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Grim Holiday and New Year Predicted for Women-Headed Families

WASHINGTON, DC – It will be a joyless holiday this year for the 2 million families who will lose their Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits in December unless Congress acts to restore the program that expired last night at midnight. In addition, clerks and other employees of American businesses will notice fewer shoppers this December and may even find their own jobs on the chopping block. According to a recent [study](#) by the Department of Labor, during each quarter of the recent recession, UI benefits kept an average of 1.6 million Americans on the job.

“The unemployment rate of single women who maintain families has been higher than the national average, and unemployment insurance is vital to their survival and that of their children,” said Joan Kuriansky, Executive Director of Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW). “Many of these women have no savings to fall back on and no other means of support.”

The average weekly unemployment benefit of \$290 per week (\$1,247 per month) covers only one-quarter of the amount a single mother raising two children requires to be economically secure under WOW’s recently completed Basic Economic Security Tables (BEST).ⁱ The average monthly benefit is just slightly more than a mother of two needs for housing and utilities, based on US Department of Housing and Urban Development fair market rents. “In the absence of other resources, these are the families who can end up sleeping on relatives’ couches and eventually out in the cold,” said Kuriansky.

The mother could apply for the Supplementation Nutritional Assistance Program (formerly food stamps) but that would cover only 11% of the family’s total monthly needs under WOW’s calculations. “And there will be no income to pay for the transportation and child care she would need to search for a new job,” said Kuriansky, urging Congress to act quickly to approve a one-year extension of the emergency program.

In every recession since the late 1950s, including the latest one, the federal government has funded a temporary program that allows workers who cannot find a job before their unemployment insurance runs out to receive additional weeks of benefits as they continue to look for work. Without federally-funded extended benefits, no one can obtain assistance beyond state-funded programs that typically last 26 weeks. Nearly half (42%) of today’s 15 million jobless workers are “long-term unemployed,” – out of work for six months or longer. Currently there is only one job opening for every five unemployed workers.

In no case do federal extended benefits last for more than 99 weeks. Those who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own are eligible for federal benefits only if they reside in states where the unemployment rate is exceptionally high.

Since July 2008, Congress has enacted only short extensions of three to four months each. Last June the extended program lapsed for 51 days following a Republican filibuster, curtailing benefits for 2.5 million workers and their families.

Since Tuesday, Senate Republicans have said they agree benefits should be extended, but they also signed a letter saying they would block legislation on any matter until Congress passes more tax breaks for millionaires and billionaires.

“It is unconscionable that the needs of two million Americans should be thwarted by the concerns of those who have so much,” said Kuriansky. “With few exceptions, the number of unemployed residents in any state or district is much greater than the number of their most wealthy constituents.”

¹ Wider Opportunities for Women, *The Basic Economic Security Tables Index for the United States*. Washington, DC: Wider Opportunities for Women, 2010.

Wider Opportunities for Women

Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) works nationally and in its home community of Washington DC to achieve economic independence and equality of opportunity for women and their families at all stages of life. For over 45 years, WOW has been a leader in the areas of nontraditional employment, job training and education, welfare to work and workforce development policy. Since 1995, WOW has been committed to the self-sufficiency of women and their families through the national Family Economic Security (FES) Project. Through FES, WOW reframed the national debate on social policies and programs from one that focuses on poverty to one that focuses on what families need to make ends meet. Building on FES, WOW expanded to meet its intergenerational mission of economic independence for women and families at all stages of life with the National Elder Economic Security Initiative.

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