

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. MENENDEZ. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak as in morning business for approximately 10 minutes.

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SUPPLEMENTAL APPROPRIATIONS

Mr. MENENDEZ. Mr. President, as we debate the supplemental, I want to speak about the importance of extending unemployment insurance to our economy and to so many of our fellow Americans.

I know if Senator KENNEDY were on the Senate floor today, he would be leading this effort, lending his powerful voice, as he always does, with fervor and passion on behalf of those in this Nation who are in need. I certainly hope and pray that he will be with us once again lending his voice to this and so many other critical issues.

Mr. President, we know there are Americans in need. These are difficult economic times, not just for Americans on the bottom of the economic ladder but for Americans from all walks of life.

In the past year alone, as this chart indicates, losses in the stock market and in home values have totaled \$2.7 trillion each—that is trillion with a “t.” Foreclosures have risen 130 percent since 2006. Some 20,000 families lose their homes every week. This combination of a credit and housing crisis isn’t just affecting Wall Street or homeowners, but it is reaching throughout our economy and putting a strain on businesses, large and small, from factories to restaurants.

Under the pressure of this economic squeeze, the economy has lost 260,000 jobs in the last 4 months alone. Beyond just the loss of the jobs, what is hurting those who have lost a job is the time it is taking to find a new job. These are not individuals who are just sitting back and waiting for someone to offer them a job. These are people who are actively engaged in the labor market and looking for gainful employment, looking for the dignity of a job.

This chart shows us the average length of unemployment has risen to almost 17 weeks—longer than at any time Congress has extended benefits in the past 30 years. In my State of New Jersey, each week some 3,000 more unemployed workers are exhausting their benefits. It is not that they are sitting back at home. They are engaged in the market looking for jobs—many times even outside of their field, simply to be gainfully employed.

While we certainly hope some of the recent efforts we have performed in the Congress to stimulate our economy

will be successful, there are still troubling signs. Long-term unemployment is higher now than before the last recession. Mr. President, 17.8 percent of people unemployed find themselves searching for a job for over 27 weeks. That is a 58-percent increase since the year 2001. Statistics show those who are unemployed are going to have a very difficult time finding a job, as there are 7.6 million unemployed Americans competing for only 3.8 million jobs. That is two workers for every job.

Some are struggling more than others. Veterans and minorities have been disproportionately burdened by our struggling labor market. Young male veterans who answered the call to protect our Nation after September 11, 2001, are now faced with an 11.2-percent unemployment rate—well over twice the national average. A total of 21,588 newly discharged veterans are now unemployed and collecting unemployment insurance.

It seems to me the last thing these brave men and women who risked their lives dodging bullets and IEDs in Iraq and Afghanistan should have to worry about is finding a job when they come home. And when they cannot, it seems to me the last thing they should have to worry about is not having any income to sustain themselves and their families. Now they are standing in an unemployment line, and pretty soon they will not be able to do that either.

Minorities are also being hit especially hard by our current economic conditions. For Hispanics, unemployment has grown to 6.9 percent. For African Americans, unemployment has grown 8.6 percent. Both are well beyond the national average. We cannot ignore the fact that the subprime crisis has also disproportionately affected some communities more than others. Unfortunately, for many of these hard-working Americans, their hope of obtaining and continuing to keep the American dream has instead become a personal nightmare.

These statistics are not just numbers. The 260,000 jobs lost this year, the 7.6 million Americans who are unemployed, the 21,000 veterans collecting unemployment—this is not just economic data. Behind each number is a story and an American worker who is struggling.

Let’s take a moment to imagine what it would be like to be one of these workers. All of the Members of the Senate are gainfully employed. But try to put yourself in the shoes of one of these American workers. Imagine you have two kids, you have a mortgage to pay, and you just lost your job. That alone is a scenario that could lead any family into hard times. If you are also facing foreclosure because of a bad subprime mortgage that has reset to a higher rate, or if losing your job meant losing your health care insurance that

provided coverage for your children, imagine how powerless you would feel. Imagine the uncertainty of not being able to find a job, not being able to pay for your child’s college education for the next semester, not being able to keep the home in which your children grew up. Imagine what that must be like.

