

# Deseret News

## Senior unemployment proposal shelved

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A controversial proposal to dock unemployment compensation paid to laid-off senior workers by the amount of money they receive from Social Security payments was put off until October by a legislative committee Wednesday.

The decision came after an lengthy discussion and a proposal to do away with the state's 2-year-old Social Security Offset rule. A bill that requires seniors to deduct half their Social Security payment from the amount paid in unemployment compensation to working seniors who lose their jobs through downsizing or other causes that are no fault of their own is scheduled to expire next year.

Rather than allow that and then increase the offset to 100 percent, as the state Department of Workforce Services has proposed, lawmakers decided to have staff members research the benefits and costs to doing away with the offset altogether.

Adopting the offset might have been illegal in the first place, given the ruling by a Utah Supreme Court in April that treating workers in similar situations differently for any reason violates the state's uniform operation of the law guarantee.

If the state were to impose a 100 percent offset of Social Security benefits, it would be the only state in the country to do so.

Not only would forcing seniors to deduct all of their Social Security from their unemployment benefits induce more court action, Melissa Smith, an advocate with Community Action Partnership of Utah, said the program isn't worth the financial harm it causes to seniors or the minimal savings to the state.

The state has never spent more than 7/10ths of a percent of the total unemployment benefits paid by the state on senior workers, she said, adding that if there had been a zero offset the past four years, payments to laid-off seniors would have been just over 1 percent of the total unemployment insurance benefits paid.

"Social Security offsets discriminate against jobless older workers merely because they have reached an age sufficient for them to get retirement benefits," Smith said. "Social Security is a form of pension, not unemployment insurance."

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