

Workers: ‘Customers have little grace’

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Competition

Just ask Robin Clement, co-owner of Monkless Belgian Ales in Bend. Clement and her husband opened their pub just four months before the pandemic shut it down to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Fast forward to July, when tourism season in central Oregon hits a high note and the state is reopening as COVID-19 cases wane: The Clements had trouble finding enough workers to keep the brewpub open six days a week.

In an interview with an out-of-town worker recently seeking a lead prep cook position, Clement said she made an offer on the spot to the worker. The applicant dined with his family for dinner that night.

But the next day, he told Clement he took another position because it offered slightly more money and a leadership role, something the small pub couldn't offer, she said.

"It was really disappointing, but par for the course. He was one of the few interviews that I set up who actually showed," Clement said. "2020 was a cakewalk compared to 2021.

"Customers have little grace. Their patience is thin. It's been hard dealing with expectations."

Only 32,500 eligible workers statewide are sitting out the labor market waiting for the pandemic to lift because of possible health concerns or child care issues, said Gail Krumenauer, an Oregon Employment Department economist. And another 12,000 workers statewide, who had been in the leisure and hospitality industry, now are working in the transportation/warehousing and delivery sector because of higher wages and benefits. The average wage for leisure and hospitality in Oregon is about \$14 an hour, but in transportation/warehousing it's \$18 to \$20 an hour.

"That's a tough spot to be in. The hiring is 1½ times greater than we've ever seen," Krumenauer said. "This spring we had 98,000 job vacancies. That's a lot of what is fueling the worker shortage.

"That's a perfect storm: a lot of things happening all at once and it makes it hard for employers. Everyone's hiring."

Layer these events on top of one another and mix in pent-up demand for buying and traveling and the demand on goods and services increases, which in turn increases demand on the need for more workers, Krumenauer said.

"Expanded benefits helped families in central Oregon and nationwide keep food on

'THIS SPRING WE HAD 98,000 JOB VACANCIES. THAT'S A LOT OF WHAT IS FUELING THE WORKER SHORTAGE.'

Gail Krumenauer | an Oregon Employment Department economist

the table and a roof over their heads when workers lost their jobs through no fault of their own during this public health pandemic," U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat, said in an email. "Research has repeatedly debunked the baloney that benefits discouraged work.

"What's clear in my conversations with Oregonians all over our state is that the lack of child care, housing costs, the unique challenges of service industry work and other factors are what's really keeping many people from returning to the workplace."

The unemployment rate in July was 5.6% in Deschutes County, lower than the double-digit rates at the height of pandemic-related closures but still above February 2020, when it was 3.3%, according to the Oregon Employment Department monthly unemployment figures. Crook and Jefferson counties have seen their unemployment levels return to near-normal levels in the months following the business closures imposed to slow the spread of the virus.

Crook County's unemployment rate was 7% in July, compared to 4.4% in February 2020. And Jefferson County's unemployment rate was 6.5% in July, compared to 4.1% in February 2020.

Statewide, the unemployment rate was 5.2% in July, just slightly below the national unemployment rate of 5.4%.

"There's no doubt that (the federal boost of the unemployment insurance) is constraining the supply of labor," said Damon Runberg, an Oregon Employment Department regional economist. "But I don't think it is to a significant degree.

"The labor market will likely ease some as we move into the fall, but that will be more a reflection of a reduction in job vacancies rather than a massive influx of workers who lost their federal unemployment insurance benefits."

Child care could potentially get worse if the Bend Park & Recreation District isn't able to hire 20 more workers for its after-school programs. It takes about 90 employees working part-time hours to run the 14 pro-

grams in elementary schools, said Julie Brown, the park district's community relations manager.

The park district has posted hiring signs everywhere, even on vehicles, posted ads on social media, participated in job fairs with on-the-spot hiring and even raised the hourly pay, she said.

"We've worked all summer long struggling to recruit the new employees needed," Brown said. "These things typically produce the results. This situation feels different."

