

Senate Dems say jobless benefits bill on track



By ANDREW TAYLOR, Associated Press Writer
50 mins ago

WASHINGTON – A measure to restore eligibility for the jobless to receive up to 99 weeks of unemployment checks appears on track despite objections from Republicans concerned about its \$18 billion cost.

Democrats are also seeking to extend those benefits through Memorial Day instead of risking another cutoff in just three weeks.

The extension is needed, said Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., to give House-Senate negotiators more time to iron out a separate and more complicated bill to extend jobless benefits through the end of the year and revive expired tax breaks enjoyed by both individuals and businesses.

Democrats were counting on Sen. George Voinovich, R-Ohio, and perhaps one or two other Republicans to help the measure through a procedural thicket on Wednesday. Republicans are trying to derail the measure unless it is paid for with spending cuts from elsewhere in the \$3.7 trillion federal budget.

Extending unemployment benefits for the long-term jobless has prompted a battle between Republicans promising to battle the deficit and Democrats insisting that the government continue to borrow the money to pay for benefit checks averaging \$335 a week.

"Families are now looking to us for the help they need in a time of crisis," said Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash. "They see this Senate being forced to jump through procedural hoops and endure endless delay tactics to get even emergency legislation passed."

The GOP move is unprecedented — the House passed the measure last month and Republicans didn't even force a vote. More than half the Senate Republicans voted just last month for an earlier debt-financed extension of jobless benefits after Sen. Jim Bunning, R-Ky., held up benefits for days and Republicans came out on the losing end of the public relations battle. But the issue of deficits and debt is of increasing concern to voters who in only seven months will determine if Republicans take back control of Congress.

Four Republicans helped Democrats on Monday defeat a filibuster by other Republicans seeking to block the Senate from even taking up the measure: Sens. Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe of Maine, Voinovich and Scott Brown of Massachusetts. But other procedural tools are available to GOP leaders under the Senate's complicated rules, including one that directly raises the question of whether the measure can be financed by adding to the \$12.8 trillion national debt.

Democrats need to pick up at least one Republican to win the 60 votes required to advance the measure past such a hurdle on Wednesday. Last month, in a similar situation, Collins was that single Republican as she helped Democratic leaders maneuver their way through a tight spot. Now, she says she will insist that the temporary unemployment benefits bill does not increase the deficit.

But Voinovich said Tuesday evening he would join with Democrats to help the measure smoothly advance. Democrats were hoping for support from Brown and Snowe as well.

"All I know is that I've got two guys on my street that are unemployed," Voinovich said in an interview. "This unemployment (compensation) is a big deal. I hate borrowing the money for it. But ... it's allowed people to keep their families together."

Unemployment compensation ended for more than 400,000 people whose benefits lapsed but who would have otherwise been eligible to reapply for additional weeks of compensation if the program's authority had not ended last week. More than 5 million people continue to receive the extended benefits, but 200,000 people each week stand to lose them if the impasse continues.

The cost of the extended unemployment benefits program is about \$7 billion a month.

Several other programs have also lapsed, including federal flood insurance, higher Medicare payment rates for doctors and health insurance subsidies for people who have lost their jobs.

The expiration of the programs means that the newly jobless aren't eligible to sign up for health insurance subsidies but that people currently covered under the so-called COBRA law retain the benefit. People living in flood plains can't sign up for flood insurance or renew their policies, while the Medicare program has delayed payments to doctors rather than imposing a 21 percent cut.

Eligibility for the expired programs would be restored retroactively. The House would have to vote again on the measure, assuming Democrats are successful in extending its expiration

date past Memorial Day.

Copyright © 2010 Yahoo! Inc. All rights reserved. [Questions or Comments](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [About Our](#)
[Ads](#) [Terms of Service](#) [Copyright/IP Policy](#)