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Senate Democrats to hold hearings on expansion of unemployment benefits *Skyrocketing unemployment numbers necessitate examination of eligibility*

SALEM – Following news of skyrocketing unemployment rates in Oregon over the last six months, Senate Democrats plan to examine options for expanding the number of out-of-work Oregonians covered by unemployment insurance. Earlier today the Oregon Employment Department reported that the state's unemployment rate rose to 9.0%, a 1 percent increase from the last employment report released December 15th, 2008. At hearings planned for February, members of the Senate Committee on Commerce and Workforce Development will discuss the expansion of eligibility as well as the expected arrival of additional federal money to the state's unemployment insurance fund.

“We have good reason to believe that federal dollars are on the way that will increase our capacity to help out-of-work Oregonians,” said Sen. Diane Rosenbaum (D-Portland), chair of the Senate Commerce and Workforce Development Committee. “My committee will be looking for opportunities to expand eligibility for unemployment insurance to more Oregonians. These are extraordinary times and we need to look at ways that the state can help Oregon families stay afloat during this recession.”

The call for hearings on unemployment insurance benefits has become increasingly urgent as Oregon, ranked 5th in the nation in unemployment for the month of November, is now expected to rise to third in the nation when the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics releases national rankings next week. While many out-of-work Oregonians receive unemployment insurance following a job loss, many others find themselves ineligible. These hearings will examine ways that benefits can be extended to underserved sectors of the workforce.

“Senate Democrats have made a pledge to fight for economic security for Oregon families,” said Senate Majority Leader Richard Devlin (D-Tualatin). “We believe there are a number of areas where we can expand the number of Oregonians we are able to help. These hearings will examine available options to find the proposals that work best for all Oregonians.”

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