



Speaker's Press Clips
Friday, December 20, 2013

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FULL TEXT

Ala jobless rate drops to 6.2 percent

The Associated Press

December 20, 2013

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Alabama's unemployment rate is again down to a five-year low of 6.2 percent after the jobs picture improved in every county in the state, officials said Friday. The governor's office said the state jobless rate dropped two-tenths of a percent in November, down from October's revised rate of 6.4 percent.

The 6.2 percent rate matched a five-year low that was also achieved in July and August, and it also was below the U.S. unemployment rate of 7 percent.

The November rate represented 132,381 people without jobs in Alabama, compared to 148,956 people without work at the same time a year ago.

Gov. Robert Bentley said unemployment improved in each of the state's 67 counties for November.

"Every Alabama county has a decrease in their unemployment rate for November, and that is a sign that Alabamians are getting back to work in both rural and urban areas of Alabama," Bentley said in a statement.

Shelby County, located in metro Birmingham, had the state's lowest jobless rate at 3.6 percent. West Alabama's Wilcox County was highest at 13.9 percent.

Labor Commissioner Tom Surtees said seasonal retail hiring helped lower the unemployment rate.

"This traditionally happens during the months of November and December as employers prepare for the Christmas shopping rush," he said.

Retail operations saw an increase of almost 8,000 jobs, but statisticians also recorded improvements in trade, transportation and utilities. Government employment also grew along with education, health care and manufacturing.

Alabama's unemployment rate has not been at or below 6.2 percent since the beginning of the recession in October 2008, when the state jobless rate was 5.9 percent.

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State Rep. Jim Patterson announces bid to seek re-election

Al.com

December 20, 2013

Paul Gattis

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama - State Rep. Jim Patterson, whose district includes Hazel Green, parts of downtown Huntsville and eastern Madison County, has announced he will seek a second term in the legislature.

Patterson, a Republican from Meridianville who represents the House's 21st district, cited his record in Montgomery during his first term as a strength.

"I am proud of what we have accomplished over the last four years," Patterson said in his announcement. "We have truly changed Montgomery with real ethics reform, cutting wasteful spending and reforming our budget process to end proration. We are also growing our economy and have bringing new jobs and economic development across our state.

"As a small businessman and entrepreneur I know that we grow our economy by cutting taxes and investing in our roads and schools."

Patterson, who served 12 years on the Madison County Board of Education before his election to the legislature, also pointed to work done to support schools and improve roads.

"I am proud that over the last four years we have secured millions of dollars to build new schools in our community through the BRAC School Bond Bill and over \$80 million for our roads through the ATRIP Grant Program," he said. "These historic investments by our State will impact every part of my district and help us recruit new jobs and industry to our area."

Democrat Terry Jones is the only other candidate in the District 21 race to file so far with the state Secretary of State.

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Anti-meth law helps curb drug production in Lee County

Opelika-Auburn News

December 19, 2013

Drew Taylor

Lee County District Attorney Robbie Treese knows there will always be a way for people to make methamphetamine, but that it has become easier to find these people over the last year. Since first enforcing Alabama's anti-meth campaign, Lee County has been working to stop those from buying products with precursor chemicals with the purpose of creating meth. In August 2012, the state began enforcing a law passed during the previous legislative session making it illegal to purchase or provide key ingredients to make meth, such as pseudoephedrine, which is a common ingredient in most cold and allergy medications.

Since first being enforced, there have been 2,400 grams of precursor ingredients that have been kept off the streets in Lee County, totaling to approximately 960 boxes of pseudoephedrine, according to the National Association of Drug Diversion Investigators.

"Because of the means by which those transactions can be monitored by law enforcement in real time, it just puts another layer of protection between legitimate purchases and those that would want to circumvent the law," Treese said.

Sheriff Jay Jones said the law hasn't entirely stopped the production of meth, but it has put a hamper on how widespread it could be.

"It had a significant effect on the manufacturing and what we saw was a decline in production," Jones said. "It did not stop, because they're always going to be able to obtain what they need, but it did cause them to make a shift in how they acquired the precursor...and the law impacted their ability to do that."

