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Summer jobs for students harder to find this year

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Memo to high school and college students looking for summer jobs: You should have started yesterday.

Adult workers and the economy are squeezing the summer job market, and some summer jobs that previously could be counted on simply aren't there this year.

"It is difficult," said Mary Beth Ray, director of career development services at Lincoln Land Community College. "What traditionally used to be thought of as summer jobs are now being held by adult employees who have been laid off from other jobs."

She said retailers, for example, might decide to hire an adult, who might be more mature and dependable than a teenager, if given a choice between the two.

The city of Springfield isn't hiring temporary workers this summer, and Sangamon County will provide few, if any, jobs for youths.

"We're hiring a very small number of seasonal employees, mostly at the highway department," said Brian McFadden, Sangamon County coordinator. "And these are adults. If they are youths, they're on the older side.

"We curtailed summer employment last year, so this isn't a change from 2009," McFadden said.

Slim pickings

Tammy Craig, director of career services at the University of Illinois Springfield, agrees that the summer job market is tighter.

"Absolutely," she said. "It's slim pickings right now."

She said her listings include a job as a summer day camp counselor, jobs at a day camp and pool, and an ice delivery driver. But she said there's no way to tell if those postings already have been filled.

"If you don't have a job by now, you're definitely at a disadvantage," Craig said. "I get that from talking with people around the office who have children who have just now started looking."

Ashanti Crockett of Springfield started applying for a summer job in March, but the 20-year-old sophomore at Southern Illinois University hasn't landed one yet.

"It's usually easier," she said. "But I'm still optimistic. A lot of places said they might hire in May."

Crockett has her name in at Dollar General, Family Dollar, some fast-food restaurants and other retail stores. She worked at Wal-Mart the past two summers, but said she wants something different this year.

She recently enrolled in the Put Illinois To Work program through the Springfield Urban League in hopes of finding a clerical or data-entry position.

Tim Rowls, executive director of The Springfield Project, said it's too soon to tell how his organization will do in placing mostly minority teenagers in summer jobs.

"We haven't started yet," he said. "About three-quarters of the businesses we expect have signed up so far."

In the seven years he's worked with The Springfield Project partnership, which through its Summer Youth Program offers teens a chance at summer employment, "the numbers are different every year," Rowls said.

"There are a couple of fundraising opportunities that haven't committed yet," he said, adding that for now, he expects to get jobs for between 40 and 50 teenagers at 30 to 35 participating businesses.

He's hoping to be able to place 100 to 200 youths, but acknowledges "everything is tight."

Staffing pools, camps

Some traditional Springfield summer jobs will be available again this summer.

Doug Knight of Knight's Action Park said the popular summer attraction has hired close to 200 summer workers — split about evenly between high school and college students. That's about the same number he hired last year.

"Applications started coming in around Thanksgiving," he said.

"We'll have a few drop out when they find out they have to work instead of just getting a tan," he said. "The stack of applications we have on file will fill those openings."

Knight said the state of the economy doesn't dictate how many workers the fun park hires.

"We have to staff for safety reasons," he said. "We have to cover the hours and the days."

Despite layoffs of permanent employees, the Springfield Park District is hiring summer help for its seasonal programs.

"We have pools to run and camps to run," said executive director Mike Stratton.

He said it's too early to tell how many lifeguard and camp counselor positions will be available.

"We won't know the numbers for another seven weeks yet," he said. "Some will return, and we don't know how many we'll have open after that."

The park district operates Camp LIFE, the Nelson Center Summer Camp, Camp LEAP (formerly Camp Sunshine) and Zoo Camp, as well as outdoor pools at the Nelson Center and Veteran's Memorial Pool.

'Tougher this year'

Girl Scouts of Central Illinois is hiring for about 50 positions at its four summer camps in central Illinois, including Camp Widjiwagan at Lake Springfield.

Communications specialist Erica Douglas said the Girl Scouts hire about the same number of people each year. Counselors have to be at least 18 years of age.

A total of 18 of the jobs are at Camp Widjiwagan. They include counselors, lifeguards and kitchen help.

"We have had more applications this year," Douglas said. "The jobs are mostly filled, but even when we're full, we're seeking alternates for those positions."

And the state Department of Agriculture is hiring 365 people to work at the Illinois State Fair in August. That number is the same as in 2009, said spokeswoman Januari Smith.

The jobs break down to 218 grounds workers and 147 who will basically be office workers, she said. Most of the jobs are for only the two-week duration of the fair and pay minimum wage, which goes up to \$8.25 an hour July 1.

"There are just fewer opportunities out there," said LLCC's Ray. "It's tougher this year. After the layoffs of the fall and winter, those people are grabbing many of the available jobs."

"And jobseekers are going to find out that almost everywhere now requires a resume, even McDonald's," she said. "Just filling out an application or applying online probably won't get you the job. People who are coming in in person and dropping off a resume are the ones getting the interviews."

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No temporary workers at CWLP

City Water, Light and Power historically has hired temporary workers for seasonal duties, but the city's summer workers were laid off last year due to an unexpected budget shortfall.

This year, the utility won't hire temporary workers at all.

In past years, the utility typically hired about 100 workers to cover the Lake Springfield Beach operation, plus boatmen and workers for lake services and other electric and water department facilities.

The workers helped with summer maintenance, such as mowing, trimming, cutting, weeding, road maintenance, boat registration and security.

In 2009, CWLP hired 120 seasonal workers, but laid them off mid-season, with the exception of those at the beach – and the beach won't be open at all this summer.

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