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On Eve of Cut-Off of Jobless Benefits for 165,000 Workers Unemployed by the Hurricanes, Congress Takes Action to Extend Benefits

House of Representative Votes Today Before Leadership Heads to the Gulf Coast

WASHINGTON D.C. – Two days before the March 4th deadline when thousands of Gulf Coast workers unemployed by the storms start to run out of their jobless benefits, the House of Representatives unanimously voted to extend jobless benefits by 13 weeks. The House action comes the same day that Speaker Hastert and Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi lead a bi-partisan delegation to tour the Gulf Coast.

In contrast to a similar Senate measure passed two weeks ago, which covered 140,000 unemployed by Hurricane Katrina, the House bill also applies to 25,000 workers left jobless by Hurricane Rita. The Senate is expected to pass the House measure by an expedited procedure and send the bill shortly to the President.

"Six months after the devastation caused by the storms, 165,000 Gulf Coast workers are still struggling to get by on their jobless benefits and rebuild their lives," said Maurice Emsellem, Policy Director of the National Employment Law Project (NELP), a non-profit group that assists hurricane evacuees and has advocated for the federal extension. "This rare bi-partisan action by Congress is critical to the proud Gulf Coast families who rely on their limited jobless benefits to pay for their rising housing costs and other major living expenses while looking for work," says Mr. Emsellem.

The federally-funded program, called Disaster Unemployment Assistance (DUA), will apply to those who were unemployed directly as a result of the storms. First, it will cover the self-employed who previously collected DUA because they did not qualify for regular unemployment benefits. In addition, it will cover many workers who reached the end of the 26 weeks of regular jobless benefits and still remain unemployed because of the storms.

The weekly DUA benefits correspond to the amounts provided by each state's unemployment program. For example, in Louisiana, those collecting regular state benefits receive an average of \$189 a week -- the 2nd lowest benefits of any state. They will continue to collect the same amount in DUA during the new 13-week extension of the program. The self-employed who previously collected DUA in Louisiana averaged \$100 a week, which is the same DUA amount they will continue to collect.

Workers eligible to receive the federal extension of jobless benefits will be notified by their state how to apply for the program. Most of those who previously collected DUA will continue doing so, without having to submit new applications. Those who are eligible for DUA after reaching the end of their regular state unemployment insurance will receive information tailored to each state explaining the DUA application process. "With over 100,000 evacuees who will qualify for federal jobless benefits after running out of their state assistance, it is absolutely critical that the states and the federal government provide all the help needed to properly notify and timely process these critical benefits," concluded Mr. Emsellem.

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The National Employment Law Project is a non-profit policy and legal organization, which advocates on behalf of the working poor and the unemployed (www.nelp.org).

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