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Statement by Senator Edmund S. Muskie on the Emergency Employment Act of 1971, S. 31

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STATEMENT BY SENATOR EDMUND S. MUSKIE
EMERGENCY EMPLOYMENT ACT OF 1971, S. 31

I support fully the bill we are debating today - The Emergency Employment Act of 1971, S. 31. Enactment of this bill is long overdue. If Congressional initiative had been respected by the President last year, thousands of Americans would be employed who are presently out of work. They would be earning paychecks instead of waiting for unemployment or welfare checks. This bill then is necessary but two facts about it should be clear. First, this bill is merely emergency legislation responding to the present crisis of unacceptable high rates of unemployment and; two, ~~this bill is stopgap legislation, and it should and must be~~ replaced by a much more comprehensive and long-range bill.

For many months, the nation has been assured that the ever increasing rate of unemployment is only transitional; that it is the sacrifice we must make to combat inflation. The sacrifice has been made but the victory has not been achieved. The plague of inflation continues largely unabated.

Today, while the average rate of unemployment has slightly dipped from its December high, it is well above the 4.5% rate that the Administration proposed last year as the rate which would trigger emergency funds for additional manpower training programs. The average rate of unemployment of 5.8% is not the whole story. Like the man who drowned trying to walk across a lake, the average depth of which was only three feet, large pockets of our economy -- fifty major labor areas and many rural areas -- have unemployment rates shockingly higher than the national average. For some areas, and for some selected groups in our nation (non-whites and youth particularly), rates run as high as thirty and forty percent.

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We are told by Administration supporters that we must be patient and wait for the day when the unemployment rate drops as the pace of the economy quickens. Many of us feel that we can no longer wait.

While we play statistical games with index changes of .4% we forget that each 1% of that index represents 800,000 people -- men without paychecks, families with growing expenses and decreasing funds. This is not just a statistical fact, it is a human problem; a problem that must be handled now.

Also, it must be remembered that even during the prosperous periods of the 1960's, persistent unemployment haunted the country. National prosperity did not break the cycle of poverty in many areas of our economy. Yet many policy makers believed and still believe that economic growth alone will do the job.

Other peoples have, of course, realized that special efforts are necessary if we are to cure the persistent problem of unemployment. The private sector, particularly through the National Alliance of Businessmen, has made a creditable effort to hire and train the unemployed and especially the hard-core unemployed. Many of our business leaders have devoted time and interest to this effort. It would not be reasonable, however, to expect the private sector to do the whole job, particularly when the practical effect of national economic policies is to dampen economic expansion in the name of inflation control. When orders decrease, layoffs occur. The last employed, often the recently employed "hard-core", are the first to go.

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In the meantime, co-existing with the problem of persistent unemployment, there is the problem of the deteriorating conditions of our cities and of our rural areas . Revenues decrease while the demands for services increase . Without revenues, vital services are not provided. The unemployed could be put to work providing these necessary services. These are real jobs, not, as has been claimed, "leaf-raking".

During the hearings on the Employment and Training Act of 1970, uncontested testimony was given that jobs exist. In a survey of the mayors of fifty cities of 100,000 population or more, 280,000 job possibilities distributed among thirteen municipal public service functions were uncovered. In every case it was noted that these possibilities were purely theoretical because funds were not available to make them into real job openings.

Even more significant was the fact that city representatives estimated that there were at least 140,000 jobs that did not require technical or professional training and could be filled by inner city residents.

These jobs are not only real, they are essential. Even allowing that supervisors often overestimate their manpower needs, it is clear that public services are deteriorating in all areas of our country and that there is an infinite variety of useful work that can be done. With unemployment persistently higher than any acceptable level, and needed work begging to be done, we are wasting precious resources.

Finally, the great merit of this kind of public service program is that it is aimed specifically at those sectors of the labor market

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that benefit least from present programs, that share least in economic growth, and suffer most from the unemployment caused by present national economic policies. We know that while many of the uneducated and unskilled did not share in our previous prosperity, they have more than their share of the present recession. This situation is pervasive and explosive.

After extended hearing and debate, the last Congress passed the Employment and Training Opportunities Act of 1970, a comprehensive overhaul of the country's manpower programs. That bill included a strong permanent public sector job creation program. The President vetoed that bill largely because of the public sector job provisions. The Administration proposes creating 200,000 public service jobs for welfare recipients, but it has difficulty accepting this concept for the unemployed. Calling jobs transitional will not change the fact that we need the jobs, whether a person is on welfare or not, and the jobs need to be done. If we pass this legislation today, we establish the concept that there are public sector jobs that are needed and important, and that people who need jobs can do them.

I support fully the view of my colleague, Senator Nelson, the distinguished Chairman of the Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty of the Labor and Public Welfare Committee, that the nation must have a strong comprehensive manpower legislation. He led the effort to enact such legislation last year. I know he will make that effort again this session. This legislation will allow us to go forward and create a permanent comprehensive public employment program during this Congress.