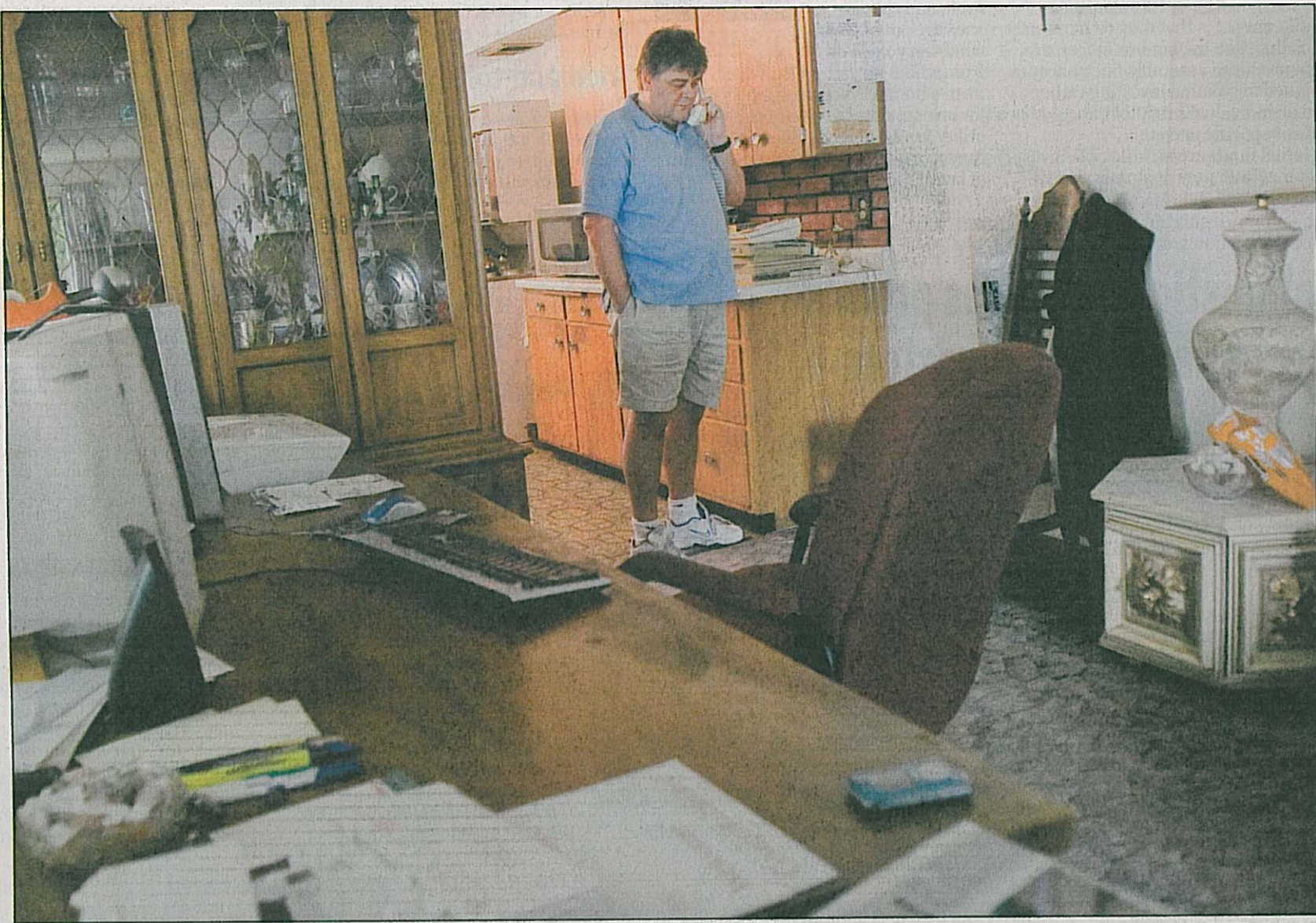


**“No, I’m not going to be kicked out and homeless.
(But) it creates a major hardship.”**

Ed Forsyth

whose unemployment benefit checks ran out earlier this year
and had to move in with his mother



ERIN STARKEBAUM/The Columbian

Ed Forsyth takes a phone call from his mother’s nurse to set up a home-care visit. Unemployed since March 2007, he exhausted his jobless benefits earlier this year and moved in with his mother.

