

# Gunn calls on governor to enforce unemployment rules or end \$300 a week pay

Mississippi Today  
By Geoff Pender and Bobby Harrison

House Speaker Philip Gunn says Mississippi small businesses can't find workers because of an extra \$300 a week federal unemployment pay, and he's asking Gov. Tate Reeves to enforce job search requirements or end the state's participation

in the COVID-19 benefits program.

"I and other House members are continually being contacted by increasingly desperate small businesspeople who inform us their businesses are at risk," Gunn wrote to fellow Republican Reeves, and copied the letter to all House members. "They report that they cannot get

employees to return to work because they can earn more from combined federal and state unemployment benefits than their normal wages."

Gunn noted that the governors of Montana and South Carolina last week announced they were ending their states' participation in the \$300 a week federal COVID-19 benefits. Politicos and pundits nationwide have surmised increased pandemic unemployment benefits and stimulus payments have incentivized many people to not return to work.

Gunn said he's heard reports that unemployment claimants are not following requirements that they earnestly search for jobs, and that "MDES is not effectively enforcing that requirement."

Reeves' office did not respond to a request for comment.

Last August, Reeves announced the state would participate in a federal COVID-19 unemployment stipend created by an order of the Trump administration that would provide unemployed Mississippians an

extra \$300 a week. In Mississippi, state benefits are a maximum \$235 a week, with the average payment at less than \$200, compared to the national average of \$308 a week.

House Ways and Means Chairman Trey Lamar, R-Senatobia, said he has heard from numerous employers in his district that they can't find workers because of increased pandemic benefits.

"Not just one or two (employers)," Lamar said, "but a substantial number of businesses just here in my little hometown of Senatobia — restaurants, other businesses. The place where I used to get coffee in the mornings can't open in the mornings because they don't have enough workers ... I think it's past the point for this. People can safely go back to work."

But Mississippi has suffered from low wages, lack of jobs, high unemployment and low workforce participation long before the pandemic.

House Democratic Leader Rep. Robert Johnson of Natchez said, "let's raise the minimum wage first," before ending the pandemic unemployment stipend.

Johnson said "people have been working in poverty" because of the state's \$7.25 an hour minimum wage and should not be blamed for tak-

ing advantage of an opportunity to earn more thanks to the \$300 per week federal benefits stipend. Plus, he said, cutting the benefits off without taking other steps could harm people who are legitimately unemployed.

He said many states have increased their minimum wage to as much as \$15 per hour. If it was increased to \$9 or \$10 an hour in Mississippi, Johnson said it would help low wage workers and boost the economy.

Rep. Chris Bell, D-Jackson, said, "It's very unfortunate to hear about ending the unemployment benefits for Mississippians who are currently out of work."

"I don't know of a single person who would rather receive these benefits than find meaningful employment," Bell said. "The extension of unemployment benefits should not expire."

Mississippi's unemployment for March was 6.3%, higher than the national average of 6% and up from 6.1% in February. Overall, Mississippi's number of jobs remains down by 3% from last year.

Mississippi for March ranked last, at 56.1%, in workforce participation — a trend that predates the pandemic — and it ranks last in median household income at

\$45,081, also a trend predating COVID-19.

Mississippi's state economist recently reported that the state is forecast to see a major economic rebound in 2021, including job growth of 1.8%, the highest annual increase since 1998. He noted that much of that growth would be due to federal COVID-19 stimulus spending.



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## Auditor's office partners with school districts to cut outside-the-classroom spending

News Release

JACKSON, Miss. — Mississippi public schools could eliminate ineffective outside-the-classroom spending to potentially redirect over \$200 million to teacher salaries and classroom expenses each year, according to reports released this month by State Auditor Shad White. White's office recently partnered with three school districts to find ways to improve how they operate. This pilot project was conducted with the help of the advanced data analytics firm GlimpseK12 and was funded by the Mississippi Office of the State Auditor.

operations and expenditures examined with these cutting-edge data analytics techniques.

"I'm thankful for the leadership these school districts showed by volunteering to go under the microscope in the public view," said Auditor White. "I was happy to help these school districts identify ways they can prioritize their spending on teachers and the classroom."

Across the three school districts, GlimpseK12 identified opportunities to eliminate ineffective spending which would lead to annual savings of between \$7.5 and \$12.3 million. The spending areas with the largest opportunities for cost savings include software and digital products, maintenance, and supply chain management.

These school districts combined serve nearly 14,000 children. Together, they represent a range of municipal, county, and consolidated school systems. This level of savings spread across all public school students in the state could lead to over \$200 million of eliminated outside-the-classroom waste every year.

"I attended Mississippi public schools until I graduated from college, and I'm the child of a 35-year public school teacher," said Auditor White, "so I'm committed to doing my part to help make our public schools the best they can be."

Previous reports from the State Auditor's office showed ballooning outside-the-classroom spending, a comparison of education spending in other states, and priority given to administrative pay raises.

## Auditor arrests two Biloxi Public Schools employees for fraud and embezzlement

News Release

JACKSON, Miss. — Today State Auditor Shad White announced Special Agents from his office have arrested Michael Ludlow and Mickey Bellande, Jr. after both were indicted for fraud and embezzlement. Both Ludlow and Bellande are former maintenance employees at the Biloxi Public School District. Demand letters were presented to both men upon arrest.

Michael Ludlow is accused of submitting fraudulent timesheets from October 2020 to November 2020 to embezzle money from the Biloxi Public School District. He was allegedly absent from work during time he claimed to be present. Ludlow also purportedly conducted personal business at other times he was on the clock and being paid by the school district. Special Agents presented a \$6,678.32 demand letter to Ludlow when he was arrested. The demand amount includes interest and investigative expenses.

Investigators also believe Ludlow purchased controlled substances during the workday while using a district-owned vehicle away from school property. This incident was referred to the

appropriate law enforcement agency and is pending prosecution.



MICHAEL LUDLOW



MICKEY BELLANDE, JR.

appropriate law enforcement agency and is pending prosecution.

Mickey Bellande, Jr. also allegedly submitted fraudulent timesheets from May 2020 to August 2020 in order to embezzle from the school district. He is accused

of clocking into work and returning to his home for extended periods of time. He also allegedly used a district-owned vehicle to conduct his own personal business. Bellande was issued a \$2,870.99 demand letter when he was arrested. This amount includes interest and investigative expenses.

"I applaud the work of our investigators in this case and their cooperation with other law enforcement agencies to ensure the other illicit activities that were discovered will be fully investigated and prosecuted," said Auditor White.

Both Ludlow and Bellande were taken into custody at their respective homes on Wednesday morning with assistance from other law enforcement agencies. Bond for both men will be set by the court. Both cases will be prosecuted by the office of District Attorney Crosby Parker.

No surety bond covers either man's employment at the Biloxi Public School District. Surety bonds are similar to insurance designed to protect taxpayers from corruption. They will remain liable for the full amount of the demand in addition to criminal proceedings.

Suspected fraud can be reported to the Auditor's office online any time by clicking the red button at www.osa.ms.gov or via telephone during normal business hours at 1-(800)-321-1275.

## Obituary

ELAINE ROBINSON HUTCHISON

Elaine Robinson Hutchison, 91, of Sallis, MS passed away Saturday, May 8, 2021 at Baptist Medical Center in Kosciusko, MS.

A graveside service was held on Tuesday, May 11 at Pleasant Ridge Cemetery near Sallis, MS.



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