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Unemployed use training to create new lives

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

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It's been almost five years now. But Jo Hall still remembers the shock -- and the fear.

It was March 2005.

Diversified Healthcare, a division of D&K Healthcare Resources Inc., announced that it was closing its distribution center at 800 Pleasant Valley Road in June.

The local office, originally Mullen & Haynes Inc. Wholesale Druggists, had been in business for 131 years.

"I had worked there 26 years," Hall said the other day.

She had worked her way up to inventory control manager.

"I was 43 years old and didn't know what I was going to do," Hall said.

Shawn Payne had worked at Premium Allied Tool in Philpot for almost 13 years when he was laid off in 2005.

"It was a shock when it happened," he said. "I was totally surprised. We had already had a couple of rounds of layoffs. But it became more real when it happened to me. I was 31 at the time. Tool and die making was all I knew."

But there is life after unemployment.

And better jobs are out there, Hall and Payne say.

"I decided to go to college," Hall said. "I was terrified of English and math, especially math. But I went college and got my associate (degree in business administration) at Owensboro Community & Technical College."

Still, finding a job wasn't easy.

"I sent out 22 résumés, some to places I hoped wouldn't call me because they only paid \$7 an hour," Hall said. "Nobody called. I was down to my last unemployment check when the city called and asked me to take tests for the police department."

But getting hired at the police department can take up to three months, she said.

"I didn't know what I was going to do after my unemployment checks ran out," Hall said.

But she got the job.

"I started as a records clerk in March 2006," Hall said. "By November, I was working as a secretary



Mechatronics instructor Shawn Payne, right, watches high school students, Myles Frey, 17, left, and Zach Miller, 18, from Beacon Central High School, work through a lab exercise Thursday morning using a flow meter in the Advanced Technology Center at Owensboro Community & Technical College. Photos by Gary Emord-Netzley, M-I

in investigations. Now, I'm in support services, working with the training sergeant and with the public information officer. I help with the hiring now, and I understand why it takes so long."

"I had a skill," Payne said. "But I wasn't sure that tool and die making was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. Because I lost my job to foreign competition, I was eligible for two years of training like a lot of the workers laid off today."

He took advantage of the Industry-Based, Modular, Accelerated Credentials option which is now part of the "Quick Jobs" program.

After Payne earned an associate's degree and graduated with honors, he was hired by the college to teach advanced manufacturing.

"It opened a lot of doors for me," he said. "I couldn't have imagined four years ago that I would be teaching today. There is life after unemployment. There are a lot of opportunities in education.

"A lot of people looked at me like I was nuts when I got into mechatronics (which blends several technology disciplines)," Payne said. "I'm happier today. I really enjoy teaching."

Success stories

"There are success stories out there in almost every sector of the regional economy," says Tonya Logsdon, associate director of the Green River Workforce Investment Board at the Green River Area Development District, which administers the funding for many of the dislocated worker programs.

"The program is designed to make a difference for people as they face the future after a layoff," she said.

The Quick Jobs program, designed to retrain workers in high-demand areas before unemployment benefits are exhausted, is a partnership between OCTC's Workforce Solutions division, the Green River Workforce Investment Board and the Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corp.

"We have a work force in transition," EDC President Nick Brake said. "The manufacturing work force has changed significantly in the last couple of years. Production jobs have been eliminated by automation or exported elsewhere.

"Most jobs in manufacturing require skilled technicians who can operate and maintain a piece of high-tech equipment."

The state says 1,700 jobs have been lost in the past year in the Owensboro metropolitan area -- Daviess, Hancock and McLean counties.

The majority were in manufacturing (800 jobs) and trade, transportation and utilities (500).

That's the number of layoffs, but the state says 5,161 were unemployed in the three counties in December.

A relatively small number of those are being retrained for other careers.

Logsdon said 754 people are currently enrolled in training through GRADD along with 70 who are in on-the-job training programs -- a total of 824 people.

Those numbers are for the entire seven-county GRADD area.

Brake said money probably isn't available to retrain 5,000 people in the three-county Owensboro metro.

"Money for training is an issue," he said. "Every city is in the same position that we are, and federal funds are gone in a lot of cases."

Many still hopeful

Many of those who are unemployed are still hopeful that they'll find another job in less time than it would take to complete the training programs, he said.

"There have been some hirings," Brake said. "Some people are finding jobs. But there's sometimes a skills discrepancy between some of the layoffs and the jobs that are open. The time commitment for training is ominous for a lot of people. But everyone we've talked to who's done it is glad they did it."

Rose Bowlds, an employment specialist at GRADD, said the medical field is in high demand among those seeking training.

"We have a lot going for phlebotomy, CNA (certified nursing assistant) and pharmacy tech," she said. "But we also have several in welding and electrical programs."

Brake said there are "three broad areas where we expect the most jobs to be through 2016 -- industrial maintenance, energy and health care."

About 40 percent of the industrial technicians in Hancock County's aluminum plants will be eligible for retirement in three to five years, he said.

"Energy will see some pretty intense interest -- from linemen to plant operators," he said. "The coal gasification plants that are being planned in the area would create up to 4,000 jobs. Then, there will be retirements at Owensboro Municipal Utilities, Kenergy and Big Rivers."

Brake said: "The hottest job is nursing. But there will be health care jobs from monitoring medical devices to IT to coding."

There's always a danger that too many people will enroll in a field and create a glut, he said. "But I don't think health care will be (oversaturated)."

The state says that the five fastest-growing occupations in Kentucky through 2012 will be in health care -- medical assistants, massage therapists, chiropractors, physician assistants and physical therapist aides.

Logsdon said that construction is another area where there will likely be opportunity in the coming months for skilled workers.

"With all the construction projects planned -- from the new hospital to new roads and school projects, we expect a significant need from the local work force," she said.

"It was scary for me to go back to school," Payne said. "But two years is really such a short time. I talk to people who've been laid off and tell them what I went through. You can't just have one skill set these days."

"I would advise anybody, even if they have a job, to get more training," Hall said. "Training is something nobody can take from you. It never hurts to better yourself."

"A lot of people I worked with couldn't even turn on a computer," she said. "I tried to get them to get more training, but they didn't want to. They wanted everything to be the way it was -- and it never will be."

For information on training programs available locally, call OCTC at 686-4444 or e-mail Logsdon at tonyalogsdon@gradd.com.

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