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Jobless lose big in Bush budget

Less than a week after his State of the Union address, President Bush sent to Congress a \$2.23 trillion budget that reflects nothing more than smoke-and-mirror politics. Despite his well-spun claim to support job-seeking Americans, the president's new spending plan puts the federal deficit well over the \$300 billion mark yet leaves the nation's jobless with little support and undermines the country's primary employment program.

Let's be clear about what the President is not doing to put Americans back to work.

First, the president is not spending enough on the unemployed: 8.6 million jobless Americans. His multitrillion-dollar budget offers a meager .07 percent—seven-tenths of 1 percent—for a "Back to Work Incentive" Act.

This new-fangled legislation suggests creating Personal Reemployment Accounts (PRAs) that some unemployed could use for employment services, skills training or bonuses for finding work fast. On the surface, that may not sound too bad. But considering start-up costs and the current jobless numbers, these funds will go quickly. A simple extension of Unemployment Insurance benefits would provide more stability for people while they learn new skills and find new jobs.

Second, the president is not reaching enough of those who are trying to rejoin America's working class—you know, those would-be millionaires who aren't cashing in on dividends and instead are counting their pennies before their unemployment runs out. But limited employment funds and complicated rules for PRA qualification mean that the majority of the people in need won't benefit. We've already seen thousands of people exhaust their Unemployment Insurance and by springtime experts estimate another 51,000 Illinoisans will be without any support.

Third, the president is not passing on any favors to the states. His budget calls for significant disinvestments in the primary employment program on which the states rely: the Workforce Investment Act's One Stop Career Centers, affiliated providers, and certified skills trainers. In Illinois last year, WIA providers worked hard to serve 40,988 dislocated workers, disadvantaged adults and youth in a tight labor market. Illinois now has 398,400 unemployed who face an even tighter job market and the very real prospect of less support thanks to fewer WIA dollars. Worse yet, those who manage to get one of the president's new PRAs will disqualify themselves from future assistance under WIA. Once the account is spent, service is done, job or no job.

Let's clarify what the president is doing for America.

He's downsizing our nation's employment program while offering up a new one that will serve fewer. He's planning tax cuts that will help the richest among us. He's increasing military spending that doesn't begin to pay for a possible war with Iraq. And he's turning the estimated \$5.6 trillion surplus he inherited into the biggest deficit this nation has ever seen.

Clearly, this president needs to stop playing politics and listen to what someone once told his father, "It's the economy, stupid."

*Robert E. Wordlaw
Executive Director
Chicago Jobs Council
Chicago*