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Unemployed workers in unfamiliar territory

Many seeking public assistance for first time

By Dave Hodges

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Each day is an ordeal for Norma Crosby as she looks for a job in a labor market that has nearly twice the number of unemployed individuals it did a year ago.

"I moved to Tallahassee several months ago to be with my daughter and my two grandchildren," Crosby said. A new user of the government's social services network, she was not prepared for the effort it has taken to search for work, food and housing assistance.

"I've just recently been approved for food stamps assistance, which is barely enough to feed the four of us all month," said Crosby, who worked 15 years as a corrections officer in the juvenile justice system.

As of March, the Tallahassee Metropolitan Statistical Area that includes Leon, Wakulla, Jefferson and Gadsden counties had 12,972 people unemployed, compared to 6,796 in March 2008.

The statewide statistic is up dramatically as well, from 494,000 to 893,000. The result is record numbers of people turning to social services for help — many of them for the first time.

"We are seeing record levels and record numbers of calls and claims and customer contacts," said Robby Cunningham, communications director for the state's Agency for Workforce Innovation. "One of the biggest challenges is to ensure that all the customers understand the most efficient way and the best way to utilize the service and to reach us when they need us."

Agencies have responded to the surge in clients by extending hours, adding more staff and phone lines and making services as accessible as possible.

Search takes its toll

Crosby's search for work is itself a full-time job. The family is behind on the rent for their Quincy residence, but the landlord is letting them stay until the end of the month. Her daughter, Angel Rowe, hunts for a job, but much of her time is devoted to caring for the children, ages 6 and 6 months.

"Pretty much every day I have been out looking for work," Crosby said. "I've gone places I never thought I would go to try to find employment. I've offered to pick up garbage at people's places, to clean up their yards — whatever I can do to see to it that me and my grandkids aren't homeless.

"It's embarrassing. I am just having to do things that I never in my life thought I would have to do to try to survive," she said.

Claims see spike

Besides helping individuals find jobs, AWI is the state agency that administers the unemployment

compensation program. Weekly claims for unemployment in Florida peaked at nearly 100,000 the week of Jan. 24, but have since retreated to just above 40,000 claims per week.

Nonetheless, the call volume for unemployment compensation claims in 2009 remains at an all-time high. AWI has responded by adding nearly 500 employees in the last 18 months, most in the last 90 days, Cunningham said.

Nearly 400 additional telephone lines have been added, and the service is available longer hours. The agency is in the final stages of negotiating with an outside provider for an overflow call center that would take the extra demand.

Best place to start

State assistance agencies stress that the easiest means for obtaining help is online. For unemployment claims, it's www.Floridajobs.org. For finding a job, the site is www.employFlorida.com.

"One of the best pieces of advice is to utilize the Internet if you can. Our online services are available 24 hours a day," Cunningham said.

Those without a computer can visit area Workforce Plus offices to use the agency's job registry, post a resume or check vacancies. Similarly, the Florida Department of Children and Families has ACCESS, the Automated Community Connection to Economic Self-Sufficiency.

Started in 2005, the service is available on the Internet, but also in storefront locations where customers can walk in and meet with a counselor. Tallahassee's ACCESS center is at 2810 Sharer Road. To use the online system, go to www.myflorida.com/accessflorida.

The system has reduced paperwork and improved the customers' ability to obtain food stamps, cash assistance and Medicaid, said Traci Leavine, operations administrator for the Circuit 2 area that includes Leon and surrounding counties.

Persistence pays

Yolanda Calloway sought work for nearly two years after being laid off from her position as a receptionist in November 2007. Since then, her home has gone into foreclosure and there have been other setbacks, but she found a position as an appointment secretary for Capital Eye Consultants through Workforce Plus.

April 20 was her first day, ending Calloway's 17-month odyssey.

The commute from her home in Wakulla County is about 70 miles each day, but Calloway smiled and said "it's worth it."

Without the state's job assistance, Calloway said she would be jobless and hopeless.

"I lost a lot of things, but by the grace of God, I look to get everything back one step at a time," she said.

Calloway's suggestions to other residents looking for work:

- Register with Workforce Plus.
- Complete the "Ready to Work" assessment that provides details about one's skills.
- Apply for "anything and everything."
- Continue to show up at the Workforce Plus office. "As long as they see you are trying and really want to work, they are really helpful," Calloway said.