One part of the law is the use of NPLEEx, or the National Precursor Log Exchange, which law enforcement agencies and pharmacies use to monitor those that buy precursor chemicals above the legal amount as it happens. This year was the first year pharmacies were required by law to use the system.

Treese said that before NPLEEx, it was much harder to track these suspects due to their use of smurfing, a process where a group would split up and go to several different pharmacies, purchase precursor chemicals and put them together to make meth.

“It was completely out of control,” Treese said. “The challenges are incredible when you think about trying to keep track of purchases by having to physically go where the purchases were made. It was a very difficult time, but it is far easier now and prosecutions are far easier as a result.”

Jones said he is thankful the law has helped the Sheriff’s Office and other law enforcement curb widespread purchase of precursor chemicals to make meth.

“Anything that works toward reducing the opportunity and reducing the availability of these substances, certainly that goes toward helping to curb the man of illicit pharmaceuticals,” Jones said.

Across the state, over 200,000 grams of pseudoephedrine were stopped from being sold for manufacturing meth in 2013.

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Rep. Martha Roby joins fight to protect military retirees, House bill designed to stop pension cuts

Al.com

December 19, 2013

Leada Gore

Just one day after the Senate's passage of a two-year budget agreement, Montgomery Republican Martha Roby is joining with other representatives to try and change one of its most controversial provisions.

Roby, along with Rep. Mike Fitzgerald, R-Penn., is joining with other lawmakers to repeal a provision that reduces pensions for working age military retirees beginning in 2015. Roby said she'd like to see the cuts replaced with a measure to prevent illegal aliens from receiving payments through the Refundable Child Tax Credit.

Roby, who voted for the budget plan in the House, said it does set a sustainable path for controlled federal spending and lessens the impact sequestration will have on the military. However, she said House members were not allowed to present amendments to the bill once it was on the House floor.

"One provision that is particularly troublesome is the one percent reduction in the cost of living adjustment for working age military retirees beginning in 2015. Just look at the vast federal government that is rife with waste. Are reductions to military benefits really the best place for Congress to make cuts? I don't think so, and that is why I believe that provision should be removed," Roby said.

The bill is the House version of one introduced earlier by Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-AL. A vote on Sessions measure was blocked, however, and lawmakers have vowed to repeal the measure.

The House bill introduced today would require recipients of the Refundable Child Tax Credit to be eligible citizens. The change could save as much as \$7 billion a year as compared to the \$6 billion in savings over the next decade from the cuts to cost-of-living adjustments for retired veterans younger than age 62.

Roby said she is working to have the measure come before the House when it returns in 2014.

"We need to make this right. In the coming weeks, we will try to use our position of strength in the House majority to improve upon the budget agreement and better prioritize our budget savings," Roby said.

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Bentley and Strange challenge EPA's power to halt economic development

Yellowhammer News

December 19, 2013

Adam Thomas

Gov. Robert Bentley and Attorney General Luther Strange announced this week that Alabama has joined a group of 27 states that are pushing back against the ever-expanding power of the Obama Administration's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The State of West Virginia recently requested the U.S. Supreme Court review a lower court's decision that upheld an unprecedented EPA veto of a Clean Water Act permit issued to the Mingo Logan Coal Company.

The U.S. Army Corp of Engineers issued the permit to the coal company, only to see the EPA revoke it nearly four years later in an unprecedented display of agency power.

Alabama has now joined an amicus brief in support of West Virginia's request that the Supreme Court intervene.

"The authority asserted by the EPA in the Mingo Logan case is unprecedented," Gov. Bentley said. "Alabama has joined West Virginia in support of challenging the D.C. Circuit Court's opinion that gave overreaching power to the EPA. If the decision by the D.C. Circuit Court stands and the EPA has unlimited veto authority, all states will be subject to devastating

uncertainty with respect to public works projects that require... permits under the Clean Water Act.”

