

Louisiana unemployment: See who qualifies for extra \$300 benefit; next steps for disbursement, more

BY SAM KARLIN | STAFF WRITER PUBLISHED AUG 13, 2020 AT 12:55 PM | UPDATED AUG 13, 2020 AT 9:49 PM



Governor John Bel Edwards speaks during a press conference to discuss the current state of spread of Coronavirus in Louisiana, Thursday, August 13, 2020, at the Louisiana State Capitol in Baton Rouge, La.

STAFF PHOTO BY HILARY SCHEINUK

Now, more than ever, we need your support. [Subscribe to local journalism for \\$2.32 a week.](#)

[Sam Karlin](#)

Louisiana's more than 400,000 laid-off workers will be able to tap into an extra \$300-a-week unemployment benefit, state officials said Thursday, after new federal guidance made it easier for the state to pay its portion of the costs by using existing benefit payments.

Still, it is not clear when jobless workers will start receiving payments, which are less than the \$400 initially touted by the Trump administration. For about 200,000 of them, the state will

need to reconfigure its computer systems, which led to maddening delays early in the pandemic. And the state hasn't received the money yet.

When the payments do arrive, they will be retroactive to August 1, Edwards said. But he also cautioned the benefits would run out in a matter of weeks unless Congress delivers a new aid bill.



Claims Louisiana is inflating its coronavirus numbers are unfounded, auditor says

The announcement by Gov. John Bel Edwards means workers could soon get relief after losing an extra \$600 weekly benefit that expired in July, followed by fruitless negotiations in Congress over a new aid package that would replenish the payments.

It also comes days after state officials expressed concern that 200,000 Louisiana workers would not qualify for the extra \$300. That's because the state needs to foot 25% of the bill, and doesn't have extra money to pay \$100 a week. Instead, at the advice of the feds, the state is classifying existing state benefit payments as its portion of the costs, lowering the benefit workers will see to \$300.

Edwards said new guidance from the Trump administration that came down late Wednesday said all the state's benefits would qualify as part of that cost share. That guidance represents a reversal from the White House's previous statements that only people who receive more than \$100 in unemployment benefits already would qualify. About 200,000 workers in Louisiana receive less than \$100 in state benefits.



Louisiana's coronavirus rules on masks, bars are legal; judge pleads we 'get a hold of this'

"I'm fully aware the \$300 benefit is half the enhanced benefit that was being paid but I'll remind you the state benefit will continue to come with that,"

Edwards said. Louisiana has among the lowest state benefits in the country, maxing out at \$247 a week.

Edwards' office said gig workers and the self-employed who normally aren't eligible for unemployment but who are receiving benefits through a special pandemic program will qualify for the new funds. In all, 454,000 workers will qualify, he said.

The boosted payments stem from an executive order by President Donald Trump issued Saturday that takes money from a pot of disaster relief funds and sends it to states for unemployment checks. Critics have questioned whether the move is legal.

Edwards said Thursday he's not concerned with the legality of the move.



Despite a Phase 2 extension, John Bel Edwards says he's 'encouraged' by latest coronavirus data

But the governor said "it's going to take some time" to change the state's computers to deliver the \$300 payments to people currently receiving less than \$100, though he said he expects that to happen before payments start to go out.

The Louisiana Workforce Commission, which administers unemployment benefits, struggled early in the pandemic to deliver payments to laid-off workers in Louisiana as unemployment soared to unprecedented levels.

Wendy Manard, a New Orleans attorney who runs a Facebook group for nearly 8,000 people to receive advice and share tips on navigating the unemployment system, said it took awhile for people to begin receiving the \$600 payments to begin with this spring.

Manard said she is advising people to contact their local state legislator if they have difficulties getting a claim processed, saying many of the people who have done so saw their issues resolved more quickly.



Louisiana revokes permit of defiant BBQ restaurant for refusing to require masks

With historic levels of unemployment and schools reopening on a piecemeal basis, many laid-off workers with children aren't able to go back to work. And Manard noted many of them have never filed for unemployment before, making the prospect of navigating the bureaucratic red tape daunting.

“There are jobs out there but there aren't as many jobs out there as there were before. It's a big challenge to a lot of people,” Manard said. “Most people want to go back to work. They want their life to go back to normal. It's not only a financial benefit, it makes people feel better about themselves if they earn money and are working.”

As the \$600 benefit went away, the governor also reimposed a requirement that people certify each week that they are searching for jobs in order to continue receiving benefits. That decision rankled workers advocates and labor unions, and several organizations delivered a petition Thursday to Edwards' administration asking him to end the mandate.

“Louisiana's unemployed workers want to work, but the pandemic is keeping them from their jobs. Adding more paperwork to the unemployment claims process won't bring those jobs back,” the petition read.



Louisiana health department accuses some rural parishes of misusing coronavirus lists, violating HIPAA

Several advocacy groups and labor unions – Step Up Louisiana, the Louisiana Budget Project, the Workplace Justice Project, the Power Coalition for Equity and Justice, LiUNO Local 99 and UNITE HERE Local 23 – launched the petition last week. The organizations say most of the signatures were from unemployed workers.

Edwards said he would review the petition, but said with the state's unemployment trust fund set to run out of money in the coming months, it's "absolutely essential to reconnect workers with work wherever they can do that."

With Congress still deadlocked on a new aid package, the governor has pleaded with lawmakers to come to an agreement on a new deal, pointing specifically to the fact that the state's unemployment trust fund is set to run out. If that happens, the state will have to borrow money from the feds and add a surcharge on employers to pay for it, he said.