

THE CORONAVIRUS

FEMA AID: No word on when Pa., N.J. residents to get stopgap funds.

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By Erin Arvedlund STAFF WRITER

New Jersey on Wednesday received federal approval to give eligible workers an extra \$300 a week in unemployment benefits, joining Pennsylvania, which received the same approval on Monday, officials announced.

But it's unclear when residents will start receiving the extra money.

Through a temporary federal program, called Lost Wages Assistance, unemployed Pennsylvania and New Jersey residents can get extra money through the Federal Emergency Management Agency, known as FEMA.

"The recently ended \$600 weekly federal benefit was a true lifeline to many Pennsylvanians, and I know you are anxious for these new payments to begin," Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry Secretary Gerard Oleksiak said in a statement. The department will issue a timeline "very soon" about when the payments will begin, a spokeswoman said Wednesday.

The New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development also was vague about when the new \$300 benefit would start. Payments, however, will be made retroactively from Aug. 1, 2020, officials have said.

"This is a Band-Aid program, to tide people over whose unemployment has run out, but who are waiting for more assistance from the next rescue package from Congress," said accountant Mitchell Gerstein with Isdaner & Co. in Bala Cynwyd.

The Lost Wages Assistance program isn't a true unemployment insurance program because it is funded by \$44 billion from FEMA originally intended for storm disaster relief.

For this reason, payments will be delayed as states, including Pennsylvania and New Jersey, create new systems or processes.

On Aug. 8, President Donald Trump authorized the Lost Wages Assistance plan after Republicans and Democrats failed to strike a deal on supplemental benefits before the August congressional recess. Democrats supported a return of the \$600 weekly boost that ended in July while Republicans sought a smaller supplement — initially \$200 a week — maintaining that more money would discourage people from working.

In Pennsylvania, roughly 1.8 million Pennsylvania workers sought unemployment assistance during the peak of the pandemic in early May, or 28% of the state workforce, according to federal data. That's since dropped to 673,093 Pennsylvanians seeking assistance, for the week ended Aug. 8, the most recent data available.

To qualify for the extra \$300, the program requires those eligible to already be receiving at least \$100 a week in benefits from the following:

- >Regular Unemployment Compensation (UC);
- >Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC);
- >Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA);
- >Extended Benefits (EB);
- >Short-Time Compensation (STC) or Shared Work;
- >Trade Readjustment Allowance (TRA).

Pennsylvania residents must also self-certify that they are unemployed or partially unemployed due to COVID-19.

Pennsylvania applied to join the temporary program on Aug. 21. The program will run for a minimum of three weeks and will end no later than Dec. 27, 2020.

The Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation program, including the extra \$600 a week funded entirely by the federal government, ended on July 25. Although the House of Representatives voted to continue the benefit, Senate Republicans have yet to approve its extension due to the impasse over the size of the next stimulus.

Pennsylvania's unemployment rate, meanwhile, rose by 0.5% to 13.7% from June to July. The national rate fell by 0.9% to 10.2% from June to July. That's down from the peak of 18.1% during the spring.

Pennsylvania's total nonfarm jobs rose 97,900 to 5,525,900 from June to July, with the largest gain coming in leisure and hospitality. Those 47,100 jobs accounted for nearly half of the month's total increase.

Over the year, however, total non-farm jobs in Pennsylvania fell by 541,900. The largest 12-month change was a decline of 167,800 jobs in leisure and hospitality.

In New Jersey, new unemployment applications fell by 17% more last week — to 13,822 — the lowest weekly total of new claims in five months, as the state paid out \$516 million more in weekly benefits.

“It’s a relief to see initial unemployment claims decline for two consecutive weeks. But with hundreds of thousands of New Jerseyans still out of work, or being called back only partially, our workforce needs continued, sustained economic relief,” New Jersey Labor Commissioner Robert Asaro-Angelo said in a statement. earvedlund@inquirer.com

215-854-2808 erinarvedlund