

Workforce Management

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Trade agreements might cost some American workers their jobs, but the government stands ready to help them get back on their feet. That's the message from Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao, who last month touted the Trade Adjustment Assistance program in a speech at the conservative Heritage Foundation.

Chao outlined the benefits to her audience: 104 weeks of income, job training, child care, health care and transportation support.

"America is a compassionate nation," Chao said. "And nowhere is this more apparent than in the generous assistance offered to workers whose jobs have been displaced by trade."

But a critic says the Bush administration's actions do not live up to its rhetoric.

Typically, workers--or HR managers on their behalf--must petition for federal help rather than being contacted by the government, says Howard Rosen, a former Democratic congressional aide and Labor Department economist who now heads the Trade Adjustment Assistance Coalition.

Rosen says Chao's speech was the first time he'd heard her advocate Trade Adjustment Assistance. It followed House approval of the Central America Free Trade Agreement by a two-vote margin after fierce White House lobbying. Rosen says the Clinton and Bush administrations avoided drawing attention to workers left behind by the global economy.

"The last thing they want is those numbers to come out when they're trying to get a CAFTA through Congress," Rosen says. "The Labor Department looks for ways to deny the assistance, as if getting assistance is a bad thing."

But a Bush official says the department actually streamlined and improved the program it inherited in 2001.

"Workers are able to go into one-stop career centers and access trade adjustment assistance benefits and services faster than they have ever been able to before," says

Mason Bishop, deputy assistant secretary of labor for the Employment and Training Administration.

Department statistics indicate that 75,726 workers received income support during fiscal 2004, up from 32,808 in 2000, and 46,938 were retrained. The number of days required to process an assistance petition has dropped from nearly 100 to 27, Bishop says.

The administration provides states \$220 million annually for the trade adjustment assistance program and works with them to distribute information at operations slated for closure.

A company's human resources department is usually responsible for triggering the response process.

"We depend on HR people because they're the ones who are the gateway to the program," says Rosen, who conducts workshops around the country on trade adjustment assistance.

(Program details can be found at www.doleta.gov/programs/factsht/taa.cfm.)

Efforts to expand assistance to service employees as part of CAFTA failed because of administration resistance, according to Capitol Hill Democrats. "This is the first significant piece of trade legislation in years that did not include something for U.S. workers," Rosen says.

Bishop says the administration has clarified assistance rules so that service employees who work on-site, such as accountants at a textile factory, can receive help if their plant is shut down.

—[Mark Schoeff Jr.](#)