

New help for unemployed

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Updated: 01/23/2009 07:56:45 PM EST

BRIDGEPORT -- The murmur of conversation rising from the crowd of men and women waiting to take a test to become temporary Census takers Friday afternoon was further evidence of the need for the new resource center dignitaries unveiled at the unemployment office.

The U.S. Census Bureau has been using the CTWorks Career Center, 2 Lafayette Square, Bridgeport, to test applicants to fill hundreds of jobs related to the 2010 Census. While the applicants waited for the test to begin, Scott Wilderman, chief executive officer of Career Resource Inc., began the ceremony -- attended by state Labor Department Commissioner Patricia H. Mayfield and other dignitaries -- unveiling the Community Resource Center at CTWorks.

Wilderman's nonprofit company runs CTWorks, which replaced the old unemployment offices about 12 years ago. Career Resources will staff the resource center thanks to a \$175,000 grant from the United Way of Coastal Fairfield County.

People looking for unemployment benefits and jobs can use the resource center to find information about child care, heating assistance and other social services the jobless often need.

The United Way money means Career Resources won't need to spend federal dollars to staff the center, and it will pay for services and funds to get people to other offices where they can apply for heating assistance and other benefits.

Connecticut's unemployment rate in December 2008 was 7.1 percent, compared to 4.8 percent in December 2007, according to the state Labor Department. There are 134,200 people unemployed in the state. The national unemployment rate is 7.2 percent.

Calls to United Way's 2-1-1 Infoline have been rising rapidly, with requests for heating and utility bill assistance nearly doubling in Fairfield County in 2008, to more than 9,800, according to United Way.

"This center is hope," said Joe Carbone, president and chief executive officer of The WorkPlace Inc., which manages education and training programs in the Greater Bridgeport region. The WorkPlace, the region's work force development board, is in the same building as CTWorks; the two organizations work together to help unemployed people find jobs.

About 22,000 people come through the CTWorks office each year, Carbone said, but that figure will be up by nearly 6,000 when 2008's figures are tallied, which is straining the office's ability to meet demand.

The WorkPlace Inc. has also applied for a federal grant worth approximately \$3 million to expand service in Stamford for displaced financial industry workers. But Carbone said that grant is stuck in the transition between the Bush and Obama administrations. The outgoing U.S. Labor secretary did not sign the grant and the incoming labor secretary has not been confirmed.

Carbone said the United Way donation allows CTWorks to use federal funds for job training programs and not to fix social problems, although those can hamper a person's ability to get a job. In this unprecedented time of financial problems, Carbone said, he will be asking businesses to help with direct donations in the coming months. There

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was no need to ask for help from the United Way, he said, which offered the aid in November.

The United Way "has set an example for others," Carbone said. "Don't wait to be called."

Merle Berke-Schlessel, of the United Way of Fairfield County, said the group understands the problems are growing and decided to provide funding on the front lines of this crisis.

U.S. Rep. Jim Himes, D-4, helped cut the ribbon Friday and pledged help from Congress. He said lawmakers in Washington, D.C., are providing \$140 billion worth of aid to cities and towns. They are also planning on tax cuts for families making under \$150,000 a year, which can be taken immediately to put more money in people's paychecks. He also said there are programs being put in place that should help families in which one of the wage earners has lost their job.

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