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Unemployment rate stagnant. There's plenty to do to improve chances of landing jobs

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LANCASTER - A major glass manufacturer shut down and other major companies laid off an estimated 85 employees throughout 2007. But it appears the job losses barely moved Fairfield County's average unemployment rate of 5 percent for January through November, according to workforce data from the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

That is slightly higher than the 4.8 percent for the county during the same period in 2006.

Employment statistics for December 2007 will be available later this month.

Mike Orlando considers Fairfield County fortunate because Lancaster Glass was the only major employer in the county to close. The director of Fairfield County Job & Family Services compares the number of plant closings and employers leaving the area to a few years prior.

He pointed out that some substantial companies left the county in 2003 and 2004, when the unemployment average was 5.4 percent both years.

Big Bear grocery stores closing in Lancaster and Pickerington were probably the most notable shutdowns in the county in 2003, leaving about 180 employees without jobs. Venture Industries, a plant that made parts for the automobile industry, closed in 2004, affecting about 200 employees.

Orlando said losing a major employer like Lancaster Glass takes its toll on the community because manufacturing jobs typically are better-paying jobs. Lancaster Glass was the largest company in the county to close, leaving about 140 people jobless in 2007.

"We did experience moderate growth in retail and other things that allowed us to remain pretty stable," Orlando said. "The other thing we've seen was the health-care industry and those jobs are still very strong, and that pays a good living wage."

LOOKING FOR WORK

Fairfield County Job & Family Services offers an array of valuable resources to job seekers looking for new jobs, those updating their resumé, expanding their skill set, learning computer programs and applications, and more, said Nida Reid-Williamson, supervisor for workforce development at the agency.

"I always like to think of us as an advocate," Reid-Williamson said. "All services are free and open to the public."

Reid-Williamson said about 40 percent of Lancaster Glass employees have sought training assistance through JFS to reenter the workforce.

Holly Overly has found JFS' resources very helpful. The 35-year-old, who hopes to land a new job in the new year, spent time in the WorkNet room recently updating her resume and considering what her job options are. She already is employed but wants a better-paying job.

"The pay out here is not good so you have to commute - that's probably what I'll end up doing," said Overly, who's looking for customer service and clerical-type work.

Reid-Williamson said an average of 100 customers a day used the WorkNet room in 2007. This included everyone from professional engineers and teachers to people who didn't have a high school diploma or GED, Reid-Williamson said.

Rhonda McGee, 19, of Lancaster said she has visited the WorkNet room just about every other day for the past few months. McGee said she's looking for any type of sales job.

"I've applied to every single place in the mall," McGee said. "I'm feeling pretty crappy because everywhere I apply, they're either not hiring or only accepting applications."

McGee, who was slated to go on a job interview recently, plans to begin a three-week course later this month to become a medical assistant. She hopes those skills will make her more marketable. She eventually wants to pursue massage therapy.

HELPING JOB SEEKERS

Linda Timberlake works as a vocational specialist helping job seekers, assisting mostly injured people who need to re-enter the workforce and transition into a new career.

She says she sees a different picture in Fairfield County for certain trades. "I'm helping two clients in this area for job placement," Timberlake said while in the WorkNet room recently. "(One) client is moving to Columbus. We looked in this area initially for surgical tech jobs, but nothing is turning up. ... There's not that many postings as we look. Really it's a depressed area."

But she said the unemployment figures could be worse if JFS agencies didn't provide assistance.

"It's a wonderful resource for the unemployed or the injured," said Timberlake, who travels throughout the state.

"The people in these offices are helpful and resourceful, and have transitional programs and offer computer skills. A lot of people don't own computers because they're too expensive. What would these people do (otherwise)?"