

**Opening Statement of Chairman Sheldon Whitehouse
Senate Committee on the Budget
Committee to Consider S. 1274 The REEF Act
March 6, 2024**

This morning, the Committee will consider and vote on S. 1274, the Railroad Employee Equity and Fairness, or REEF Act. This bipartisan legislation would permanently end mandated cuts to railroad workers' unemployment and sickness insurance benefits, putting more money in the pockets of rail employees.

Nearly 200,000 active railroad workers are eligible for unemployment and sickness benefits from the Railroad Retirement Board's (RRB) Unemployment Insurance Account. But likely because of an omission Congress made almost 40 years ago, the RRB is subject to sequestration. Beginning on May 10, 2023, sequestration reduced railroad unemployment and sickness insurance benefits by 5.7 percent – reviving benefit cuts that had been paused during the pandemic.

No other unemployed workers face these kinds of cuts. No one ever should.

Today's markup of the REEF Act is the first step to fixing that error and ensuring that affected railroad workers receive their full earned benefits.

Workers should receive the benefits they have worked for and are entitled to. This bipartisan legislation is championed by both railroad labor and railroad industry. I ask unanimous consent that a letter written jointly by rail corporations and rail workers be inserted into the record.

This bipartisan legislation also does not make any changes to the program's eligibility or benefit structure. And because the railroad unemployment program is self-financing and has a dedicated trust fund, paying these benefits does not meaningfully contribute to the deficit. It never made sense for it to be sequestered. And the bill before us today—which would exempt railroad workers' earned benefits from sequestration—has no meaningful effect on the deficit, either.

I strongly recommend members vote yes on this bill.

Finally, I'd like to thank our esteemed colleague from Nebraska, Senator Fischer, for her leadership and work to correct this oversight, and for her willingness to join us today to speak on her bill.

I also want to recognize our distinguished colleague from Minnesota, Senator Klobuchar, who was an introductory cosponsor of the REEF Act, and who has championed this bipartisan legislation alongside Senator Brown.

I will recognize them both after Ranking Member Grassley gives his remarks.