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Career Expo points to reality of unemployment in Tucson

Downtown streets filled to capacity for 4-hour event

By Dan Sorenson

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It's the stupid economy.

Downtown streets around the Tucson Convention Center approached gridlock near the 2 p.m. start of Jobing.com's Career Expo Tuesday.

Parking lots overflowed and people drove up and down side streets looking for spots to parallel park.

As the fair began, perhaps 2,000 job seekers descended from a double line covering most of the upper concourse above the exhibit hall, where 66 employers waited in a maze of draped partitions.

By the time the four-hour event ended, nearly 6,000 job-seekers had come through, estimated Doug Mayes, Jobing.com's community relations director.

Unemployment has surged in recent months, rising in the Tucson area from 5.8 percent in November last year to 6.5 percent in December, the Arizona Department of Commerce reported.

Employers at the fair ranged from Aaron's home electronics leasing to Wayland Baptist University (recruiting students), from the Internal Revenue Service to Circle K.

Desert Diamond Casino and Hotel was looking for staffers and Southeastern Arizona Behavioral Health Services Inc. was looking for an accountant, a bookkeeper, clinical associate and case managers.

Military recruiters seemed to be doing big business, as were the U.S. Border Patrol and the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections.

Jade Tatum, a University of Phoenix criminal-justice student, stopped at the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections booth. He said he was interested in a job with the agency that started at \$15 an hour.

The Tucson High School grad said he had already talked to the Border Patrol and Pima County Sheriff's Department and was here to widen his search.

At first he said "it was very disconcerting to see the lines when you got in when you started. It's also you can't get any time with the people."

Tatum and some of his friends questioned the sense of talking to recruiters who then asked them to apply online.

But Mayes of Jobing.com said some companies require online applications even after a face-to-face meeting with a recruiter because they are required to treat all applicants equally.

"So, they're actively recruiting, even though they're asking them to apply online. The goal (of the applicant) is to make that personal connection with the recruiter," Mayes said.

The crowd was so thick at the opening that job seekers in the main aisles were reduced to short, shuffling steps, then waiting in lines to speak to recruiters behind desks — or just to pick up a brightly colored informational sheet.

Some job seekers were dressed for Wall Street, but most wore "Tucson casual" attire. Generally, the mood was grim, although some job seekers put on a confident smile, approached recruiters and extended a hand to introduce themselves.

Recruiter Tracy Merilott, a behavioral-health recruiter, said, "I think it gets people's hopes up" to see so many employers recruiting.

She said the crowd for the latest Career Expo was definitely more professional — and better dressed — than in the past.

"I came to the last one and I didn't see this many people. There were many more professionals than last year," said Merilott, a training manager for Providence Service Corp. of Arizona, a children's behavioral-health provider.

"We've had some decent candidates turn in résumés today," said Ryan Eklund, a clinical-operations manager for Providence. He said the firm had five case-manager jobs, which pay \$25,000 to \$30,000 per year and require a bachelor's degree in behavioral health or any bachelor's degree and one year's experience in behavioral health.

Health-related fields and law enforcement were far and away the leaders in having good jobs to offer.

But for people in the building trades — who have perhaps suffered most in the sharp recession — there was little encouragement.

Henry Avenente, who was just laid off from his job as a building inspector by Pima County Development Services, didn't find much hope at the TCC.

"There's nothing here in construction management," he said.

UPCOMING JOBS EVENT

Tucson.com Classifieds is presenting a career fair on March 18 at the University of Phoenix, 300 S. Craycroft Road. For more information, contact

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