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The media's job is to
interest the public in
the public interest.

- John Dewey



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State Could Expand Unemployment And Help Families, For Free

April 6, 2009

Charleston, WV - West Virginia lawmakers are proposing to use only \$11 million of the \$33 million in unemployment funding available through the federal stimulus. Some church and family groups say expanding unemployment coverage enough to use the rest of the stimulus money would be a good idea, because it wouldn't cost the state anything for the first seven years. They will discuss the issue this morning at a media conference at 10:30 a.m. in the Governor's Conference Room at the State Capitol.

A bill likely to pass the Legislature would change the way the state decides who makes enough to qualify for unemployment. However, it would draw down only one-third of the federal unemployment money designated to stimulate the economy in West Virginia.

While he says changing unemployment qualifications is a good first step, Paul Miller with the *West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy* urges the state to expand the program enough to get the rest of the money.

"Unemployment insurance benefits are really one of the greatest economic stimulators we have. Every dollar spent in unemployment insurance generates an additional \$1.64 in economic activity."

To get the rest of the funding, the state would have to make more changes, which might include covering some part-time workers, allowing coverage for people who leave their jobs for family emergencies or for job training, and enacting a \$15-a-week benefit per child for jobless people with dependents.

Critics of expanding unemployment warn that the federal money is a one-time payment, while the expansion could be permanent. However, the *Center on Budget and Policy* spokesman says there is enough stimulus money to cover this expansion for the next seven years, and West Virginia could end the expansions after the money runs out.

"At the end of seven years, the federal government has left open the option to retract those reforms, if the state deems them too expensive."

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Domestic violence and children's advocates like the family-crisis provision and the allowance for dependents. Jim McKay with *Prevent Child Abuse West Virginia* says financial stress and unemployment put a lot of strain on at-risk families. He says it makes sense to soften the blows when families have problems.

"Domestic violence could cause them to lose their position and lose their jobs. The unemployment insurance expansion would go a long way toward helping the children, keeping them safe."

Dan Heyman, Public News Service - WV

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