, the notices also informed them of what other options were available to them. Employment Development Department Director Pam Harris said, "The particularly harsh recession left many people unemployed for long periods of time. The FED-ED extension assisted them with a final 20 weeks of federal benefits while they continued to search for their next job. Still, we know this is hard on our clients. We're doing everything we can to get word out so they can plan accordingly." The department informed that as of now, the unemployed get as many as a combined 99 weeks of benefits. The state contributes 26 weeks and the federal government accounts for 73 weeks of the extension benefits paid. These benefits will now drop to, "89 weeks as of May 13, 79 weeks as of May 27 and 73 weeks as of Sept. 2." Unemployment benefit beneficiaries in California numbered more than 1.1 million to whom more than \$17.1 billion was paid out from the state and federal programs last year and an additional \$ 4.65 billion was paid up to the 13th of April this year. However, the other four levels of federal assistance will continue till the end of the year, helping to assuage the ache of losing out on the FED-ED benefits. Supporters of the additional benefits say that even though figures may seem to contradict them, unemployment rate continues to be high, given that there are four workers applying for every advertised job. However, opponents argue, that additional benefits that were given were to tide them over the period, they would need to find a new job and that the time should have been sufficient for them to find one. Moreover, they add, continued benefits encourage people not to look for jobs. Meanwhile, Maurice Emsellem, policy co-director for the National Employment Law Project, says that the "EDD needs to work with social services and other agencies to make sure people who lose unemployment know how to apply for food stamps, mortgage assistance and other help."