



Job outlook rosy for teens -- if they don't mind 'heavy lifting'

By TOM SPOTH, Sun Staff
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LOWELL -- For the first time in years, local teenagers have reason to be optimistic about this summer's job market.

A job fair held Wednesday at Middlesex Community College told the story -- 18 employers showed up looking for summer workers, up from 12 last year.

"A couple years ago, when the economy wasn't as good, there weren't many employers," said Maria Cunha of MCC, which coordinated the job fair with the city and the Career Center of Lowell. "I think this is an indication things are getting a little bit better."

In recent years, a sluggish economy led to job cuts at big corporations. Some displaced workers took low-paying jobs to make ends meet, thinning the pool of jobs for high-school and college students.

The economy has picked up of late but is still well off the peaks reached in 2001, when 40 employers had booths at the fair. As such, young people still can't expect to just waltz into McDonald's and be thrown an apron and a paycheck.

Cunha said she hopes the private sector will snap up between 50 and 100 of the roughly 400 kids who attended the job fair. Another 200 or so will likely benefit from state and federal grant money used to place students in jobs with municipalities or nonprofit agencies, according to Barbara O'Neil of the career center.

The job fair was targeted to young people who may not have the same advantages as other students -- i.e., a well-to-do friend or relative won't hook them up with a summer job. Cunha said turnout was relatively low this year because organizers didn't publicize the fair, spreading the word only through Lowell High School and local programs that work with at-risk youths.

"As employers became less and less, it didn't make sense to bring 800 kids to a job fair when the jobs weren't there," Cunha said.

On Wednesday, the fair buzzed with activity as teens ambled from booth to booth, filling out applications almost as quickly as employers could provide them. By 3:30 p.m., a half-hour into the event, McDonald's restaurant manager Mike Page was already clutching a thick stack of applications.

"There's lot of interest," said Page, who was looking for five or 10 workers to fill night and weekend shifts at the Plain Street McDonald's in Lowell.

The company was also hiring at its Rogers Street and Varnum Avenue locations, and at Drum Hill in Chelmsford. Those hired would make the minimum wage, \$6.75 per hour, Page said.

Alicia Melo, a recruiter for UPS, said the company is "hiring vigorously" this summer. She was looking to fill entry-level "loading and unloading" jobs that pay \$8.50 an hour.

Applicants have to be at least 17 to work the day shift (18 for other shifts) and must be able to lift at least 70 pounds.

"It's a hard job," Melo confessed to one student.

Other employers at the fair included Kentucky Fried Chicken, D'Angelo, Dunkin' Donuts, Enterprise Bank, The Sun and Lowell National Historical Park.

Angel Huertes, a junior at Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School, filled out a Dunkin' Donuts application. Huertes also planned to apply at KFC and Papa Gino's. Last summer, he made \$8.50 an hour cleaning cars for a local mechanic, but the business has since shut down.

William Mayo, a 16-year-old Lowell High junior, said he was looking "for pretty much anything."

He seemed unimpressed by the selection of jobs at the fair.

"They had UPS, but that's kind of heavy lifting," he said.

Mayo's ideal working conditions were to "do nothing for a lot of money."

His friend, Kelsey Morgan, also 16, said she's looking for "something that doesn't take too much time."

Morgan said she's interested in working at The Sun or Papa Gino's. ("Pizza's good.") She had already applied at McDonald's and Market Basket but didn't hear back.

Morgan wasn't too worried about being jobless this summer.

"If you really try, it wouldn't be that hard," she said.

Fred Grant, owner of CollegeHelpers.com, said the summer job market looks good. Job postings on Grant's site, which caters to college students, have increased by 40 percent this year.

He attributed the uptick to a general economic recovery.

"Businesses are taking on additional staff because of increased demand," Grant said. "The market has really bounced back well this year."

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