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Job-training program a victim of budget battle

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HARTFORD -- Employment and training for thousands of low-income Connecticut residents has come to an abrupt end, a casualty of Gov. M. Jodi Rell's order to ax lower-priority programs during the battle over a new state budget.

For Sade Sims, of the Marina Village neighborhood in Bridgeport, a July 1 shut-off of state funding for Job First Employment Services meant the first \$147 paycheck -- for two weeks of initial training -- was her last, unless funding is restored.

A 23-year-old graduate of Harding High School and a single mother of a 2-year-old son, Sims said she didn't find out about Rell's executive order until June 26, when she arrived for a class on how to interview customers.

"I got there and was told today's my last day," Sims said during an interview. "I was sad. I'm trying to get work skills because I've never had a job other than baby-sitting." The program paid for child care and gave her a \$60-a-month bus pass to get to the training program.

The longer the Republican governor and the Democratic-dominated General Assembly fail to agree on a new state budget, the longer McGee and others may be closed out of job-assistance programs.

Once in the state's Temporary Family Assistance program, recipients have a 21-week period to use job-training programs. So, with the jobs program money on hold, the clock's ticking away for McGee and thousands more throughout the state.

About 8,000 TFA recipients, mostly single mothers like Sims,

annually participate in the Jobs First program, which also includes employment assessment, high school equivalency education, training and on-the-job experience through which employers get paid by the state Department of Labor.

Ordinarily, the program costs about \$1.5 million a month. Rell's emergency order cut all funding, except for \$65,000 to pay for labor administrators who, right now, have nothing to supervise because of the funding termination.

"Everyone's talking about economic stimulus, but the best kind of economic stimulus is a job," said Scott K. Wilderman, CEO of Career Resources Inc., which has offices on Fairfield Avenue in Bridgeport. The non-profit services about 1,100 people a year in southwestern Connecticut, from Stamford to Bridgeport up to the Naugatuck Valley. It's responsible for administering Jobs First locally.

Jobs First "turned TFA and welfare recipients into taxpayers instead of liabilities," Wilderman said. "We want to get these people back off the welfare rolls."

Rell's executive order resulted in six-week-long unpaid furloughs for 13 Career Resources employees involved in Jobs First, mostly case managers who work one-on-one with clients. Most of the job-training contracts involve entry-level positions in the health care and hotel industry.

Rell administration officials said Friday that they intend to use about \$19 million in federal stimulus money to keep job-training programs operating if the budget impasse continues. But federal law precludes the funds from being used for child care, transportation and individual case management.

Robert L. Genuario of Norwalk, who as secretary of the Office of Policy and Management is Rell's budget chief, said Friday that with a 20 percent decrease in tax revenue this year, the governor had to make tough decisions on where to make cuts.

During a recent special session of the General Assembly, legislators accepted \$30 million in federal stimulus money, including \$11 million for summer youth employment.

"But the balance of it is relevant to these issues," Genuario said in a phone interview. "Virtually all that non-youth funding will go to entities that would get Jobs First money, the same contractors to fund job search, placement, assessment of skills, skills development, as much of the Jobs First money has been utilized."

Wilderman said that the federal stimulus money is supposed to help the tens of thousands of Connecticut residents who lost their jobs in the recession, not assistance recipients who are trying to enter the job market for the first time.

Genuario hinted that if the budget stalemate results in a second executive order, Rell might add funding for Jobs First.

Until then, Sims, whose initial job training is a casualty of the political stalemate, hopes she can get into the summer jobs program. "I just got the application notice in the mail," she said.

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