Mr. President, there are hundreds of thousands of Americans facing these very dire circumstances, who know all too well, unfortunately, what it feels like. It is up to us to lend them a helping hand during their darkest days. That is what the extension of unemployment benefits in the supplemental will accomplish.

On top of that, we also know extending unemployment is one of the most effective ways to help the economy. For every dollar the Government provides in unemployment insurance, \$1.64 goes right into our economy.

While I, along with many of my colleagues, believed this should have been part of the stimulus we had earlier, I am pleased we have another chance.

Today, as unemployment and the cost of living continue to rise, it is even more imperative to act now and do what is right. Mr. President, 1.4 million workers have been actively looking for a job for more than 6 months—half a year of their life actively looking for a job. As it is becoming harder to find a job, more families are running out of their unemployment benefits. Thirty-six percent of workers exhaust their benefits before finding a job, and many expect that number to increase. In March of this year, 45 percent of New Jerseyans receiving unemployment insurance exhausted their benefits before finding a new job.

We have a chance to fairly and reasonably address the challenges that long-term unemployment are creating for many fellow Americans. Extending unemployment insurance will help those who are hit hardest and give the economy a much needed shot in the arm.

We have this opportunity to act, and act now. I cannot understand when those who try every day, get up and go out into the market to try to find a job—when we have twice the number of Americans as there are jobs competing for employment—why we are saying to veterans who have come back and others who are standing on an unemployment line that soon that will be cut off as well. It is unconscionable.

We have an opportunity to change that in this supplemental. I hope our colleagues who enjoy the benefits of gainful employment will give the American workers the helping hand they need and stimulate our economy by supporting the extension of the unemployment insurance.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Vermont is recognized.

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, I want to say a few words about two important components of the domestic supplemental bill which, in my view, must be passed whenever we end up considering that legislation, and that is the new GI educational bill and the billion dollars in the bill for the Low Income Heating Assistance Program.

As an early cosponsor of the post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act, I am here today to ask my colleagues not only to pass this legislation but pass it with big numbers so if President Bush decides to veto it, we will have the votes—and he knows we will have the votes—to override that veto.

The soldiers who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan have paid a very heavy toll. In Iraq alone, over 4,000 have died, over 30,000 have been injured, and tens of thousands more have come home with post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.

In my State of Vermont, middle-aged dads and moms have left their families, they have left their kids, they have left their jobs, and they have joined their fellow members of the National Guard and Reserve in a kind of war they never dreamed they would be fighting. But they went to war and they did their jobs, and they did their jobs well and without complaint. They gave as much as they could give for their country, and now it is our turn to give back, not only for them but for the well-being of our entire economy.

The original GI bill was an appropriate way for a grateful nation to say thank you for the service and sacrifice of those who wore our country's uniform. That bill was not only a way to express our appreciation to the greatest generation, but it enabled millions of Americans to get a college education, and by doing that, it helped reshape the American economy, it created immense wealth, and allowed millions of Americans to enter the middle class.

There are, in fact, those who believe that the GI bill was one of the major reasons for the strong economic spurt this country enjoyed from the end of World War II to the early 1970s.

Unfortunately, as many returning soldiers understand, today's GI educational benefits do not match up with what the World War II veterans received and do not come close today to covering the cost of a college education. That is why it is so important that we update these benefits by passing the new GI bill, both for our Active-Duty soldiers and for the National Guard and Reserve.

As a nation, we must understand that caring for our servicemembers is part of the cost of going to war. If we are going to go to war, we cannot forget about the men and women who put their lives on the line and returned from that war.

