

January 10, 2012 3:20 PM

## SC Senate panel approves unemployment bills

COLUMBIA, S.C. — A Senate panel advanced bills Tuesday that would require people laid off in South Carolina to pass a drug test to receive unemployment benefits, then volunteer 16 hours weekly with a charity or public agency to keep receiving a check.

Though the panel heard testimony that both proposals would likely conflict with federal law, its chairman, Sen. Kevin Bryant, said afterward that doesn't matter.

"It's time to start pushing back," said Bryant, R-Anderson. "I can't base how I vote on a bill on what some activist, liberal judge is going to do."

The bills head to the full Senate Labor Commerce and Industry Committee, which meets Thursday.

Sen. Paul Campbell said his bill requiring community service will help people find jobs as they hone their skills. The intent is to match people's skills with work that needs done in cash-strapped city or county governments and schools.

"We're not trying to be derogatory," said Campbell, R-Goose Creek. "We're trying to help them go from the unemployed to employed ranks."

Senators amended the bill to require the work after five months, rather than six. Campbell said the 16-hour requirement would leave people time to search for a paying job, but Bryant wanted to require them to put in more time.

"I was brought up that 40 hours was part-time," Bryant said, though he acknowledged the bill stood a better chance of passing by leaving it at 16.

Sen. Kent Williams, D-Marion, said the system needs to be set up to ensure jobless workers aren't put in positions that humiliate them.

"Someone with a college degree, we don't want them to be taking out the trash," he said. "In the private sector, we see every day, people take jobs they're less accustomed to. It's just the way things are and the economy we're living in today, but at the same time, we want to be careful not to let something good turn to something negative."

Another bill advanced Tuesday would require jobless workers to look for full-time work. They could no longer receive benefits if they're pursuing a part-time job.

Sue Berkowitz of the Appleseed Legal Justice Center spoke against all three bills.

She suggested making the community service an option, rather than mandatory. Noting she leads a nonprofit, she said charities may find that having volunteers coming and going could be a nuisance as much as a blessing. She also said matching people to volunteer work in

rural communities may prove difficult, and daycare may become a problem.

The director of the state's unemployment agency said the federal Department of Labor has already told the agency the proposal would violate federal law. Making it voluntary would solve that problem, said Maj. Gen. Abraham Turner, who took the agency's helm in September after retiring from the military.

Bryant said there's no point to passing a bill making it an option. People can volunteer now if they want, he said.

He believes his drug-testing measure would encourage people to not use drugs.

Berkowitz noted that a federal judge threw out a similar law in Florida that required the testing for welfare benefits, and that only 2.5 percent of applicants tested positive while it was in place. Rather than pass a law destined for court, she suggested putting the money into job development or daycare for people trying to find work.

"These are people who lost their jobs and want to support their families with dignity. We're not sending the right message," she said. Afterward, she called the measures heartbreaking: "We talk to them as if they're already a criminal."

The requirement for full-time job-seeking would revert to state law prior to 2009, when the Legislature made the change so the state could collect about \$100 million from the federal government for unemployment insurance modernization.

Berkowitz said many people are taking multiple part-time jobs in these tough times, or need to work part-time while caring for children or elderly parents, and they shouldn't be penalized. She also questioned whether the state could undo the law so quickly without having to pay back the federal government.

But Turner wholeheartedly supported the change.

"We're in support of any effort we can make that would require full-time-employment seeking," Turner said. "We want to discourage part-time to part-time. What we're after is full-time employment."

South Carolina's unemployment rate is nearly 10 percent and hasn't been below 9 percent in three years. The average weekly benefit is \$235, ranking 45th nationwide. The maximum is \$326.

Legislators approved last year cutting the number of weeks of state-approved benefits from 26 to 20, reducing the total number from 99 to 77 weeks when including federally-paid extensions.

Turner told senators about new agency policies, which he plans to enact after briefing the entire committee Thursday.

He said the agency plans to reduce the number of weeks someone can receive unemployment benefits if they were let go for absenteeism, poor attitude, violating policy or poor work quality.

The change means they would miss out on at least 16 weeks of payments, up from 10, leaving the maximum state benefit at a month.

Bryant said those workers shouldn't get any benefits.

"Benefits are for employees who lose job for no fault of their own. These folks have chosen to be irresponsible," he said.

Another policy change would require people drawing unemployment benefits to accept job offers that pay incrementally less than their previous wages.

The change means those drawing unemployment benefits must accept job offers that pay 90 percent of their previous wage after four weeks. The percentage would drop every four weeks. After 16 unemployment payments, they'd have to accept 70 percent of their previous income. Once federal extensions kick in at 20 weeks, they'd have to accept minimum wage labor.

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