In letters to parents, the park district asked for referrals from parents, she said. There were 1,000 children signed up for after-school care as school started this week in Bend.

"We've never experienced this before," said Brown. "We offer training skills for those who want to do this job. Most of our workers are in their 20s, but we do have people working in these jobs in all ages."

Nearly 18 months past the initial business restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the virus, Oregon has regained 2 out of every 3 jobs lost in the spring of 2020, Krumenauer said. Just in the leisure and hospitality sector alone, the state added 7,100 jobs in July, she said.

Stress

At Monkless, Clement said she hopes that after the federal unemployment subsidy subsides, she can employ a full complement of staff. She needs to fill about seven positions, and that's keeping her from opening her business seven days a week.

Clement said the pub has not been able to operate at full capacity since the shutdown in March 2020 and that's because of staffing issues. And if summer hires leave or wait staff leave because they don't want to wear masks, she might have to consider closing for lunch or limiting more service.

"It's challenging as an employer," Clement said. "The worries I had in 2020 were if we were going to make it because we were a new brewpub. This year we have an unprecedented number of customers and a lack of staff that continues to get worse."

Keatman, Sparrow Bakery's owner, said she thinks the stress of the pandemic is wearing thin on workers who have to face customers daily. With the average age of a service industry worker about 19 to 24, she sees anxiety at levels she's never seen before.

"Workers in this age group don't have a secure financial situation, and they're trying to figure things out," Keatman said. "They're trying to figure things out. Being at work sucks."

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Hotelier: Shortage impacting entire state

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pay. What are other people offering?"

While Khan only made slight adjustments to wages, he added bonuses and incentives.

"We have value in this company and we are a good company that offers a lot of benefits," he said. "We have long-term relationships (with workers), but still ... we looked at that and made some changes."

Khan is also looking to develop housing. Cognizant of the housing crunch on the coast, where workers in hospitality and other service sector jobs are often priced out of market-rate rentals, he wants to help construct more affordable units downtown.

"We want to attract people from Portland, if they want to move over here to work, so that we can solve some workforce problems," he said. "It would not only help solve the housing problem, it will also solve some of the workforce problems because we will get some talent that will have a nicer place to stay in new buildings ... while also giving the local people a place to stay."

Khan said his workers will

get first priority on units and a discount on price.

As occupancy rates for hotels climb back toward pre-pandemic levels, the workforce remains in flux.

Earlier this summer, the American Hotel & Lodging Association estimated that 1 in 5 hotel jobs lost during the pandemic won't return by the end of the year. Many people who are looking to return to work are reconsidering hospitality or want higher wages, better benefits and flexible schedules, according to a survey by Joblist.

With the labor shortage, workers who are employed in hospitality are often tasked with extra hours and additional duties.

While the shortage may not be affecting Khan's hotels as much as others, as the board chairman for the Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association, he sees the impact it is having across the state.

"It should be a priority for industry leaders like ORLA and everybody to bring the workforce back and make them confident in the hotel industry," he said. "We should work together to bring them back because it is a huge thing."

Khan said he knows hoteliers who cannot use all of their rooms because they don't have the staffing to properly clean them on time.

Some have pointed to the extended unemployment benefits during the pandemic as one reason for the labor shortage. State economists calculated the average unemployment benefit equaled about \$16.75 an hour.

But the extended benefits expired over the Labor Day weekend.

Considering that most people are vaccinated and there is a better understanding of how the virus spreads, Khan said the government is right to end the benefits. He expects to see an increase in job applications in the coming weeks.

Despite the uncertainty of the pandemic and the changing workforce, Khan chose to move forward with construction last year of the 65-room SaltLine Hotel in Seaside. The hotel opened in August 2020.

"We did a lot of work in-house," he said. "It was not easy, but it was fun — working together through the challenge we had.

"I like when there is a challenge and I can overcome it."