

Critics rebuke delays in unemployment benefits

By Katherine Jarvis
7/17/2009

Christina Weiland was laid off from her receptionist job in San Francisco in January and was hoping to get unemployment benefits not too long after. She didn't receive benefits until May.

Weiland, of Oakland, had to wait four months to receive unemployment benefits, like many other unemployed Californians. She considered herself lucky because she had a severance package to tide her over until she received benefits.

But it's going to become increasingly difficult for unemployed Californians — now at 11.6 percent — to appeal their cases to unemployment judges. Assemblywoman Nancy Skinner, D-Berkeley, emphasized that point Friday in front of the Elihu M. Harris state building in Oakland, now that judges from the California Unemployment Insurance Appeals Board and staff from the Employment Development Department are required to take three furlough days a month in order to help the state's \$26.3 billion budget deficit.

"The full purpose is to get people's benefits immediately," Skinner said. "Furlough Fridays completely counters that objective, and it's stopping people from getting their benefits, delaying their benefits and jeopardizing those families."

Weiland said she applied for unemployment and was interviewed in February, but was denied benefits because she was taking a vocational tailoring class. Weiland said she was told that her class could interfere with future employment. She filed an appeal to this ruling immediately.

"I was starting to panic as it ran out," she said, as her severance decreased with no unemployment benefits forthcoming.

Weiland finally had an appeals trial in April and was granted benefits in May.

After the four-month struggle, she received unemployment benefits for a month before landing a job in June doing props and costumes at the Woodminster Amphitheater at Joaquin Miller Park.

Maurice Emsellem, policy co-director of the National Employment Law Project, said the administration of unemployment insurance is federally funded and that federal law prohibits the furloughing of employees who administer unemployment benefits. This means that the state risks losing its administrative funds for the unemployment programs, he added.

"The impact of these furloughs is increasing delays for all of these workers, trying to get these benefits that they are rightfully entitled to," said Matthew Goldberg, staff attorney at the Legal Aid Society — Employment Law Center.