

LOCAL

Like rest of nation, it's a job seeker's market in Ventura County

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Like the rest of the country, it's a job seeker's market in Ventura County.

Help wanted signs have sprung up throughout the county as the local economy rebounds from the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the elimination of scores of jobs that are now being re-filled. Even though there's a COVID resurgence due to the delta variant, restrictions on businesses aren't nearly as severe as they were in 2020.

Local businesses are advertising for help filling thousands of positions. Some of them say they are hamstrung by a labor shortage.

According to second-quarter data from the state Employment Development Department, Anthem Blue Cross, which has an office in Newbury Park, and Amgen, based in Thousand Oaks, in June were looking online to fill the most positions. Anthem was advertising nearly 800 jobs, while Amgen had more than 500 openings.

Hospital Corp. of America, which owns Los Robles Medical Center in Thousand Oaks, was advertising more than 200 vacancies, while Community Memorial Health, which owns hospitals in Ventura and Ojai, had more than 170 openings.

Occupations with the most advertised jobs as of June included retail salespersons with 800 openings, registered nurses with 729, customer service representatives with 498 and supervisors of retail sales workers with 476, according to the employment agency.

Second-quarter data is for the months of April, May and June. Third-quarter data, for the months of July, August and September, has not been released yet.

Miguel Delgado Helleseeter, director of CSU Channel Islands' Institute for Global Economic Research, said he's not surprised by the surge in local jobs.

"We knew that the decline in employment was imposed, in a way, as we were forced to shut down, stay at home, and work from home" due to the pandemic, he said. "As restrictions began to be lifted with improvements on the health side of things, a lot of these jobs could return.

"We are, of course, now dealing with the delta variant, but it has not slammed on the brakes of the economy like the initial COVID impact did," he said.

'Healthy jobs market'

Hospital Corp. of America spokeswoman Daphne Yousem said the company is hiring for a variety of positions at Los Robles Medical Center.

"It's a healthy jobs market," she said. "We have a lot of open positions right now. From nursing to facilities to housekeeping. Just about every major department.

"There's a need, and we're trying to fill it," utilizing jobs fairs and online advertising, she said. "We hired 15 people on the spot at a jobs fair this week."

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Some employers said they're having a hard time filling positions for a variety of reasons. They cited unemployment benefits and that there are so many job openings around the county that prospective employees can pick and choose.

Federal unemployment benefit programs under the CARES Act ended Saturday. Other benefit programs, such as help with food, rent, utilities and health insurance, remain.

"It's really tough to find people," said Vince Pillard, who owns the Slate Bistro & Craft Bar in Camarillo.

He said prospective employees, including bartenders and sushi chefs, are asking for more money than he's offering as his restaurant still tries to recover from the pandemic.

"Even the basic minimum wage people, now they want \$20 bucks an hour for very basic skills," he said. "It's quite crazy to be honest. Every person (employer) I talk to is in the same boat as I am."

Tyrone Knox, who owns the Sunset Terrace Restaurant & Lounge in Thousand Oaks, is also having trouble filling positions, including kitchen staff, servers, bartenders and hosts.

Knox said his servers make more than \$250 a night just in tips, and yet he can't find people to hire.

"It's crazy," he too said.

"I have very few applications," he said. "You go to Craigslist and it's endless. Home Depot is hiring. Lowe's is hiring. Everyone is hiring. But there's just not enough employees out there. The pool is incredibly small."

Nolan Krause, manager of Lassens Natural Foods & Vitamins in Ventura, said he's had success filling a variety of positions, including cashiers, deli workers and clerks.

"There's a lot of applicants and a lot of vetting and a lot of hiring," he said.

The problem is keeping them, he said.

"A lot of people come in and then quit a week later," Krause said. "Or they're like, 'Yeah, I'll come in for an interview,' and then they don't show up."

Amgen spokesman Michael Strapazon said in a statement that, "we are enthusiastic about the diverse range of talent and the range of candidates we are seeing apply for positions at Amgen in this dynamic market."

High-paying, low-paying jobs

Despite the rosy local jobs picture, Bruce Stenslie, president and CEO of the Economic Business Collaborative, a Camarillo-based business consulting nonprofit, said it will likely take until 2022 for the county to return to its pre-pandemic employment levels.

Ventura County's unemployment rate in July was 6.4%, higher than the nation's 5.7%, but lower than the state's 7.9%.

The county's unemployment rate at the height of the pandemic in May 2020 was 13.7%. It was about 3.6% in June 2019 before the pandemic.

"There are at least two reasons we might expect the slow rate of recovery," Stenslie said. "One, we still need to be extremely careful around COVID-19 variants. Workers may be reluctant to return to work, and businesses will be constrained in their growth or expansion."

The second reason, he said, is that the county is still down 6,400 jobs in the leisure and hospitality sector and 4,100 jobs in the retail sector

"And retail just isn't going to get those jobs back," he said. "The sector was declining, here and nationally, even before the pandemic" as more and more customers were shopping online.

The permanent loss of retail jobs will be made up by new jobs in other sectors, including biotech, non-durable manufacturing and warehousing such as Amazon facilities, he said.

The leisure and hospitality sector, meanwhile, may recover its jobs, Stenslie said.

"But workers have been reluctant to jump into the market," he said. "They're looking for better pay and working conditions in other sectors, and they're being careful about taking back work that puts them in close contact with other people" due to the pandemic.

Matthew Fienup, executive director of California Lutheran University's Center for Economic Research and Forecasting, said higher-paying sectors such as technology and white-collar have recovered better in the county than lower-paying sectors such as retail and leisure and hospitality.

"High paying sectors in Ventura County, which largely support remote working arrangements, were better protected from the immediate impact of the government-mandated shutdowns last year," he said. "Those same sectors have recovered more rapidly since the initial effects of the shutdowns."

Stenslie said the county is finally seeing jobs growth in those higher-paying sectors.

"In general, at least for now, we're seeing a reversal of the last 10 to 15-year trend, during which higher-paying manufacturing and other jobs were being replaced by lower-paying service sector work," he said.

"The challenge this current trend presents is whether we'll have enough trained workers locally to fill these new and higher-skilled jobs or the training capacity to keep pace," he said.

Mike Harris covers the East County cities of Moorpark, Simi Valley and Thousand Oaks, as well as transportation countywide. You can contact him at mike.harris@vcstar.com or 805-437-0323.

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