

A crossroads for the jobless: Take aid or work?

BY DOUGLAS HANKS

dhanks@MiamiHerald.com

As the owner of a temporary staffing firm, Vanessa Bartram knows the allure of even part-time work in a brutal economy as her Miami office clogs with candidates each day.

But she also knows the appeal of an unemployment check, a government benefit President Barack Obama extended Thursday and which has complicated some job pairings during the downturn.

“We've definitely had people say, ‘No I don't want that job,’ and beg us not to report that to unemployment,” said Bartram, president of Work Square, which specializes in matching workers with low-wage hospitality jobs. “I think it's relatively common. I think people understand the system and how to maneuver it.”

Bartram can also describe unemployed workers desperate for jobs, and eager to part ways with a state unemployment system that caps weekly benefit checks at \$275.

But accounts from her and others in the hiring field on reluctance to give up unemployment aid highlight a contentious corner of a debate Democrats won this week in Washington when Obama signed a bill that would let more than 800,000 Floridians remain on unemployment for up to 79 weeks.

“We see there are people out there collecting [unemployment] who really want work,” said Sue Romanos, CEO of Career-Xchange, a staffing firm with offices in Broward and Miami-Dade. “But some, now that you can collect for a much longer amount of time, they're being much more choosy.”

Though an emotional topic, economists say unemployment aid does slightly extend the amount of time the typical person remains out of work. An April report by the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco cited a report estimating that extensions in unemployment benefits added about 1.6 weeks to a typical person's jobless stretch of about 17 weeks.

But agencies and companies that work with the unemployed note that more than just gumption can drive the numbers.

Taking a job with pay roughly equal to unemployment checks can force someone to quit training programs or take time away from landing a position that could offer more

than just a paltry wage. Given the dicey economic climate, leaving the meager security of the unemployment system can mean a financial catastrophe weeks later if an employer reverses course and cuts payroll.

“The employer can say: ‘I don’t like this person,’ and they’re back to where they started,” she said.

On a recent morning, Work Square’s office on Northeast Second Avenue and 25th Street in Miami offered a glimpse into South Florida’s unemployment crisis, with state figures showing a million people out of work. That’s 7.5 percent more than a year ago, and unemployment in Miami-Dade, the region’s largest economy, sits at 12.4 percent.

Those statistics include Ishmael Cisneros, 24, who took the bus from Miami Beach to apply for a Work Square position.

He had received unemployment payments since last summer, but the aid stopped in May when an emergency federal program expired.

That program allowed Florida to offer unemployment aid for up to 79 weeks, instead of the 26-week limit in effect before Congress approved the first wave of emergency federal payments in 2008. The bill Obama signed Thursday revives the federal extension available to states.

Cisneros has applied for jobs at Wendy’s, McDonald’s, the city of Miami Beach and Subway. Winning back a paycheck has become even more difficult without government help, he said.

“It’s hard,” Cisneros said. “You’ve got to pay for the bus. The unemployment money helped me get around.

“When I was younger, you could get a job right away,” he said. “If you wanted to work, they’d give you a job.”

Cisneros lives with his father, who loaned him \$5 for the bus trip. He said his next stop was a nearby Taco Bell. “I saw a sign,” Cisneros said. “They said, ‘Now Hiring.’”

A few steps away in Work Force’s tile-floor storefront office, Dolphus Walker punches keys on a computer, his résumé on the monitor screen. Dressed in a black suit jacket and pants, his tie lies neatly folded on a leather satchel on the desk. He lives in a nearby homeless shelter and says he hasn’t worked for more than a year.

“I’ll take anything,” he said. “Want me to dig a hole? I’ll do it.”

Carl Alexis runs the West Dade Career Center, a branch of the publicly funded South

Florida Workforce employment agency. He said he, too, has encountered people who prefer unemployment checks over a job interview, but that most are desperate for a job.

“If you hear that response, it may be a customer whose spouse is still employed and they're not in as much of a rush" to get a job, Alexis said. “But the great majority of them really want to get off unemployment. You hear that all the time -- `It's not enough for me. \$275 is the max. That's not enough to pay my rent or mortgage.”

For Bartram, the debate over extended benefits can be a delicate one. She has seen her profits cut sharply by higher payroll costs, mostly thanks to a spike in unemployment taxes as Florida struggles with a jobless rate that hit 12.4 percent in June.

While Work Square last year paid 1.7 percent of each worker's salary into the state unemployment fund, Bartram said the rate hit 4.9 percent this year.

That's kept her from adding a position in her own office, and she suspects the added tax makes other companies reluctant to hire, too. And with jobless benefits extend for up to 79 weeks, she's spending more time fighting unemployment claims from workers she's placed in jobs but then opted to quit and try for government help.

“I have had lots of people that come to me and say, `When unemployment calls you, tell them I was laid off' -- when they weren't laid off," she said. “I wouldn't.”

But she's also witnessed how hard it can be for the unemployed to land work, much less a job that can keep them afloat amid food and housing bills.

“I work with so many people who would have no income if their benefits were not extended," she said. “I see both sides of the issue so well.”

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