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LIEBERMAN ASSAILS GOP FOR REFUSING TO EXTEND UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS FOR 2005 HURRICANE VICTIMS

Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Ranking Member Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., Tuesday assailed the priorities of Republican leaders who refuse to extend unemployment benefits for victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita while moving to repeal the estate tax for heirs of the wealthy.

Legislation to extend disaster unemployment benefits for hurricane victims for 13 weeks has languished, while the Senate plans to take up legislation to repeal the estate tax later this week. Unemployment insurance legislation is also stalled in the House.

“The President once said he would do whatever it takes to help rebuild the Gulf Coast. I call on him now to urge the Congress to provide relief to the thousands of families who have lost everything, rather than focus on repealing the estate tax for less that one percent of Americans who inherit multi-million dollar fortunes.”

“What sort of message does it send to America, and the rest of the world, that the Congress refuses to help those most in need while it prepares to give a leg up to those who least need a hand?” Lieberman asked. “The GOP’s priorities are

unconscionable given that residents of the Gulf Coast are still struggling to rebuild their homes, businesses, and lives torn from them by a combination of nature and the failure of government officials to lead and respond. ”

The disaster relief legislation sponsored by Senator Lieberman, along with Senators Mary Landrieu (D-La.) and Edward Kennedy, (D-Mass.), would have extended benefits for Katrina victims until September 1 and for Rita victims until September 23. Benefits expired June 3 for Katrina victims and will expire June 24 for Rita victims, affecting a total of 83,514 families.

“The average check for a family in the Gulf Coast receiving unemployment benefits after Hurricane Katrina was $104 for families from Louisiana and $208 for Mississippi families, while a repeal of the estate tax would largely benefit families inheriting estates worth millions of dollars,” said Senator Lieberman. “As residents of the Gulf Coast continue the daunting task of rebuilding their lives, they need our support and our assistance.”

While more than nine months have passed since Hurricane Katrina hit landfall, Gulf Coast families continue to struggle to find permanent housing and jobs. The Bureau of Labor Statistics has recently reported that 25 percent of displaced Hurricane Katrina victims who have been living out-of-state remained unemployed in May, more than five times the national average. There are 200,000 fewer jobs in Louisiana than there were before landfall.