

Saturday, May 9, 2009

Obama: Encouraging signs, but too many remain out of work

By **DARLENE SUPERVILLE**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON —

President Barack Obama said Friday there have been “somewhat encouraging” improvements in the country’s stricken labor markets, but the rate of joblessness is “still a sobering toll.”

The president spoke shortly after the government reported that the jobless rate rose to 8.9 percent in April, although the pace of layoffs slowed to 539,000 from well over 600,000 the previous month. He also announced a new plan to permit jobless people to return to college without losing their unemployment benefits.

Obama said that “if we want to come out of this recession better than before, we have to make sure we have a work force that’s trained better than before.”

As for the overall economy, he said: “Although we have a long way to go before we can put this recession behind us, the gears of our economic engine do seem to be slowly turning once again.”

The president asked states and colleges to help jobless people pursue education and training without losing their unemployment benefits, which typically happens when they enroll in school. They also often fail to qualify for federal grants

because eligibility is based on the previous year’s income.

Under Obama’s plan, the Labor Department will encourage states to update rules during economic downturns so the unemployed can enroll in community colleges and other education or training programs without giving up their benefits. States generally require people who collect unemployment to be actively looking for work, which can make it difficult to sign up for school or job training. Going to school will satisfy the requirement that they be actively seeking new employment.

“In a 21st century economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge,” Obama said, “education is the single best bet we can make not just for our individual success, but for the success of our nation as a whole.”

The Education Department will encourage colleges to increase financial aid packages for the unemployed. Colleges can consider unemployed workers’ situation and make them eligible for Pell Grants, which help low-income students afford college, and other aid.

An unemployed person could get a Pell Grant and use it to pay for education or job training without giving up unemployment benefits. Beginning in July, the maximum Pell Grant will increase by \$500, to \$5,350.



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President Barack Obama looks on as **Sharon Arnold**, a small business owner from Illinois, speaks Friday, in the Eisenhower Executive Office building in Washington.