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Labor Day will bring an end to Kentucky's pandemic unemployment benefits

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BY LIZ MOOMEY

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Pandemic unemployment benefits will expire in less than a month despite surging COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations, President Joe Biden confirmed Thursday.

After 18 months, the supplemental benefits expire nationwide on Sept. 6, which is Labor Day.

Gov. Andy Beshear said on Thursday it is safe for Kentuckians to return to work, even with the Delta variant crippling the state and the country. Kentucky is expected to hit a record number of coronavirus hospitalizations this weekend.

"We believe that people can safely go back to work if they get vaccinated, and if they wear that mask when they need to," said Beshear, a Democrat.

Recipients had been receiving an extra \$300 a week through the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation program. Pandemic benefits will also end for those who would not normally qualify for assistance, such as the self-employed and independent contractors, as well as for those with mixed earnings from self-employment and taxable income from employers. Also ending is a program that provided a benefits extension when regular benefits were exhausted.

The Kentucky Office of Unemployment Insurance will send an email to claimants who are impacted by the changes.

The state has been trying to ween unemployed Kentuckians off unemployment insurance benefits for several months. In May, recipients of pandemic unemployment benefits had to provide proof they were actively searching for work, a requirement that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. They had to report at least one job contact per week when requesting UI

benefits bi-weekly.

In June, Gov. Andy Beshear announced unemployment insurance claimants who return to work between June 24 and July 30 could receive a stipend of \$1,500. Kentuckians have until Oct. 1 to apply for the award.

Still, the number of Kentuckians applying for unemployment benefits has remained mostly steady over the last several months. There were 3,785 new claims in July, compared with 3,876 in June and 4,061 in May. In April 2020, claims hit an all-time high of 208,000.

“With a surging economy and job opportunities available throughout the commonwealth, there isn’t a valid reason why any Kentuckian who wants a job shouldn’t be able to find one,” Beshear said last month.

Kentucky Chamber Foundation Workforce Center Executive Director LaKisha Miller said Kentucky’s workforce is at a pivotal place.

“Employers are not only eager, but they need (employees) to return back to work,” Miller said.

Evan Smith, AppalReD Legal Aid attorney who specializes in unemployment, said the majority of his clients want to go back to work, but some are still wary because they have someone in their household who is immunocompromised and COVID-19 cases are increasing.

Some of his clients are struggling with finding work or not finding work that is right for them, he said. He is concerned the looming deadline will force unemployment insurance claimants to get a job that is a mismatch of their skill and pays less. He has also seen clients with a criminal record unable to find a job.

“A lot of these people when they apply they are not wanted,” he said.

The Kentucky Chamber of Commerce created a “Who’s Hiring” program in March 2020, which has posted thousands of positions, including some by “fair-chance employers,” which don’t consider criminal records while hiring. It was relaunched in May and employers came flooding in, adding 1,000 jobs in the first week.

Miller said the Kentucky Chamber understands there are a lot of barriers for people who struggle with substance use disorder or with being formerly incarcerated.

“Employers can’t afford to be passive,” Miller said. “Everyone on the sidelines should be considered.”

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