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## **Ranks of those losing benefits grows by 150 a week**

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Approximately 150 Rhode Islanders exhaust their unemployment benefits every week, according to the most recent data from the Department of Labor and Training. Susan Robbins, 54, of Warwick is one of the many who has exhausted her benefits.

Robbins worked as an order filler for 30 years at Victoria and Company, a jewelry firm in Cranston. When the company uprooted and moved to East Providence, Robbins found the commute too strenuous and left her job. She found work as a hairdresser and a Warwick bus monitor, and she worked at The Christmas Tree Shoppe, but nothing became permanent. Robbins has been unemployed since 2007. In 2009 her unemployment benefits expired.

Looking at data from the week of Feb. 19, the numbers reveal that 150 have exhausted their benefits of Emergency Unemployment Compensation, or EUC. The EUC became effective in July of 2008 and provides up to 53 federally funded weeks of benefits to those that have already exhausted their regular unemployment insurance claims. The number of those who exhausted their regular unemployment claims is much higher: 514 for the week of Feb. 19.

Since 2009, Robbins' only income has been a \$20 weekly allowance granted to her by her sister. For five years Robbins has been searching for a job that she is suited for.

"There's no work," she said, "After a while you get so tired of being told 'no.'"

For now, Robbins lives with her sister and helps her by doing the laundry and cleaning the house. That is, until recently.

Last Oct. 23 Robbins awoke and got out of bed, only to trip and fall. The result: a broken shoulder. After visiting the walk-in clinic, she was sent to the hospital and scheduled for surgery. Eleven days later, Robbins was successfully operated on at Kent Hospital.

Because Kent is a Care New England Hospital, they provide free essential hospital care to uninsured Rhode Islanders who earn less than 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Limit.

"Thank God for that," Robbins said.

The only bills Robbins was left with were her anesthesiologist and doctor's bills.

She currently owes \$4,000, an amount that continues to grow because she still sees her doctor for x-rays and follow-up appointments. Robbins pays \$20 a month towards the anesthesiologist and \$20 a month to her doctor. Her doctor allows her

to pay as little as \$10 a month.

“At this rate it will take years for me to pay them off,” she said. “I feel guilty.”

Because Robbins’ injury will not prevent her from working for 12 or more months, and because she was not employed at the time of the injury, she is ineligible for disability. She’s also not old enough to collect Social Security.

“I can’t work, but I’m not elderly. What happens to the people like me who need help, people who are the forgotten unemployed? If I didn’t have my sister, I’d be out on the street. What do people do who don’t have anyone?”

Laura Hart, communications manager at the Department of Labor and Training, said that there is a steady stream of people losing their benefits. Hart explains that when someone’s unemployment is about to expire, they receive a flier from the Department of Labor and Training with helpful information. The flier includes information on 211, a United Way service that allows people to call and ask about available health and human services programs.

In November 2010, the Department of Labor and Training reached out to The United Way of Rhode Island and informed them of the steady stream of benefit exhaustion. They asked United Way to help people transition after their unemployment expired and to see what forms of assistance they qualified for. The United Way encouraged people to contact 211 by phone or to visit [www.211ri.org](http://www.211ri.org). Available in 175 languages, those who call will speak with a live person trained to help on a customized basis.

Chris Medici, a spokesman for United Way of Rhode Island, said that it is imperative for the 211 staff to have a true understanding of a person’s situation.

“There are all kinds of issues and stress and anxiety,” he said. “There’s a great deal of strain.”

The great deal of strain is reflected in the volume of calls 211 receives. According to the United Way data, 3,318 (24 percent) of the 13,824 calls 211 received in December 2010 were related to, or referrals of, the Department of Labor and Training. In January, the number jumped to 4,017 (29 percent) of 13,850.

“Because of the ongoing economic challenges, more people are calling,” he said.

Medici explained that many people call looking for employment. “People want to go back to work.”

211 will help to set people up with additional training or education they may need to get back in the work force. They also offer counseling services and let people know if they qualify for things like housing assistance.

“Those who have worked all their lives may not be familiar with the resources that are available,” said Medici.

“We felt strongly that these are our people,” said Hart. “We wanted to make sure that just because their weeks had run out, someone was taking care of them.”

The most recent monthly data is from December 2010 and shows that more than 12,000 new unemployment claims were filed that month. At the end of 2010, 58,590 individuals had collected EUC benefits.

Because of the EUC plan and extended benefits, Hart says that there are more weeks of unemployment potentially available than before. She explained that if unemployment goes over a certain rate, the number of weeks of unemployment benefits are expanded upon. The current unemployment rate in the state is 11.5 percent (from December 2010). Ninety-nine is the maximum number of weeks that an individual can collect unemployment. This includes regular unemployment, EUC and extended benefits.

Hart emphasized the important affect of unemployment insurance on the local economy.

“Those in the lower income brackets are more likely to spend this money. They circulate it back into the community, which is helpful to the economy. Especially an economy that is stressed.”

With jobs being hard to find, and the expiration of benefits steady, there is a concern that many Rhode Islanders may end up in Susan Robbins’ shoes.

“These are very stressful times,” said Medici. “They’re taking a financial and emotional toll.”

For Robbins, her hopes and goals are simple: “I’d like to try to get better and get back to work. I’ll do whatever I can do.”

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