

8.8 percent jobless rate fails to show full extent of problem

Thousands in region quit looking or accept part-time positions



John Shishmanian/ NorwichBulletin.com

Sherree Greczkowski, 48, of Norwich, right, gets help looking for a job Wednesday from Michelle Farber, an advisor at CtWorks in Norwich. John Shishmanian/ NorwichBulletin.com

By DEBORAH STRASZHEIM ~ Posted Aug 21, 2010

Norwich, Conn. — First, Sherree Greczkowski was shocked.

Then she was scared. She worked at Foxwoods Resort Casino for 12 years and earned a paycheck. Then they laid her off. She'd have to reinvent herself at age 46. What if she couldn't?

Today, almost two years later, with a career switch, education and new certification on her resume, she sometimes gets so frustrated trying to find a job she feels like giving up. She hasn't, but she understands why some people do.

"It's hard not to," said Greczkowski, 48, of Norwich. "I might have a day where I don't want to look at the computer. You have to give yourself that break. Otherwise, you'll make yourself crazy."

The official unemployment rate in New London County was 8.8 percent in July, according to data released last week. But labor experts in the region estimate the real figure is closer to 15 percent, because many people have quit looking or have taken part-time jobs.

Economists refer to this higher unemployment figure as the "U-6." The figure for New London County and state is about the same.

The difference between the two figures used to be about 4 percentage points, said John Beauregard, executive director of the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board.

Now it's about 7 percentage points.

"We're seeing people who probably never thought they'd be in this situation," said Roger Mason, regional director for CTWorks East, a program with offices in Norwich, New London, Danielson and Willimantic.

"People who had long work histories who were suddenly thrust into unemployment. People with master's degrees that had a 20-year history with a company."

Settling

From June 2009 to June 2010, about 2,200 people in New London County dropped out of the labor force, or 1.5 percent of the total, according to labor statistics.

By comparison, the labor force fell by 0.8 percent statewide during the same period.

"I've had people who have taken part-time work because they've just needed something," said Michelle Farber, a work force adviser in Norwich. "And I've had people who have taken something they were overqualified for because they needed benefits. There's been some settling."

There are glimmers of hope, however.

Beauregard said the June statistics marked six months in a row that Connecticut added jobs, though the addition was painfully small.

"The problem with that, is any type of recovery is not feeling like a recovery until jobs start to become available at a much higher pace than what we're seeing right now," he said. "We're trying to work with people in our career center to stay positive and keep at it."

Help for unemployed

CTWorks East offers help with writing resumes, applying for work online and taking classes to learn new skills. It also connects people to social service agencies.

The offices have about 500 clients.

Greczkowski grew up in Norwich, graduated from Norwich Free Academy 30 years ago and went straight to work. She worked at Electric Boat for 10 years, left for several years to stay home with her children, then worked about eight years as a store clerk.

She moved to Foxwoods to get benefits, she said. She worked in a department marketing bingo bus tours, stayed there 12 years and loved it.

The casino eliminated the department and its seven employees in June 2008. She was devastated.

“All those things go through your mind, (like) what am I going to do now? Where am I going to go?” she said. “I was nervous, I was afraid. I was unsure about what the future was going to be like.”

But she had an idea. She had a 22-week severance package, so after collecting herself, she decided to train to become a phlebotomist — a technician who draws blood. She went to school at Quinebaug Valley Community College, then completed her certificate at the Red Cross in April.

No human contact

Then she applied for work: at The William W. Backus Hospital, Lawrence & Memorial Hospital, Hartford Hospital, Day Kimball Hospital, St. Francis Hospital, Quest Diagnostics.

No luck.

“It’s like you’re one piece of paper in a huge stack,” she said. Or more specifically, like a blip in cyberspace. Greczkowski said she just wanted to show her face and actually talk with an employer.

She stopped at a hospital human resources office, brought in her cover letter and resume with her, and put it in the receptionist’s hand.

She called to check on an online application.

The woman who took the call answered like a robot: Go to our website, she said.

“The hardest part is not being able to meet with someone face to face and let them get to know you,” Greczkowski said. “I just find it very frustrating.”

Her 99 weeks of unemployment insurance ended the third week in July. She’s still looking, and she’s managing, she said.

“I’ve had a couple of angels,” she said. “They know who they are.”

“I stay positive, but believe me, I have my moments,” she said. “I have good friends in my life who listen to me rant and rave and be frustrated and then pick up and go again. And you think, it could always be worse. ... So it’s faith, it’s a good support system and it’s realizing things could always be worse.”

Missing jobless

In May, CTWorks East braced for a flood of people to its offices. Unemployment benefits hadn’t been extended yet, and the office estimated 1,600 people had exhausted their benefits and were about to have no income.

The Norwich office assembled a brochure on how to get help with basic services such as food and shelter. One of their employees who helps with social services also prepared.

The desperate job seekers never arrived. Mason said perhaps a handful of people showed up at the Norwich office.

“It’s like, where are these people?” he said. “Have they gone back to live with family members? We don’t know.”

Mason said people in this situation may have moved in with relatives, left the area or come up with some other living arrangement.

CTWorks East sees those who are recently unemployed and those who have been searching so long they feel like giving up. But if they’ve truly dropped out of the work force, they’re not in his office.

Work force adviser Farber has a caseload of 154 people in the Norwich office, many of whom were laid off from Foxwoods in 2008.

“I think a lot of them just assumed they would get called back, or in two months they’d have another position. And then reality set in,” she said.

She said the office is trying to encourage people and also help them build on their skills to find work in a tough environment.

One recently added program is called Metrix Learning, which provides access to more than 5,000 online classes for 90 days. Credits may be transferred to a college or university.

The office also runs 36 free workshops for job seekers, including computer basics, health careers and “Confidence Makeover,” to help people feel less isolated.

“I tell them they’re not the only ones who are struggling out there,” Farber said. “I think for a lot of people, it’s a personal struggle. They get knocked down so many times. I tell them to keep going. Network, do volunteer work ... sometimes that leads to a job. ... It’s just really easy to get so deep in that hole when you’re job-seeking, that it’s important to make a regular routine for yourself.”

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