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Numerous Resources Exist to Help Job Seekers Find Career Path

by MEG BARONE

The economy is still plodding along, sort of lost between two worlds; not as disastrous as it was two years ago but not quite coming back to life yet either.

Connecticut has a number of initiatives aimed at helping people find jobs, find better-paying employment, or transition from one career to another. Some, like the Black Rock Employment Networking Group (BRENG), were in place long before the U.S. economy tanked, and it's one of the few that addresses the emotional affects of job loss. Others, like Goodwill Industries of Western Connecticut, have responded to the need for career counseling and job search resources by opening two new comprehensive Career Centers, one in Bridgeport and one in Brookfield.

On Tuesday, Nov. 16, the latest ammunition in the state's economic development arsenal will open in Bridgeport. Gov. M. Jodi Rell will attend the CTech IncUBator ribbon-cutting and Open House, 10:30 a.m., 250 Myrtle Avenue, on the campus of the University of Bridgeport, where the new initiative is housed.

The CTech IncUBator is a partnership between the University of Bridgeport (UB) and Connecticut Innovations (CI), the state's quasi-public authority for technology investing and innovation development. The founding sponsors are CI, UB and United Illuminating. The CTech IncUBator is Fairfield County's first and only university-based incubator for high-tech start-ups.

In announcing the new initiative last April, Rell said its aim is to spur the development of high-tech start-ups, fostering additional economic development and stimulating job creation in the Greater Bridgeport area and Fairfield County.

"Small businesses account for eight out of 10 of our state's new jobs every year," Governor Rell said. "In these economic times, it is more important than ever to cultivate entrepreneurial, start-up businesses—our primary engine of job creation," she said.

"The primary purpose of the incubator is to help entrepreneurs and possibly intrapreneurs, by that I mean corporations that may want to have a small office to develop some new initiatives outside of their corporate bailiwick," Dr. Gad J. Selig, associate dean, of Business Development and Outreach, Graduate Studies and Research Division for the University of Bridgeport.

"We're trying to start new businesses in high tech. Americans need jobs and small businesses and start-up businesses are the largest market segment for creating new jobs in the United States," Selig said. The unemployment rate is fairly high, here in Connecticut and throughout the country. "We're all interested in being employed. When people are employed they can pay taxes and the governments have an easier burden to pay for whatever they need to pay for going forward," Selig said.

According to Selig, the University of Bridgeport is a logical location for the CTech IncUBator because of its various related academic disciplines and resources that can be made available to the participating entrepreneurs.

"We have a School of Engineering, which is the largest engineering school in the state of Connecticut and the second or third largest in the northeast. We have a School of Business, we have a School of Industrial Design and we have a Health Science division that is growing as well that has a number of new initiatives such as a pharmaceutical degree (in partnership) with the University of Connecticut and a Physician Assistant program with a number of Fairfield County hospitals like St. Vincent's and Bridgeport and Norwalk hospitals," Selig said.

"We have the resources that are available to new businesses. When someone becomes a tenant of our incubator they have access to some of these resources, and that includes world class faculty and students who can do projects either for pay or not for pay – depending on a particular situation, for these companies," Selig said.

Dr. Tarek Sobh, dean of the UB School of Engineering and Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies, said it's appropriate to have a technology incubator on the campus, given the history of UB in developing high-technology, innovative interdisciplinary-research projects, and cutting-edge products and services. Its faculty and students are involved in major research endeavors, including the development of the U.S. Army's next generation of unmanned aerial vehicles and sponsored projects in the areas of biomedical engineering, nanotechnology, and wireless computing.

The incubator will initially focus on attracting participants from the several key industry sectors: information technology, digital media, advanced materials and clean tech. Businesses in the STEM classifications (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) will eventually be considered.

There are currently three tenants in the CTech IncUBator already and Selig said there is room to accommodate three or four more. "We're starting small intentionally. We want to make sure we do it right," he said.

Obviously, this initiative intends to help create jobs. But it may take a while to develop these businesses to the point that they are able to hire more staff. In the meantime, what are Connecticut's unemployed and underemployed to do? They should take advantage of the myriad opportunities that exist for job seekers and transitioners at local public libraries, churches and private organizations. There are also many individual career coaches.

