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Monday, March 31, 2008

Summer job market bleak for students

Area's weak economy means few firms hiring; teens must compete with older workers for spots.

Jennifer Youssef / The Detroit News

The odds are stacked against Metro Detroit high school and college students looking for jobs this summer. Few businesses plan to hire workers in the next few months in a state with the highest unemployment rate in the nation at 7.2 percent. That means teens will be competing for scarce summer jobs alongside veteran workers who are unemployed or are looking for a second income to help pay the bills. They'll also get competition from teens who have never worked before, but are feeling the pressure to chip in for their own living expenses to ease the strain on tight family budgets.

On top of that, a 25-cent increase in the state minimum wage goes into effect July 1, bumping it to \$7.40 an hour. That could lead to further cutbacks in part-time and entry-level jobs as businesses look for ways to meet costlier payrolls.

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That's not to say there won't be jobs for the younger work force, said Scott Watkins, a consultant with Anderson Economic Group in East Lansing, but it will be much harder to find one.

"There's more competition all around," he said, noting that 159,000 laborers in Metro Detroit are looking for work, many of them laid off from the auto industry. And that doesn't include those who are underemployed or those who have stopped looking for a job.

The state in early May will release its summer jobs outlook for Michigan teens. Analysts predict it will be as bad as or worse than last summer, when the unemployment rate for workers ages 16-19 hit 22

percent of the 322,800 in the labor force.

When Abbey Nirva comes home to Allen Park from college in a few weeks, she's keeping her fingers crossed that she'll find work this summer. But she's well aware it won't be easy. The 19-year-old Central Michigan University student hasn't started looking, but she plans to fill out applications at local businesses, like the golf course near her home, once classes are over.

If nothing pans out, she'll try to get rehired at the ice cream shop she worked at last summer for \$7 an hour, plus tips.

"I think it's going to be tough, especially when (college) students are ... scrounging for the same jobs" all at the same time, she said. "I'm hoping for the best."

Competition is fierce

Nirva may want to start her job search earlier than she had planned. Students should start looking before summer break begins and all the positions are filled, Watkins said.

"It's going to be a case where students who are really driven will have no problem (finding work)," he said. "But it won't be the case that the first application you put in results in a job."

Competition will be fierce, in part because it appears more teens who haven't had summer jobs are looking to bring some income to the family table, especially in households where an adult has been laid off. That

More information

Tips for job seekers

- Start looking early.
- Keep looking.
- Visit local businesses.
- Talk with school guidance counselors.
- Read the newspaper want ads.
- Let friends and neighbors know you are looking for work.
- Think about self-employment: lawn service, pet sitting, etc.
- Search the Internet.
- Source: Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth

may be one reason 8,000 more students were seeking employment in 2007 than in 2006, he said.

Michelle Guinayard, a junior at Southfield-Lathrup High School, is nervous about finding a summer job. It would be her first, except for baby-sitting jobs and the like. She applied for an internship at a bank; if she doesn't get that job, she'll try for something at a fast food restaurant or grocery store.

"I don't know what to expect," the 16-year-old from Southfield said. "My parents keep telling me it's going to be hard to find a job because there are a lot of grown people who don't have jobs. I'm not going to be choosy because I know it's hard out there."

Wage hike hurts

This summer's increase in the state's minimum wage won't help the job situation, said Dana Johnson, chief economist for Comerica Bank. The regular minimum wage increases from \$7.15 an hour to \$7.40 on July 1, and the sub-minimum wage, for those under 18, goes from \$6.08 to \$6.29.

Johnson called the wage hike a "job killer," because employers will hire fewer workers to compensate for their higher payrolls.

"It's going to make it harder still (to find employment)," he said.

Gary Martin, owner of Stroh's Ice Cream Parlour in St. Clair Shores, says he won't be able to hire as many teens this summer because of the wage increase. Last year, he hired two employees to help the 14 year-round workers, but this year he will hire only one. He pays all his employees at least minimum wage.

"With the minimum wage (increase) and the economy, people aren't coming in as much anymore," he said. "I don't have as much expendable cash."

Westborn Market, a grocer with stores in Dearborn, Berkley and Livonia, typically hires 30 percent more workers during the summer, mostly students. But despite the increase in the minimum wage, the market won't cut back on summer help.

"We don't want to hinder customer service," said Bryan Bandyk, marketing director. "To us, it's worth paying a few dollars more to maintain the same level of service."

Get started early

Businesses say job seekers, including teens, are showing a strong interest in their summer openings. Al Rasmussen, manager at Jax Kar Wash, a Southfield-based business with five locations in Metro Detroit, said he's gotten 40 applications so far this year -- twice as many as last year at this time.

"A lot of experienced workers are looking for something to pay the bills until something else comes along," he said. "The way the economy is, everyone is looking for something."

Kelley Bishop, executive director of career services at Michigan State University, is optimistic about teens getting hired this summer -- if they get started looking sooner than later.

College students have more internships to choose from this year, he said, because companies that expect to lose a slew of workers to retirement are using internships as a way to look for their next generation of workers.

"For college students who have started early, it's going to be great for hiring," he said. "But you need to get on the bus and get moving."

That's what Chatoris Jones, a 17-year-old senior at Southfield-Lathrup, did. He has two summer jobs lined up.

He works as a teller at the credit union at his school, earning \$8 an hour, and will continue during the summer months. He also has an internship with Oakland County Commissioner Eric Coleman.

Students should not sit around and wait for a job to fall in their laps, he said. They need to take the initiative, like he did.

"I feel personally to have those opportunities, I'm going out there to get it," he said.

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