

# ARRA backup in case Labor swamped by gov't layoffs

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In the event expected layoffs of government workers exhaust funding programs, the agency will be able to tap into a \$200 million federal National Emergency Grant reserve for "massive layoff events," Labor Department Secretary Miguel Romero said Tuesday.

"We have not applied for the grant because we have not run out of money. But we know it is available for that [layoffs of public employees]," Romero said during a round table with reporters at Puerto Rico Infrastructure Financing Authority headquarters in Hato Rey.

Both Romero and Puerto Rico Infrastructure Financing Authority Executive Director Erwin Kless discussed how American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds are being used to retrain local laid-off employees, including those on an expanded renewable energy industry on the island.

AFI, as the agency is known for its Spanish initials, was charged with monitoring spending of ARRA funds, according to an amendment to the original legislation approved in March.



Daily Sun/Miguel Rios

## Labor Secretary Miguel Romero

While National Emergency Grant money was originally set aside for only private-sector employees, ARRA was amended to allow such funding to be used to help government workers who have been laid off, said Romero, who noted the change responded to the fact that more than 40 states face budget problems this year.

Romero acknowledged the island's

climbing unemployment, including the nearly 8,000 public workers fired during the summer in the first round of layoffs under fiscal emergency Law 7, has put pressure on Labor Department services.

But he added that an injection of \$169 million in ARRA funds has helped the agency weather the storm. This includes \$2.9 million that were used to improve the agency's call-in system for unemployment claims, which reached 275,000 during the last two-week cycle in August. In fact, he said the system could go 24-7 as early as October.

Puerto Rico's unemployed have also been receiving an additional \$25 a week on top of their \$110 weekly check thanks to additional federal unemployment compensation, of which the island had received some \$61.5 million as of Aug. 28, Romero said. And the island has the potential of receiving an additional \$165 million until June 30, 2010, he said.

He said ARRA money allowed the government to provide 52,000 summer jobs to island youth, given that the Right To Work Administration lacked the funding, Romero said.

Some \$92.1 million in ARRA money was assigned during the current fiscal year for retraining programs, which made up for a

\$46.9 million cut in regular Work Investment Act federal funding, said Romero. He also noted that the government hopes to create an undetermined number of jobs with an ARRA-aided boost of a renewable energy sector on the island. For this purpose, the agency submitted a proposal last week to get \$5 million in Energy Training Partnership funding.

"This will train people for potential renewable energy-related jobs such as mechanics for hybrid vehicles and windmill and waste-to-energy workers," he said, noting that local universities have handed in curriculum proposals for training in such areas as solar panel installation and climatology engineering.

Kless said the ARRA-funded local Weatherization System Program to make homes energy efficient should be running by October. AFI is contracting personnel for the program, given that the Office of Energy Affairs, which is running the program, lacks the infrastructure.

Romero said that the job-creating potential of the newly created "green economy" energy sector depends on the ability of the island to be "competitive" in allowing such such businesses to be established here. The new permits law and public-private alliances will be key, he said.