

The Day

Laid Off But Not Laid Back

Jobless find looking for work a full-time job in this economy

By [Lee Howard](#)

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Denis Bourgeois, a former construction superintendent who lives in Uncasville, said he sent out 60 résumés in the past month but received only three rote responses and no job interviews, despite once supervising multimillion-dollar construction projects.

"There's nothing out there," said Bourgeois, wearing a New York Yankees cap and brandishing a three-inch-thick folder of job applications he has sent out. "It's bad, and it's not getting any better. I don't know what to do."

For now, the 54-year-old Bourgeois spends much of his time at the New London CTWorks Center in the Shaw's Cove office complex, using the jobs center's computers in a desperate search for work.

Four months ago, until being laid off from a construction job in New Hampshire, Bourgeois earned up to \$30 an hour. Now he lives with his cousin, Valerie Damiano, and lives on \$123 a week in unemployment benefits plus food stamps. He's trying not to tap into his retirement funds, but it hasn't been easy.

"We eat a lot of beans and rice," Damiano said.

"We haven't hunted in 10 years," added Bourgeois. "Now we have to."

Unemployment growing

Christine Paquette, director of the New London jobs center, has heard countless tales like Bourgeois' over the past few months as a flood of laid-off workers has poured into a growing pool of the unemployed. The most recent statistics, for November, show the unemployment rate in the Norwich-New London area has increased 50 percent from the same period last year -- rising to 6.6 percent.

Normally, unemployment benefits last for six months. But with recent federal extensions, the jobless now have an extra 13 weeks to find work. Unemployment checks for most people amount to about half of their pay while they were employed.

"We see so many people who really need help," Paquette said. "But there's not a lot of options out there right now."

She said the center, one of several run by the state Department of Labor, sometimes is packed with more than 100 people using computers to look for jobs, attending workshops, meeting with employers, training for interviews and filing paperwork. To receive unemployment benefits, recipients must submit forms once a week - either in person or online - and show that they have made contact with at least three potential employers.

One of the most popular days at the center is Employer Recruitment Monday, during which job seekers can meet representatives of companies that are still hiring.

"We don't get them jobs; we give them the tools to get jobs," Paquette said.

Paquette, who also directs the CTWorks center in Norwich, said she has seen a broad range of people come in looking for help in the wave of layoffs that have hit the area in the past few months - including about 700 casino workers at Foxwoods.

"We're people just like everybody else," said one young woman from Pawcatuck, who asked to be identified only as Dawn. "We wouldn't be here if we wanted to be sitting around at home."

Dawn, married and with two young children, said a large corporation laid her off in October with no warning.

Family helps out

"It's hurt - it's hurt really bad," she said. "It's like a death - you go through the same stages: anger, guilt and all of that."

Dawn said her family has been adopted by another family who will be helping provide Christmas dinner.

"With kids, you can't be proud," she said. "It's time for me to be humble right now."

Dawn, like others, has been very happy with the help available at the jobs center - especially the workshops.

"These ladies try to help us," said Patrick Hairston of Waterford, waving his hand toward a group of jobs-center employees. "If you want it, it's here for you."

Ash Fuller of Groton, laid off a few weeks ago from Mystic Seaport, said she learned a lot from a one-on-one session last week at the jobs center in which she tried to hone her interview skills.

"It's a grilling," said Paquette.

Fuller, who spent six years in a clerical job at the Seaport, said she found out from her counselor that she should have asked more questions at the end of the interview. If you don't ask questions, she added, it might appear you're not interested in the job.

The jobs center also has helped Fuller freshen up her resume-building skills and has allowed her to train using such key Microsoft programs as Excel and PowerPoint.

"Everyone has gone out of their way to help," she said.

John Beauregard, executive director of the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board in Franklin, said people like Fuller need the right skills for today's marketplace. Many of those being let go may have had sufficient skills a decade ago but could need brushing up for the jobs available today.

"To me, the complicating factor (today) is that if you have one eye on the short term, another eye should be on the long term," he said.

To that end, retraining may be key for some, he said, while others might choose to go back to school and start a different career entirely. Those living on the edge, however, will have to settle for a quick series of skill enhancements like those offered at the local jobs centers in Norwich and New London.

But the real question is: Will there be jobs, even for those who have taken the time to enhance their skills?

With Connecticut economists predicting unemployment in Connecticut will reach at least 7 percent next year, that's a question no one can answer. But it's one reason that Paquette, who runs the jobs centers, urges people not to sit around and mope after losing a job before beginning looking for another.

"You can't wait a couple weeks and start your search," she said. "You need to get right back out there. It's a full-time job."

Hairston, the Waterford job-seeker, has been out of work for eight months and needs to support a young son at home. He'd do anything for a job, he said, including janitorial work or flipping burgers at McDonald's, but the jobs just aren't there.

"I'm getting discouraged with 'I will give you a call,' and then when you call back they say they're busy or they've already filled the position," Hairston said. "But I just have to block that out."

Bourgeois, the laid-off construction superintendent, understands how frustrating and time-consuming finding a job can be. He's ready to take a job as a handyman or even a construction laborer if that's what it takes to find work.

"I don't want to become a laborer, but if I have to, I will.

"Minimum wage?" he said. "I'd be happy to work for minimum wage. I'm a worker. I'm honest. I get things done. What does that stand for right now?"



By Cheryl Albaine

Patrick Hairston of Waterford uses a computer to look for employment at the CTWorks Center in New London.