

**Republican American:
State's Shared Work program adjusts to benefit companies, workers**

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Judging by government statistics, it appears the state's employment picture is improving. In July, Connecticut recorded an unemployment rate of 6.6 percent, the lowest since December 2008, when it was 6.7 percent, and only slightly higher than the national rate of 6.2 percent.

Still, many people remain concerned about the state of the economy in general, and job security in particular. In a stroke of convenient timing, a recent change to the state's Shared Work Program has expanded the eligibility criteria for employers that need to reduce their employees' hours without having to commit to long-term layoffs.

ADMINISTERED BY THE state Department of Labor, the Shared Work Program was introduced in 1992 as a way to provide partial unemployment benefits to workers at a company experiencing a temporary economic slowdown. Following the passage of Public Act 13-66 last October, a series of expansive changes have enabled more employers to participate in the program.

"Public Act 13-66 allows all Connecticut employers to take part in the program," said Nancy Steffens, the Labor Department's communications director. "Prior to this change, employers that could not take part included municipalities and self-funded nonprofits. Permanent part-time workers can now also be part of the Shared Work Program.

"Furthermore, the work-hour reduction was expanded from between 20 and 40 percent to 10 to 60 percent, and the definition of 'affected unit' was changed from four employees to two or more employees that can participate in a shared work plan."

Another change allows the department to provide a dependency allowance to employees in the program who have qualified dependents on their unemployment insurance claim. Steffens noted that the state's offering exceeds the parameters mandated by federal requirements on this type of program.

"The change Connecticut made to from the 20 percent to 40 percent guideline to the 10 percent to 60 percent was not a federal requirement," she said.

"The state made that change to allow more companies to be eligible to take part."

A LITTLE MORE THAN 100 Connecticut companies now participate in the Shared Work Program, including Flabeg Technical Glass, a provider of fabricated glass and mirror products at 1000 Church St. in Naugatuck.

"Since 2006, we've used the program at least three different times when our business levels reduced," said Donna Andrew, the company's human resources manager.

At the moment, only one Flabeg employee is enrolled in the program, but in previous periods the company, which currently employs 112 people, has had up to 20 percent of its workforce participating. Andrew stressed that the program enabled Flabeg to "maintain a highly loyal employee base while preventing a major personnel disruption."

"In years past, we would have been forced to do a large layoff and risk losing a very large part of our workforce — half of whom have worked for us for 20 years and more," she said.

Another local company taking advantage of the program is Watertown Plastics Inc., a custom injection molding company at 830 Echo Lake Road in Watertown that first participated in the program in 2009 and signed up again last September.

"It covers 27 employees," said Laurie Hill, office manager for Watertown Plastics, who added that the company has a 35-person workforce. "All of our hourly employees are reimbursed 20 percent."

Hill observed that one significant change in the distribution of unemployment compensation created some initial confusion among employees.

"It was a little complicated in the beginning, with our employees getting cards in the mail instead of checks," she said.

"Originally, the program sent out checks. Now, everyone gets debit cards."

DESPITE THE RECENT EXPANSION of employer participation criteria, Steffens pointed out that the intended beneficiaries of the expanded program have yet to take advantage of it.

"At this time, no municipality or other previously ineligible employer has applied to take part in the program," she said. "We are increasing our outreach efforts to get the word out about these changes, and hope employers will contact the agency to see if Shared Work is right for their employees and the company."

While Steffens did not foresee any further changes to the program, she said the department is working to speed up the payment process.

"The agency is making upgrades to its computer system, so that within the next several weeks new programming will allow the agency to process Shared Work payments on a nightly basis," she said. "Currently, Shared Work payments are processed twice a week. We are also currently making additional upgrades to automate additional internal functions that staff now carries out manually for processing Shared Work benefits."