

Senate sends bills to revamp unemployment, Medical Assistance to Evers

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The Senate approved a series of bills that would revamp the unemployment program and add new restrictions to Medical Assistance that backers say would help move people off government safety net programs and into the workforce.

That includes enforcing drug testing requirements to qualify for food stamps and cutting off from Medicaid able-bodied adults who turn down a job offer.

The bills all now head to Dem Gov. Tony Evers.

Backers of the package said the bills were meant to help address a labor shortage in Wisconsin with employers across the state struggling to fill open positions. The problem existed before the pandemic, but supporters said the issue was exacerbated by COVID-19.

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Sen. Dale Kooyenga, R-Brookfield, argued the bills were about more than just helping employers. He argued work is part of human nature and the bills were about encouraging people to succeed.

“Work is something that keeps us alive, keeps us well, makes us connected to the community,” Kooyenga said. “Work is good.”

But Sen. Jon Erpenbach, D-West Point, said the bills will do nothing to address the state’s labor shortage. Instead, he argued they target the working poor who are already working and struggling to get by in the jobs they have. The bills pose a threat to the help they need to get by.

“We are setting people up to lose,” Erpenbach said.

The bills include:

*AB 883, which would rename UI “reemployment assistance.” It would also add additional work search requirements and direct the Department of Workforce Development to promulgate rules for drug testing claimants. The bill also includes a provision that would direct the governor to use federal money from the American Rescue Plan Act to provide payments to employers of up to \$2,000 for hiring long-term unemployment recipients who lose their jobs due to COVID-19. It passed 21-12.

*AB 934, which would require the Department of Health Services to check the eligibility status of childless adults in the Medical Assistance program every six months to determine if they can remain in the program. If participants fail to timely report a change in their status related to their eligibility, they are kicked off the program for six months. The bill passed 20-13 with Sen. Joan Ballweg, R-Markesan, joining Dems in voting no.

*AB 935, which would require Health Services to enforce drug testing, screening and treatment for the FoodShare program; those requirements are currently being waived due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It passed 21-12.

*AB 936, which would prohibit able-bodied adults from staying on the Medical Assistance program if they refuse a job offer or an increase in work hours or wages. They’d be ineligible for six months after the date it was discovered they turned down the offer. The bill includes exceptions such as someone who works 40 hours a week and doesn’t accept hours beyond that, as well as able-bodied adults over the age of 65, those physically or mentally unfit for employment, those who are pregnant or within six months of having given birth, full-time students, and the caregiver of a child under 13 or 19 if the child is disabled. The bill was amended to create an additional exemption for the caretaker of a dependent who is disabled or elderly. It passed 21-12.

*AB 937, which would index the maximum number of weeks jobless benefits can be claimed to the unemployment rate. If the rate is 3.5 percent or less — as it is now — the maximum number of weeks would be 14. The current maximum of 26 weeks could only be claimed if unemployment was above 9 percent. It eclipsed that briefly in April and May 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before that, it last was above

9 percent in February 2010 as the country was emerging from the “Great Recession.” It passed 19-14 with GOP Sens. Steve Nass, of Whitewater, and Van Wanggaard, of Racine, opposed.

*AB 938, which would expand the definition of misconduct that would mean fired employees aren’t eligible for unemployment. Among other things, those fired for violating a company’s social media policy would be ineligible for benefits. It passed 21-12.

*AB 939, which would penalize those who turn down or fail to show up for a job interview, as well as those who don’t respond to one. Under the bill, someone out of work would be ineligible for unemployment in any week in which an applicant failed to do any of those three. It passed 21-12.