



Maryland's unemployment benefits rank near bottom

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BALTIMORE (AP) - Maryland may be a wealthy state, but its unemployment benefits are among the worst in the nation, according to a new study by the Maryland Budget and Tax Policy Institute.

Some business leaders and state officials say the study is flawed and that Maryland actually offers one of the best unemployment packages in the nation.

That contradicts the findings, said Patrick Lester, the author of the study, "Maryland Unemployment Insurance: Underfunded and Out of Date."

"Maryland is generally perceived as a high-tax, high-spending state that supports government social programs in spades," said Lester, a policy analyst with the institute, which has offices in Silver Spring and Baltimore.

"But it's not true. When it comes to unemployment insurance - who gets it and how much they get - we're well behind the rest of the country."

For those who receive benefits, the average weekly payout of \$241.57 per week in Maryland replaces only 33.9 percent of the average weekly wage.

That ratio ranks Maryland 43rd out of 50 states.

The \$241.57 average weekly payout ranks Maryland 25th out of 50 states, and places it below the national average of \$257.90.

Arizona is at the bottom with an average unemployment payment of \$205 per week, while Washington state is at the top with an average payout of \$496 per week, Lester said his research found.

According to the 2000 Census, Maryland's median household income of \$52,868 ranked it third, behind New Jersey and Connecticut. More recent estimates place that income at \$53,530, second behind Alaska's \$57,363, according to economy.com analyst Scott Hoyt.

Such high-income levels warrant a major boost in Maryland's unemployment benefits, which rank among the nation's worst, the nonpartisan tax policy institute said in its study, which was partially financed by the liberal Open Society Institute-Baltimore.

While Maryland's average is \$241.57, its maximum weekly payout was boosted to \$310 last year,

an increase of \$30, or 11 percent, said Thomas Wendel, executive director of the Maryland Office of Unemployment Insurance.

"Overall, we feel we're in the top five or 10 in terms of overall benefits," Wendel said.

The study concluded that the state's unemployment system is underfinanced, that benefits are too low and that too many of the state's jobless are unfairly barred from receiving the weekly unemployment payments.

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