

The Other Connecticut

By Gene Guilford

Travel east of the river and you find yourself in the other Connecticut.

In the other Connecticut, the average personal income per capita is \$30,000, less than half of that found in Fairfield County. In the other Connecticut, the poverty rate exceeds eight percent, and in many towns unemployment is higher than the statewide average.

While the boom in the other Connecticut centers recently on casinos, many businesses in other sectors have had to lay off laborers and licensed professionals for lack of work. Empty shells of brick factories where manufacturing once thrived now stand as hollow monuments to a bygone era: a proud past of economic security that no longer exists and isn't likely to return as jobs flee to where wages and benefits are a fraction of what is needed here.

One of the businesses in the other Connecticut, like dozens more in the same predicament, now has to borrow \$15,000 a week from banks not always fond of lending in the current crunch of credit seen here and around the country. This business bills out \$40,000 a day to customers and is paid back \$25,000 a day from its customers. Each week the gap grows between what this business bills out and what it is paid. The supplier of this business demands payment for wholesale purchases within three to five days, yet its retail customers pay within 30 or 60 days - creating more of a gap required to be filled with another round of borrowing.

This business has had to lay off two employees, and the owners of the company, a husband and wife, take no salary as there is only cash enough to pay suppliers, fuel the delivery trucks, and pay the electric bill, taxes and their few remaining employees. Last week, the business sold one of its trucks to raise cash to pay bills. The owners, for now at least, work for nothing in the other Connecticut, while their debt grows each week just to stay above water and serve their customers.

The media has begun to report on Connecticut's low-income energy assistance efforts, and how the President and Congress took until December to appropriate an insufficient amount of money to help the needy make it through the winter paying their energy bills.

But that is not the end of the story. There are businesses - a growing number of them -- who cannot afford to participate in these programs, businesses like the small, family-owned heating oil retailer referred to in this story, businesses who are going tens of thousands of dollars into debt every week paying their suppliers, laying off workers while the owners forego a paycheck just to make ends meet.

These businesses cannot accept the reimbursement rate offered by the state, which quite literally is too little too late, because to do so would only drive them further into debt and leave them unable to provide services to the needy. These businesses want to be able to take care of everyone who comes to them, but faced with the stark prospect of shutting their doors, they simply cannot afford it.

Businesses that go under serve no one.

There has to be a better way to serve needy people than what we face every day in the other Connecticut - and not just the other Connecticut east of the river. We can do better than take it or leave it.

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