Alabama’s section of the brief focuses on the Northern Beltline plan that is expected to “enhance cross-region accessibility, create jobs and stimulate economic growth” in Birmingham and the surrounding area.

Alabama Attorney General Luther Strange said the bottom line of the case is about economic growth.

“At its core, this lawsuit is about saving and protecting jobs and ensuring public or private projects do not get halted midway by a federal agency that changed its mind,” Strange said. “This case is about states being able to engage and promote economic development, highway construction and other needed investments without fearing a federal agency will step in years later and halt the project. That is why we strongly support Mingo Logan Coal Co.’s appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.”

Alabama has joined 26 other states in supporting the brief filed by the West Virginia Attorney General.

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Alabama State close to getting new president

The Associated Press

December 19, 2013

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Alabama State University is close to getting a new president after a year of turmoil.

University trustees are meeting in Montgomery on Friday to interview three finalists and possibly select a president.

First up was retired Brigadier Gen. Samuel Nichols, who was deputy commander of the U.S. Joint Task Force at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Nichols says he doesn't have a doctorate degree, but he does have 36 years of leadership experience in the military, including managing a \$120 million annual budget at Guantanamo Bay.

Next up for interviews are Delores Boyd, the executive assistant to the chief of staff of the Applied Physics Lab at John Hopkins University, and Democratic state Sen. Quinton Ross of Montgomery.

Boyd and Ross are Alabama State graduates.

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Christian group launches online petition demanding A&E reinstate, issue apology to suspended 'Duck Dynasty' star

Al.com

December 19, 2013

Erin Edgemon

Christian group Faith Driven Consumer has started an online petition drive asking A&E to reinstate “Duck Dynasty” star Phil Robertson and issue him an apology.

The petition located at IStandWithPhil.com has received 23,642 signatures as of early Thursday afternoon.

Several Facebook pages supporting Robertson have also popped up since his indefinite suspension was announced due to anti-gay remarks made in a GQ magazine article. The largest has nearly 400,000 likes.

The online petition states, in part:

“Mr. Robertson’s comments in GQ Magazine are simply reflective of a Biblical view of sexuality, marriage, and family – a view that has stood the test of time for thousands of years and continues to be held by the majority of Americans and today’s world as a whole.

“Many members of the LGBT community may not agree with this view, but the notion that a free-thinking American should be discriminated against simply for expressing a perspective that is in conflict with another is patently un-American and flies in the face of true tolerance and civility. A&E’s position, which in your own words is “championing” the gay and lesbian community — which I believe you have the freedom to do — excludes the views of Faith Driven Consumers and effectively censors a legitimate viewpoint held by the majority of Americans.”

Chris Stone, founder of Faith Driven Consumer, told The Hollywood Reporter, that Robertson is “being censored and punished for quoting the Bible.

“Everyday people will not stand for this; they know bullying and violation of religious freedom when they see it,” he said. “A&E’s actions are censoring faith-driven consumers and eliminating them from an entertainment choice that they have overwhelmingly supported.”

Robertson released his own statement on Wednesday in response to his comments, but before his suspension:

"I myself am a product of the '60s; I centered my life around sex, drugs and rock and roll until I hit rock bottom and accepted Jesus as my Savior. My mission today is to go forth and tell people about why I follow Christ and also what the Bible teaches, and part of that teaching is that women and men are meant to be together. However, I would never treat anyone with disrespect just because they are different from me. We are all created by the Almighty and like Him, I love all of humanity. We would all be better off if we loved God and loved each other."

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President helps 3 from Alabama

The Associated Press

December 19, 2013

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Former Alabama Gov. Don Siegelman was not among the 21 people who received commutations and pardons from the president on Thursday.

Siegelman's family and supporters have been trying to get President Barack Obama to help the former governor, who is in federal prison for bribery.

The president did act on three cases from Alabama. He commuted the life sentence of Clarence Aaron of Mobile so that he will be released in April. Aaron was convicted on drug charges involving cocaine. The president said Aaron and others receiving commutations were sentenced under old drug laws that were unduly harsh.