The Danbury Job Networking Club meets twice a month on Wednesdays at 9 a.m. at Danbury CT Works Center, Career Transition Center, 152 West Street in Danbury. The club is free and open to any job seeker who is registered with a Connecticut Department of Labor office.

The Darien Professionals Networking Group meets monthly to provide career-related information for executives who are underemployed, in transition, or who wish to stay networked.

The group also welcomes those who wish to help others in need career guidance. Admission is free. The group meets at St. Luke's Church, 1864 Post Rd, Darien.

Tony Palomba is chairman of the Black Rock Employment Networking Group at Black Rock Congregational Church in Fairfield. "I have personal experience being without work for 18 months after Sept. 11, 2010. It became clear to me that there were so many people suffering in the same manner, people who lacked connections, and were struggling to find opportunities to network. Who better to serve and encourage them than those who have endured similar hardships," Palomba said.

Palomba said his group is not specifically trying to find jobs for those who are out of work, although some people have found employment because of their participation and the obvious networking opportunities that result. "Our primary function, and I'm completely overt about this, is to help people who are emotionally struggling with the affects of being out of work, the pressure, anxiety, relationship issues, negative feelings of self and the financial component," Palomba said.

The Westport Public Library has comprehensive resources for job seekers, some of which are available online from the library itself or from home or office. One program offers expert resume assistance, live interview coaching and tips and resources to help start a job search. The library also brings in speakers to talk about job search and career change.

"I want to get everybody back to work. That's my goal and Sylvia's. Everyone should have the job that they're qualified to do, that they want to do, that they're passionate about, and earn a good living wage," said reference librarian Margie Freilich-Den. Sylvia Schulman is the business librarian.

"We work closely with the CT Department of Labor," Freilich-Den said.

On Monday, Nov. 22, 7 p.m., the Westport Library will offer a program titled " Energize Your Job Search," in McManus Room. The program will help job seekers gain an advantage by learning to use valuable online tools such as Reference USA, LexisNexis, and Business & Company Resource Center. Learn how to identify key companies, spot industry trends, and get in-depth background information for greater success in networking and interviewing.

"We delve into how to utilize these research data bases if you need work, if you want to research an industry or particular company or create a list of potential companies that you'd like to contact about a job so you can go there well prepared," Freilich-Den said. "The whole thing is to be prepared for a telephone or face-to-face interview and have all the information at your fingertips," she said.

"Sylvia and I also offer individual appointments," she said.

The Westport Library will also offer a program on Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2011, at 10 a.m., about LinkedIn. The program will be led by Jan Wallen, author of LinkedIn in 7 Days or Less. It will teach job seekers or anyone interested how to use LinkedIn, a social network tool for professionals, to exchange information, ideas, and opportunities from Jan Wallen

"LinkedIn is an especially important social networking tool where you can exchange ideas with other professionals and get contact information," Freilich-Den said.

Also coming up on Thursday, Jan. 13 and 20, 2011, 10 a.m., is a Jobseeker Special program titled "Orientation to Healthcare Careers." Deidre Johnson, a health career advisor for CT Community Colleges, will discuss the many programs in nursing and allied-health careers offered by CT Community Colleges, from short-term certificate programs to Associate Degrees.

The health care profession is one of the few that are relatively recession proof.

Those who attend can participate in a free health care assessment practice test. Registration is suggested. Contact Margie Freilich-Den at mfreilich-den@westportlibrary.org or 203-291-4800 to register for this program or to get information about other job-related programs at the library. Or visit www.westportlibrary.org.

Entrepreneurs or start-up ventures interested in obtaining more information about the incubator or applying to participate may contact Dr. Gad Selig, at the University of Bridgeport by phone at 203-576-4870 or by email at gadselig@bridgeport.edu; or contact Charles Moret, managing director of Business Development at Connecticut Innovations, at 860-257-2333 or charlie.moret@ctinnovations.com. For more information about CTech IncUBator visit www.bridgeport.edu/academics/incubator.