Options wane for unemployed

Their jobless
benefits
running out or
exhausted, many
county residents
struggle to keep
heads above
water

By **AARON CORVIN**
Columbian staff writer

Some economists and politicians say the United States is slowly recovering from the recession, with some predictions pegging quarterly economic growth in the 3 percent range through the rest of this year. Meanwhile, federal lawmakers have extended unemployment benefits to help those who remain jobless to pay the bills as they continue to look for work.

But the truth is, if your skill is in a battered industry — such as the construction sector in Clark County — then there often isn’t a job for you. And if you’ve exhausted all the jobless benefits legally available to you, then the latest federal extension of benefits offers no help.

It’s a bind that has left many laid-off workers in Clark County and Washington state facing dwindling income, fewer options and stark questions as the pressure builds to make a decision about what to do next: Do they keep hunting for a way back into their line of work? Do they turn to another social safety net as the benefit checks run out? Or do they go back to school, hoping to launch a new career?

Vancouver resident Ed Forsyth understands the gravity of the situation all too well. In March 2007, after getting laid off from a job with an area contractor that did home remodeling, repair work and other projects, Forsyth, 42, went on unemployment. Earlier this year, the benefit checks ran out. He has depleted his savings and has moved in with his mom. He still hasn’t found a full-time job, despite

turning part of her dining room into what he describes as a “quasi-office,” complete with a computer he uses to hunt for work.

“No, I’m not going to be kicked out and homeless,” Forsyth said. But “it creates a major hardship.”

It’s a major hardship playing out in hard-hit areas such as Clark County. With a 13.7 percent unemployment rate, Clark carries the weight of having the highest jobless rate among Washington counties along the Interstate 5 corridor. While some national and state economic reports suggest a recovery, Clark County stays behind, partly dragged down by a sluggish construction industry that shed 100 positions in April.

Overall, the county is still 9,700 jobs below its pre-recession peak, a 7 percent drop, according to a recent report by Scott Bailey,

Southwest Washington regional economist for the state Employment Security Department.

But an economy showing few signs of improvement isn’t the only problem: As of the end of May, 10,651 Washingtonians exhausted unemployment benefits. Although the state Employment Security Department doesn’t break down the number of people who are running out of benefits by county, there is no doubt that the number of people in Clark County claiming jobless benefits has been well above the average.

The fact that benefits eventually run out has come as a surprise to some, including Forsyth and other Clark County claimants, partly because of confusion over media reports of federal lawmakers

Unemployed:

From Page E1

extending emergency benefits.

Sheryl Hutchison, communications director at the state Employment Security Department, said Congress has voted at least six times to continue the federal emergency unemployment compensation program, which provides additional benefits to people who have used up all of their regular benefits. When you add regular and emergency benefits, plus the extended-benefits program, which kicks in if certain economy-related conditions are met, then most eligible unemployed workers in Washington can receive up to 99 weeks, or nearly two years, of jobless benefits.

Hutchison said actions by Congress to extend emergency benefits have only kept the emergency program in place to give laid-off workers access to 99 weeks of benefits. "It doesn't give you access to more than 99 weeks," Hutchison said. "What they're doing is continuing a program for the recession."

Now what?

Meanwhile, the pressure of having no job and facing an end

to government help is building to the point that some Clark County residents must answer a tough question: Now what?

Some are going back to school. Some are looking for more training. Others, however are simply trying to hang on as they simultaneously look for a job and seek a social safety net in another form. In each case, the worries mount: too little income; too much time outside the economic mainstream; fewer alternatives.

For Forsyth, the answer is at the Washington State University Vancouver campus where he's been accepted into the psychology program and will begin classes this fall. He will seek a psychology degree, which will complement his degree in business administration from the University of Washington, and hopes for a new career, ideally as a family counselor.

But there are risks to going back to school and responsibilities at home.

While he qualifies for a federal Pell grant to pay for part of his education, Forsyth said, "I'm afraid I'm going to walk out of this with a lot of student loans and a huge amount of debt." He's also taking care of his mom, who, at 76, recently underwent hip surgery. He has a new career goal, though, and a new path before him.

So does 31-year-old Vancouver resident Tara Gonzales. In July 2009, she was laid off from her job as a juvenile detention officer for Clark County government. Immediately, she filed for unemployment and started looking for work. She and her husband, Manuel, who runs a small business that is taking its share of hits from the recession, have an 8-month-old daughter, Monika.

