

CITY

Study Finds Rise in Benefits For the Unemployed of 9/11

By LESLIE EATON

In one way at least, the thousands of New York City workers left jobless after 9/11 were luckier than those unemployed earlier or later — because they were far more likely to collect benefits from New York State's unemployment insurance program.

That is the unexpected finding of a report to be released this week by the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University. It is based on questionnaires filled out by more than 2,500 New Yorkers in the five boroughs who were unemployed in 2001 or 2002.

Only 52 percent of those who became unemployed before 9/11 collected unemployment insurance benefits, the study found, but that percentage jumped to almost 65 percent in the months after the disaster. In 2002, however, the percentage fell to 56.5.

The increases after 9/11 were particularly striking among those workers who are normally least likely to collect unemployment insurance: immigrants, low-wage workers and members of minority groups, according to the study.

The temporary increase came as something of a surprise to researchers, said Annette Bernhardt, senior policy analyst for the Brennan Center and an author of the report. It attributes the rise in benefits to the outpouring of assistance by government, charity, union and community groups, which informed jobless workers about their eligibility for benefits and helped them with the automated telephone application process.

"The lesson is that workers need help in accessing the unemployment insurance system," Dr. Bernhardt said. "They need a center that they can go to for information, staff that can help them figure out their eligibility, and translators to help them navigate what really is a complex application system."

A spokesman for the New York State Department of Labor, Robert M. Lillpopp, said he had not seen the Brennan Center study and so could not comment on it. The department did not relax its rules on unemployment insurance eligibility after 9/11, he said.

But, he added, the department it-

self did extensive advertising to inform unemployed workers about benefits and other help. "We printed hundreds of thousands of palm cards in multiple languages — English, Spanish, Chinese and Korean," he said, which were distributed at aid centers and job fairs.

And the state has since created a "language line" that connects people applying for benefits to someone who speaks their native tongue, Mr. Lillpopp said. The department now also allows people to apply over the Internet.

Critics of the state program frequently complain that workers who do not speak English or Spanish have difficulty navigating the system for getting and keeping benefits, a problem in a city where people speak everything from Albanian to Urdu. And a federal judge recently ruled that the state continues to reject applications improperly, despite some improvements.

Mark Humowiecki, a staff attorney at MFY Legal Services, said he was representing a worker whose native language is Bengali and whose English is limited. His client applied, ultimately successfully, for benefits, but then failed to navigate the automated system that those who receive benefits must use to check in every week.

"I'm amazed at the number of hoops he has to go through just to get less than \$200 a week in benefits," Mr. Humowiecki said, adding that his client has filed an appeal with the Appellate Division of State Supreme Court in Albany.

New York State's unemployment insurance program provides up to six months of benefits for jobless people who qualify; the maximum payment is \$405 a week, though the statewide average is less than \$275, according to the federal Department of Labor.

And even though most workers pay unemployment insurance taxes, only 44 percent of those statewide who lost their jobs collected benefits last year, according to federal data.

The Brennan Center percentages were higher in part because of the way the questionnaires were distributed, Dr. Bernhardt said. Some participants filled them out with the assistance of community groups that had helped them to apply for benefits.