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Ga., SC differ on jobless help

By [Sarita Chourey](#)
Morris News Service
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South Carolina is sweetening its incentives to employers to hire the long-term unemployed, nearly doubling the maximum amount of wage reimbursements.

The longer an individual has been out of work, the more South Carolina will subsidize a company for the new hire's training period. The top wage reimbursement tier, 90 percent, applies to new hires who were out of a job for 28 weeks or longer.

"This was done to increase flexibility and engage businesses in the program," said Mary-Kathryn Craft, spokesman for the S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce.

"The ultimate goal is to help them fulfill hiring and training needs and increase job placement for the long-term unemployed."

That the long-term jobless have a harder time finding employment is understood. Skills get outdated, and people get stigmatized when they have a long gap on their resume.

Nationally, those who have been unemployed for at least six months make up 32 percent of the jobless population, according to the National Employment Law Project.

Both South Carolina and Georgia are participating in the federal Workforce Investment Act's on-the-job-training program — but in their own ways. Georgia takes a different approach from South Carolina.

"While theirs, I think, is focused on addressing the long-term unemployed, ours really is focused on supporting small businesses," said Ben Hames, deputy commissioner of the Workforce Division of the Ga. Department of Economic Development. In Georgia, he said, it's the employers that are placed in one of three tiers, based on their size, and given wage reimbursements from 50-90 percent, during a new hire's training period. The smallest companies, those with less than 50 people, receive the most help.

"I will say, in terms of strategy, I probably prefer the route we took," said Hames, calling South Carolina's program "a little less business-friendly, a little more complicated."

He said Georgia's program focuses on meeting the needs of businesses.

"We're able to work with that company in a standardized way, which probably makes things easier for them," said Hames.

There are 407 participating employers in Georgia, with on-the-job-training contracts lasting from two weeks to six months, according to the agency.

Which state's approach is more effective is difficult to judge, considering the many factors that drive unemployment and the ways the two states differ.

But in some simple measurements, South Carolina looks brighter. In October, the smaller state had 6.7 percent unemployment, and in 2013, the median period that someone was without a job was 14.5 weeks, according to federal data.

In Georgia, the jobless rate was 7.7 percent in October, and the median unemployment duration was 20 weeks. George Wentworth, senior staff attorney for the New York-based National Employment Law Project, praised South Carolina's on-the-job-training effort.

"That's what we would call good policy," he said, after viewing the South Carolina agency's announcement.

"That is really about going the extra mile in terms of helping those who are harder to employ."

And that's helpful, said Wentworth, because, "South Carolina has a pretty harsh unemployment insurance law." He noted that in most states, an individual who was laid off may collect benefits for up to 26 weeks, but in South Carolina, the length of time was pruned to 20 weeks.

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