

June 1, 2021

Re: Fix Unemployment Insurance

Dear Members of Congress:

On behalf of the 50 organizations committed to advancing women's equality and economic security, we write to urge you to ensure that millions of people – including women supporting families - do not lose their unemployment benefits, by fixing the badly broken unemployment insurance (UI) system.

The COVID-19 stimulus packages included desperately needed supports for the UI system, which allowed millions to survive during the pandemic and stimulated the economy, but also laid bare the long-simmering problems in the system, including outdated eligibility, inadequate benefit levels, and rickety administration and technology. Unfortunately, as these programs near expiration – and in the case of many states, are prematurely cut off – there is still an enormous need for bold reforms to strengthen the system for the future.

While it may feel like the pandemic is over for a privileged few, that is far from the reality. The dire effects of this pandemic are still reverberating through communities and will be felt for years to come, especially by those who have been hit the hardest by the pandemic – women of color and the families who depend on them.

Women of color are bearing the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic and recession: as essential workers risking their lives and as those who have borne the devastating brunt of job losses. Women account for 55.1% of net job loss since February 2020, and nearly 1 in 18 (5.6%) women ages 20 and over were unemployed in April 2021. Reported unemployment rates do not capture people who have left the labor force entirely, as they are no longer counted among those who are unemployed. This includes the nearly 2 million women who have left the labor force since February 2020, many of whom were pushed out due to caregiving responsibilities. If counted as unemployed in April 2021, women's unemployment rate would have been 8.1% in April 2021 instead of the reported 5.6%.

Black women, Latinas, women with disabilities, as well as lesbian, bisexual, queer, and transgender women, continue to be hit particularly hard by the economic crisis:

- More than 1 in 12 Black women ages 20 and over (8.6%) and nearly 1 in 13 Latinas ages 20 and over (7.5%) were unemployed last month.
- Last month's jobs data also indicates that many unemployed people have been out of work for extended periods of time. Among women ages 20 and over who were unemployed last month, more than 2 in 5 (44.2%) had been out of work for 6 months or longer. Rates of long-term unemployment were similar for Asian women ages 16 and over (45.5%), Black women ages 16 and over (45.8%), and Latinas ages 16 and over (41.3%).
- Nearly 1 in 11 women with disabilities (9.0%) were unemployed in April 2021. By comparison, their pre-pandemic unemployment rate in February 2020 was 7.4%.

This is the moment to strengthen unemployment protections, not prematurely cut them. Unfortunately, as of May 27, 2021, 24 states have signaled their intention to cut off unemployment insurance recipients from desperately needed UI benefits provided by the federal government: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, West Virginia, Wyoming.

Cutting off access to pandemic UI in these states will have a devastating effect on women, and women of color in particular. Please see the included table showing the percentages of women and women of color UI recipients in the states prematurely cutting off Pandemic Unemployment Assistance.

We must take this moment to learn the lessons of the pandemic and make permanent and lasting reforms to UI. We therefore call on Congress to prioritize strengthening unemployment protections in the upcoming recovery discussions, including by mandating:

- A duration of at least 26 weeks of benefits;
- Adequate wage replacement rates so that workers can truly make ends meet while looking for a new job;
- Making sure that the earnings necessary to qualify for UI in the first place don't exclude a significant portion of a state's low-wage workforce;
- Coverage of part time-workers and those who have to leave their jobs for compelling circumstances.
- Establishment of a jobseeker's allowance to support new entrants and other unemployed workers without the work history to qualify for UI

Fixing unemployment insurance is not just an urgent economic issue; it is an urgent women's rights issue, it is an urgent racial justice issue, and is an urgent disability justice issue. Please work to make an economy where women and families can thrive as we seek to recover from this pandemic and beyond.

Sincerely,

National Women's Law Center

A Better Balance

Alianza Nacional de Campesinas

American Association of University Women (AAUW)

Build Commonwealth, Inc

California Partnership to End Domestic Violence

Caring Across Generations

Center for Survivor Agency and Justice

Chicago Foundation for Women

Coalition on Human Needs

Caring Across Generations

Casa de Esperanza: National Latin@ Network

Community Health Councils
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces
Closing the Women's Wealth Gap (CWWG)
Elise Communications
Every Texan
Groundwork Collaborative
Kentucky Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Legal Momentum, the Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund
Lovelace Consulting Services, Inc.
MomsRising
Movement Advancement Project
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
National Council of Jewish Women
National Domestic Workers Alliance
National Employment Lawyers Association
National Resource Center on Domestic Violence
Nebraska Appleseed
Network for Victim Recovery of DC
New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty - Albuquerque
Public Justice Center - Baltimore, MD
SaverLife
Shifting Hearts & Minds
Shriver Center on Poverty Law
South Suburban Family Shelter
Step Up Louisiana
The National Domestic Violence Hotline
The New York Women's Foundation
The Women's Fund of Central Ohio
Women Employed - Illinois
Women's Law Project - Pennsylvania
Women of Color Network, Inc. (WOCN, Inc.)
Women of Reform Judaism
Workers' Rights Clinic - Ann Arbor, Michigan
Workplace Justice Project at Loyola Law Clinic
Union for Reform Judaism
Victim Advocate - Alabama