The president granted pardons to Charlie Lee Davis Jr. of Wetumpka and Martin Alan Hatcher of Foley. Both were convicted of drug crimes and have finished their sentences.

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U.S. government to offer tax penalty exemption for those who lost health plan, couldn't find coverage

The Associated Press

December 20, 2013

WASHINGTON — Trying to head off more bad news over the chaotic rollout of President Barack Obama's health care law, the administration Thursday offered stopgap options so people whose existing plans got canceled are not penalized.

Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said in a letter to a group of senators that she will use authorities in the law to issue a "hardship exemption" from tax penalties to those who received cancellations and were not able to line up new coverage.

The administration is also opening up a special coverage plan created under the law for young adults. Regardless of their age, Sebelius said people whose plans were canceled will be able to buy a bare bones catastrophic plan intended for those under 30.

Additionally, the department is setting up a dedicated hotline for those who got cancellations, at 1-866-837-0677.

The insurance industry immediately criticized the moves.

"This latest rule change could cause significant instability in the marketplace and lead to further confusion and disruption for consumers," said Robert Zirkelbach, spokesman for America's

Health Insurance Plans. Only Wednesday, the industry had announced its own accommodation — giving consumers an extra 10 days to pay January's premiums.

The Oct. 1 launch of the HealthCare.gov website became an embarrassment for the administration after problems with the online gateway to coverage froze out millions of potential customers. But the biggest political damage to the president has come from cancellations issued to at least 4 million people who had individual plans they purchased themselves. Those plans did not pass muster under the health care law, which generally requires more robust benefits.

Obama was roundly criticized for renegeing on a longstanding promise that if you liked your plan, you would be able to keep it under his health care law. The president apologized, and then said insurers could extend those plans for one more year. Most state regulators followed Obama's lead and gave insurance companies the additional latitude, but it's unclear whether the problem has been fully resolved.

Although the website is now working more smoothly, there's still a concern that technology problems may prevent some people who got cancellations from signing up for a new plan. Consumers have until Dec. 23 — Monday — to pick a plan if they want their coverage to take effect Jan. 1, thus avoiding a break in coverage. The industry says it will accept payment of the first month's premiums until Jan. 10. Timely payment is required for the new plan to take effect.

"There still may be a small number of consumers who are not able to renew their existing plans and are having difficulty finding an acceptable replacement," Sebelius wrote Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., and several of his colleagues, adding: "These consumers should qualify for this temporary hardship exemption."

Separately, the administration on Thursday estimated at less than 500,000 those who have not yet found other coverage in the wake of seeing their coverage canceled. More than 4 million people have had their plans canceled because their coverage does not meet the new standards under the law.

Democrats praised the latest steps as a commonsense backup in a difficult situation. Republicans panned the administration action as another patch to an unworkable law.

Insurers are concerned that healthy customers who potentially would have bought full coverage may now stay out of the market, leaving the companies with a group of patients in worse health overall.

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Obama administration relaxes rules of health-care law four days before deadline

Washington Post

December 19, 2013

The Obama administration on Thursday night significantly relaxed the rules of the federal health-care law for millions of consumers whose individual insurance policies have been

canceled, saying they can buy bare-bones plans or entirely avoid a requirement that most Americans have health coverage.

The surprise announcement, days before the Dec. 23 deadline for people to choose plans that will begin Jan. 1, triggered an immediate backlash from the health insurance industry and raised fairness questions about a law intended to promote affordable and comprehensive coverage on a widespread basis.

All your Affordable Care Act questions answered

All your Affordable Care Act questions answered

We've compiled questions and answers around the topics discussed most, so you can browse what others have asked and get answers of your own.

Obamacare #realtalk

Obamacare #realtalk

TUMBLR| Answers to the Internet's questions about the Affordable Care Act.

Shopping for Obamacare? Tell us about it!

Shopping for Obamacare? Tell us about it!

Sarah Kliff

Is HealthCare.gov working for you? We want to know!

Implementing Obamacare

Implementing Obamacare

LATEST UPDATES | What you need to know about the new health-care law as it begins to take effect.

