

Local job fair draws 1,000; Md. jobless rate stays at 3.6%

Hopeful applicants endure heat, long line as 60 companies, agencies conduct interviews

By Nicole Fuller
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What was Erik Allen, the human resources manager for a chain of discount grocery stores, looking for in prospective employees at a job fair in downtown Baltimore yesterday?

"They were dressed right," said Allen, of Stop, Shop and Save, as he sat behind his recruiting table. By 11:25 a.m., he had already received more than 50 applications for a handful of jobs at one of the store's eight locations throughout the city.

"That's the key. When I say dressed right, I mean a shirt and tie, women in nice outfits. So I thought that was a plus. I'm not talking about the baggy pants hanging down. They were dressed."

Many of the more than 1,000 people who lined up outside the War Memorial yesterday for the chance to meet with over 60 employers at the Maryland Department of Human Resources' fifth job fair were in interview mode - business attire, resumes, the gleam of eagerness in their eyes.

But some came wearing the everyday outfit of T-shirts and jeans.

Heat in 90s

One man wore a muscle T-shirt, perhaps a testament to the sweltering temperatures in the city, which topped 90 degrees.

Nevertheless, they waited in a line that snaked the length of the building in hopes of landing a job.

"Governor [Martin O'Malley] is very committed to making sure anyone in the state who needs a job, gets a job," said Connie Tolbert, a spokeswoman for the department. She said more than 10,000 people have attended the past job fairs and close to 10 percent found employment.

The Baltimore County 911 Center, UPS, McDonald's and Howard County Fire and Rescue were among those hiring at the job fair.

The bare minimum qualifications for a gig with Southwest Airlines, which the recruiter fired off in rapid speed to anyone inquiring: 18 years of age, a high school diploma, a valid driver's license, and the ability to lift 70 pounds.

A job as a maintenance technician performing carpentry, electric and plumbing duties for Heartland Building Co. pays \$12 to \$18 an hour.

Even The Sun was hiring. For \$8.64 an hour, part-time jobs were available as "mailer trainees" to work at the paper's Sun Park printing facility.

Van William Jefferson Sr. of West Baltimore had a simple objective on his resume: "to acquire a position working in a warehouse environment."

Jefferson, 54, already works part-time as a janitor, but came wearing a white newsboy cap, cocked to the right, a white button-down shirt and a brown and black checkered tie.

"First impression is a lasting impression," he said.

Joe Tribull, 58, took a bus from Canton. He lost his warehouse job in Jessup in January after the company went bankrupt. His unemployment benefits expire in July, he said, and he's filled out applications but so far had no luck.

"A lot of people have been telling me it's my age," Tribull said. "But I'm ... here hustling and bustling, trying to get myself a job."

Shane N. Adams wore a visual message on her neck, which may or may not endear her to some employers: a tattoo in cursive letters that reads "Blessed."

Adams, 23, who graduated from City College in 2001, studied for a few years at Baltimore City Community College and Norfolk State University in Virginia, but has been unemployed since April. Her dream job would be drawing her own comic strip, but she said she'll settle for a job in customer service.

In a green polo shirt, she had her selling points down: "I just may have excellent interpersonal and personal skills," she said. "I'm creative, diligent, reliable. That tops it."

The Army was there, too, looking for a few good men and women. Sgt. Eric L. Grasso described the recruiting process as "a roller coaster."

By noon, 10 people had requested more information about joining the regular Army and the reserves.

'Lot of interest'

"There's a lot of interest, but a lot of people can't get past the [entrance exam]," Grasso said. "A lot of people have a lot of law violations."

Edward Lyles already had a long military career. That was until 2005, when he took an early retirement from the Navy after an injury.

Soon after he returned home to West Baltimore, he took a job as a human resources clerk at Aberdeen Proving Ground. He stopped working last year when his wife died of lung cancer.

"This is like a big step being out here getting ready to work," he said, holding a stack of applications. "I see that jobs I'm really into, as far as customer service, they want a bachelor's degree. It's competitive."

Lyles never graduated from college, but said he applied yesterday for jobs he might not have considered in the past.

"My last pay, I was making \$41,000 a year," he said. "But I'm humble."

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