There are some who say this bill is too generous for our servicemembers,

that we cannot afford to provide these benefits. I disagree. If we can spend \$12 billion every single month paying for the cost of the war in Iraq, we surely can spend the equivalent of 4 months of that war to pay for the cost of the educational benefits for these men and women for a 10-year period.

The new GI bill will cover the highest in-State undergraduate tuition at a public college or university where the veteran is enrolled, plus a living stipend, and would be based on how long the veteran served in active duty. This money could also be applied to law school, medical school, or approved programs of study.

This is an extremely important piece of legislation. I congratulate Senator WEBB for offering it. And now it is our job to pass it.

There is another component of the domestic supplemental that also must be passed, and that is the \$1 billion in additional funding for LIHEAP that was included in the supplemental appropriations bill through the adoption of an amendment by Senator JACK REED of Rhode Island. I thank Senator REED for offering that amendment and for getting it passed in the Appropriations Committee by a bipartisan vote of 20 to 9, which included 5 Republicans.

Furthermore, I have been active on that issue by authoring a letter, which was cosigned by 20 of my colleagues, including 4 Republicans, who also understand the absolute imperative for increasing funding for LIHEAP.

Two years ago, under the leadership of Senator SNOWE and many other Senators, LIHEAP funding was increased by \$1 billion above the appropriated level because it was well understood that at that time, we faced a home heating emergency. I strongly agreed with that assessment. But if we faced a home heating emergency a year ago, we face a much more severe home heating emergency today, and that is because the price of heating oil and propane are escalating off the roof. They are much higher today than they were several years ago. It is absolutely imperative that we significantly increase funding for LIHEAP if we are not to see the purchasing power of this program eviscerated.

While \$1 billion is a good step forward, the truth is, we are going to need a lot more than that to keep pace and level fund in terms of real dollars what the American people are receiving from LIHEAP.

Two years ago, as you know, the price of heating oil was less than \$2.50 a gallon. Today it is about \$4.50 a gallon. What I can tell you is that last winter in the State of Vermont, there were families unable to heat their homes. Families with children became sick because the temperature in those homes was too low. That was last winter. Certainly if that was the case last

winter, it will only be worse next winter.

Let us be very clear that the LIHEAP program addresses not only families who are worried about keeping warm in the wintertime, it also addresses the very serious problem of families, especially older people, who, when the weather gets 100-plus degrees, will be too warm in the summertime.

It also addresses the issue of more and more Americans having their electricity disconnected. According to the National Energy Assistance Directors Association, which represents the State directors of LIHEAP, a record-breaking 15.6 million American families, or nearly 15 percent of all households, are at least 30 days late in paying their utility bills. Several States have laws on the books that impose a moratorium on cutting off essential utility services in the winter. However, these utility shutoff moratoriums expire during the spring. Without additional LIHEAP funding, senior citizens on fixed income, low-income families with children, and persons with disabilities from all across this country are in danger of having their essential utility services shut off this spring. This is going on in California, Iowa, Massachusetts—all over this country. Rapidly rising energy costs are the major reason so many Americans are late in paying their energy bills. It is extremely important, therefore, that additional LIHEAP funding be included in the supplemental to address these urgent needs.

I hope very much when we get around to addressing the domestic supplemental bill that, A, we absolutely pass this legislation with strong numbers for our veterans to give them the educational opportunities they need and our country needs and, B, let us not forget that with the cost of gas and oil soaring, millions of Americans will go cold next winter. There are people who will suffer this summer unless we pass an expanded LIHEAP program.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from North Dakota.

ORDER OF BUSINESS

Mr. CONRAD. Mr. President, I have just spoken with Senator GREGG, the ranking member of the Budget Committee. He has graciously agreed that I could begin to discuss the budget conference report. He is at the White House and will be returning shortly. We have agreed in principle that the time I consume and that perhaps he consumes when he later arrives will be used against the 10 hours, that we will do that retroactively. But we start without an agreement because they are working on a global agreement as to how we will conclude the work of the Senate the remainder of this week. Until they have that agreement, we