The rule change was issued in a bulletin from the Department of Health and Human Services. It is the second major response by the Obama administration to a public and political furor that erupted in the fall when several million people who bought their own insurance began to receive notices that their policies were being canceled because they fell short of new benefit standards. The cancellations prompted complaints that President Obama had reneged on an oft-repeated promise that, under the Affordable Care Act, people who like their health plans could keep them.

At a news conference in mid-November, an apologetic Obama relented to the criticism, announcing that the federal government would let insurance companies continue for another year to offer individuals and small businesses health plans that do not meet the new requirements. The decision, however, is up to each state's insurance regulator, and not all have gone along.

This second change, prompted by a group of Democratic senators — most of whom face tough reelection campaigns next year — goes substantially further in accommodating people upset about losing their policies. The latest rule will allow consumers with a canceled health plan to claim a “hardship exemption” if they think the plans sold through new federal and state marketplaces are too expensive.

The ability to get an exemption means that the administration is freeing these people from one of the central features of the law: a requirement that most Americans have health insurance as of Jan. 1 or risk a fine. The exemption gives them the choice of having no insurance or of buying skimpy “catastrophic” coverage.

Until now, the law allowed people younger than 30 to buy catastrophic coverage — an exception to the law’s benefit rules in an effort to attract young adults who have been particularly prone to avoiding coverage in the past. The law also has allowed hardship exemptions for people 30 and older who could not afford the regular coverage.

It is unclear how many people facing canceled policies will choose no insurance, bare-bones coverage or a plan through the insurance exchanges that meet new federal standards. But the prospect that healthy people with canceled insurance might opt out of the new health plans set off immediate alarm among insurance industry leaders, who already have been worried whether enough people who are inexpensive to cover will sign up.

“This latest rule change could cause significant instability in the marketplace and lead to further confusion and disruption for consumers,” said Karen Ignagni, president of America’s Health Insurance Plans, the industry’s main trade group.

Another health insurance official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he lacked authorization to discuss the matter publicly, pointed out that the hardship exemption also gives one group the ability to buy coverage whenever they want, rather than during annual open-enrollment periods. As a result, he said, more people might not buy insurance unless they get sick.

Federal health officials estimated Thursday that, of all the people whose substandard health plans have been canceled, less than half a million have not chosen new coverage. But they acknowledged that they were not certain.

The insurance official suggested that some people who have chosen new health plans after receiving a cancellation notice might back out of their new coverage to take advantage of the administration’s sudden offer.

Federal health officials, however, predicted that relatively few people would take advantage of the opportunity to avoid the law’s benefits requirement, reasoning that they have had insurance in the past so would probably want it in the future.

“This is a common-sense clarification of the law,” said Joanne Peters, a spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Human Services. “For the limited number of consumers whose plans have been canceled and are seeking coverage, this is one more option.”

The administration’s move is a swift response to the dozen Democratic senators, who contended that steps the president had taken did not go far enough to help people whose insurance was canceled.

Six of those senators sent a letter on Wednesday to HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, asking for her to allow people whose plans have been canceled to claim hardship exceptions and buy bare-bones catastrophic coverage. “We have heard from many of our constituents who are upset by

the cancellation of the health plans,” said the letter, whose signers include both of Virginia’s senators, Mark R. Warner (D) and Timothy M. Kaine (D).

The six senators issued a statement Thursday night, saying that they are “pleased the administration appears to have responded to the concerns we’ve raised. . . . We will closely monitor how the administration implements this option, and we remain committed to proposing responsible solutions.”

As administration officials are granting more flexibility to one group of consumers, they also are working to cope with what is expected to be a rush of people signing up for health plans through the new federal insurance marketplace by the Dec. 23 enrollment deadline. After a trouble-ridden first two months for the insurance Web site, HealthCare.gov, it is working smoothly, they said. They also have added 800 trained staff members to their call centers for people who want enrollment advice by phone, so that there are now 12,000 staffers at 17 call centers nationwide.