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Lawmakers understand joblessness

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LINCOLN — After 12 years of working as a copywriter and editor for an Omaha bank, State Sen. Mike Friend got a sobering notice at work recently.

He was being laid off.

Suddenly, the 47-year-old married father of four was facing what more than a few Nebraskans have faced during the current recession.

That he still has his \$12,000-a-year position as a state legislator is some solace, but it doesn't pay the bills or provide health insurance or other benefits as did his former job with First National Bank of Omaha.

"It's the kind of world we're living in right now," Friend said of being out of work. "I'm really no different than anyone else other than I have two jobs. At least I had two jobs."

Four of Nebraska's 49 state senators are currently without jobs. A fifth left the unemployment line just this summer.

Though it has always been a struggle to balance a real job with the alternating 90- and 60-day legislative sessions, observers say the number of unemployed legislators is higher than ever.

It's a sign of the tough economic times, they say, and possibly reflective of the younger breed of state lawmakers seen in the term-limit era.

"We're going through a prolonged economic crisis, and it affects everyone," said Greg Petrow, a political science professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. "We think of our leaders as untouched or untouchable, but, in fact, they live in the same place we do, and they're affected by the economy, too."

Kim Robak, a lobbyist and former lieutenant governor, said some senators and employers shy away from some part-time jobs because of the tougher scrutiny applied to perceived conflicts of interest.

"And being a state senator is not just part time — you're there half a year," she said. "Even when the session's over, you're still working."

The out-of-work senators — Friend, Amanda McGill, Mark Christensen and Russ Karpisek — said it's hard to find a job with the flexibility required for serving in the Legislature, and even harder when the economy has taken a nose dive.

Karpisek, a 42-year-old married father of two, sold his family meat market in Wilber in November but figured "something would pop up" during the 2009 session, which ended May 29.

Nothing did.

"Now I'm really looking hard," he said.

Karpisek said he took the exam last week to obtain a real estate license and plans to explore that field.

He said he lost one job opportunity because the prospective employer planned to seek state funding, and neither he nor the employer wanted any "improprieties."

Karpisek said his wife, Jill, has found a new job, though the family is "pinching pennies" while still paying off debts owed on the meat market.

"We don't go out to too many expensive meals," he said. "We went out on our 19th anniversary to eat wings and drink cheap beer at DeWitt."

Senators are barred from taking some jobs. In 1991, the State Supreme Court ruled that then-State Sen. Gerald Conway could not also work as an instructor at Wayne State College.

Not being able to work at a state institution makes it tough to find work in Lincoln, where the state and the state university are two of the major employers, said McGill, a 29-year-old former television news reporter.

McGill was laid off last November from an advertising agency. She is applying for a certificate to work as a substitute schoolteacher this fall and is seeking another part-time job.

"It is frustrating," she said. "People kind of group us in with politicians who make a lot of money. I just laugh at that. It couldn't be farther from the case."

Senators who live within 50 miles of the capital get a \$39-a-day allowance during the legislative session (it's \$109 for senators who live farther away) and are paid mileage for trips to the Capitol. The job carries no other paid benefits, such as health care or retirement pensions.

McGill said her take-home legislative pay is \$850 a month, which doesn't meet her mortgage payment. She canceled her cable TV service long ago.

"Those of us out of work, we understand what people are going through," McGill said. "I know what it means to budget myself. I have to tell friends I can't go out for a nice dinner because I can't afford it. A lot of people are facing that."

Christensen, 47, a married father of seven, sold his commodity brokerage client list last fall in a move related to the economic downturn.

Now he's living off the proceeds of the sale. He also has resumed farming and ranching, taking back some property he had been renting out and also renting other farm ground.

To cut expenses, Christensen is doing the finish work on his family's new home instead of hiring workers. He also plans to sell seed to farmers later this summer.

"It's a hardship," he said. "I'm eating up equity. No one likes to do that to live."

Friend said he has begun networking with friends to find a new job.

He said the larger number of out-of-work senators reflects a "new breed" of younger lawmakers, who might not be as established in their careers as older senators.

"It's not just farmers and ranchers and lawyers anymore," said Friend, whose wife, Jacqueline, works as a real estate agent.

State Sen. Jeremy Nordquist of Omaha, 27, said his experience in state government probably helped him gain a job recently with Building Bright Futures, an Omaha-based community organization.

Nordquist lost his last job — legislative aide to former State Sen. John Synowiecki — when he was elected to the post himself. He said he and his wife, Shannon, lived off his senator's salary and her student loan until she graduated in June and got a job.

The out-of-work senators all said the thought of quitting their legislative posts has crossed their minds but said they're not ready to do that. Being jobless gives them more time to do legislative work, they said, including attending summer conferences, taking tours, making public appearances and attending interim study hearings.

"I wouldn't quit midterm, and I do want to run again," said Karpisek, who was first elected in 2006.

Voters next May will have a chance to increase salaries of Nebraska state senators by \$10,000, to \$22,000 a year. It would be the first raise for legislators since 1988.

McGill said a raise would help, but she loves public service too much to quit.

"I'll take jobs working nights and weekends at a restaurant if I have to," she said.

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