Gonzales receives, after taxes, \$397 a week in unemployment benefits. "Without it," she said, "I can't pay my bills." She's applied for jobs in her line of work, including in Portland and Cowlitz County, but didn't have any luck. Still, she remains determined. So much so, Gonzales, who already has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice, is taking classes at Clark College to prepare for a new career as a dental hygienist. Her decision to try to become a dental hygienist was a pragmatic one: "It was an in-demand field, and it sounded like something I'd like to do," she said.

To date, Gonzales has exhausted both regular benefits and federal emergency jobless benefits. However, she said, she just learned from the unemployment office that she will receive state-level extended benefits until Nov. 6.

Gonzales and Forsyth aren't alone in their decisions to leave

professions pummeled by the recession and to go back to school in hopes of attaining new careers. Full-time enrollment at U.S. community colleges increased 24.1 percent from fall 2007 to fall 2009, according to a December 2009 report by the American Association of Community Colleges. Clark College is seeing record enrollment as people pursue a new job or seek more training, said spokeswoman Barbara Kerr. Over the past couple years, enrollment has increased 38 percent, from 11,302 students in spring 2008 to 15,651 students in spring 2010.

Norma Kent, spokeswoman for the American Association of Community Colleges, said much of the increases in enrollment throughout the United States stem from laid-off workers going back to school to either obtain a degree or to get training in a skill they lack. "Knowledge is the currency that we live by," Kent said, and obtaining more education and training "does add to the amount that you're likely to earn over your lifetime."

But it's not easy to go back to school and start over again. Competition is high for dental hygienist jobs, Gonzales said, and you have to be good at math and science. "I basically need a 4.0 (GPA)," she said. "I have to

spend a lot of time studying and watching my daughter at the same time."

Trying to survive

These days, Katherine Compton isn't thinking of going back to school. She's just trying to survive. In May 2008, the 52-year-old Vancouver resident went on unemployment after being laid off from a job as a driver for a cab company that went under. She received her last weekly unemployment check — \$202 — in early April.

Compton has little time and a lot of ends to meet. The bills keep coming. She is the mother of two young daughters who need regular care because they are autistic. She receives money and health care through the state Department of Social and Health Services. She is on food stamps. It's not enough to get by on: She borrows money to cover her utility bills. When Compton thinks about the future, her thoughts bring many questions and little comfort.

"I wonder how many people have moved in with their relatives," she said, "or are living in their cars."

Her advice to those taking punches from the Great Recession is this: "They literally have to become hard-core advocates for their survival."

Hutchison is the communications director for the state Employment Security Department, urges laid-off workers who are facing fewer and fewer alternatives to call 211, the national human services network spearheaded by United Way, for help with food, housing, employment, health care and other services. Hutchison said her department also offers WorkSource centers, where the jobless may seek employment and training services, and the Training Benefits program, which offers additional weeks of unemployment benefits to those who are eligible so they can train for careers in a high-demand field. Under that program, you don't have to look for work as long as you are enrolled and making satisfactory progress in your particular training program.

Interest in the program is high. During the state Employment Security Department's last fiscal year, which ended in June 2009, it received about 2,800 applications for the program. During the department's current fiscal year, which ends this month, it has received about 9,100 applications, according to Hutchison.

Meanwhile, in Clark County, the economic outlook is murky but not without a few bright spots. In April, for example, the electronics manufacturing industry added 100 jobs for the

second month in a row, according to Bailey, the regional labor economist. And wood products generated 100 jobs. Another positive sign was the number of jobless claims filed by Clark County residents in April: County residents filed 2,423 initial unemployment claims that month, down 32 percent from 3,552 in the year-ago period.

However, April's 2,423 claims were well above the 2005-2008 average of 1,860.

What the numbers likely mean is more waiting for things to get better and more hunting for a job in a region that is unlikely to produce many for the rest of this year. "We're at that point where we're going to bounce up and down in either low or no job growth for the rest of the year," Bailey said.

It's a shaky economic outlook that will continue to force many Clark County residents to find ways to survive the Great Recession, including turning to family, friends and, for Ed Forsyth, a familiar place — Beaches Restaurant & Bar. People there know him. He went there when times were good. He goes there now — not as often, of course — to reminisce. It feels good to be known, to decompress in a familiar setting.

"It's a break," he said, "from the reality of what's going on in my life."

AARON CORVIN: 360-735-4518 or aaron.corvin@columbian.com.