

# Workers in short supply amid job growth

## Worker Shortage



FIRST IN A 5-PART SERIES

By SUZANNE ROIG

The (Bend) Bulletin

*Editor's note: Today starts Part One of a five-part series by EO Media Group to publish over the next five weekends, looking at the issue of the lack of workers for jobs in Central and Eastern Oregon; why workers are not returning to previous-held jobs and how businesses are pivoting to function without being fully staffed.*

BEND — With record job growth in Oregon, Whitney Keatman never imagined she would have problems finding workers for her Scott Street location of Sparrow Bakery.

And she didn't. It was getting them to stay that has plagued her long time Bend business.

In the past year Keatman, a co-owner, made 117 job offers and most were accepted. But after just three months, only about 42 workers remained. The bakery needed a minimum of 20 workers at the Scott Street location and by the end of this summer there were six.

So last week, she made a hard decision: She will close the bakery at the Old Iron Works Arts District.

"We've been struggling for seven years with moments of success," Keatman said. "Over the years we've had on again and off again good managers. When you don't have the right management, you have a hard time retaining workers."

"It's common for people to come and begin training and then get another job offer that competes with wages," Keatman said. "There's no allegiance. It's a competitive market for employers."

During a year of record job growth in Oregon, employers like Keatman have had the hardest time finding workers to fill positions. Companies, particularly in the leisure and hospitality industries, across the state are scrambling to find workers.

The hospitality, hotel, restaurant and tourism-related industries added 6% more jobs this year, economists say. Hiring is more competitive than ever as employers raise wages, offer signing bonuses, referral bonuses, improved benefits, even subsidies for housing. But those incentives also have to compete against federal unemployment benefits, an increase in household income from federal stimulus funds and retirements.

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 are scrambling to get enough workers to keep the brew pub 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 cake walk 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, who may have health concerns or child care issues, said Gail Krumenauer, 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, Krumenauer said. 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 1 1/2 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 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, D-Oregon, 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 too 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.

In Eastern Oregon, Baker County's unemployment rate was 5.4% in July 2021, compared to 8.7% the prior July. Union County's unemployment rate was 5.8% in July 2021, down from 9.4% the

It takes about 90 employees working part-time hours to run the 14 programs in elementary schools, said Julie Brown, district community relations manager.

The district has posted hiring signs everywhere, even on the vehicles, posted ads on social media, 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."



Dean Guernsey/The (Bend) Bulletin

A help wanted sign at Einstein Pros Plumbing Heating Cooling Service Co. in Bend seeks workers with a starting offer of \$20 per hour.

prior July. Wallowa County's unemployment rate was 5.4% in July, compared to 8.3% and Umatilla County was 5.5% in July 2021, down from 7.3% in July 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, 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."

Childcare could potentially get worse if the Bend Park & Recreation District isn't able to hire 20 more workers for its after school programs.

In letters to parents, the park and recreation district asked for referrals, she said. There are 1,000 children signed up for after school care when school starts Sept. 8 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 two out of every three 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.

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

## NEWS OF RECORD

### DEATHS

**Gaynell Dougherty:** 82, of North Powder, died Sept. 2, 2021, at his home, surrounded by his family. Arrangements are under the direction of Tami's Pine Valley Funeral Home & Cremation Services. Online condolences can be made at [www.tamispinevalleyfuneralhome.com](http://www.tamispinevalleyfuneralhome.com).

### FUNERALS PENDING

**Tharrell Tilgner:** Graveside service with military honors will take place Thursday, Sept. 9 at 11 a.m. at the Eagle Valley Cemetery in Richland. Arrangements are under the direction of Tami's Pine Valley Funeral Home & Cremation Services. Online condolences can be made at [www.tamispinevalleyfuneralhome.com](http://www.tamispinevalleyfuneralhome.com).

**David Coughlin:** Celebration of life, Sunday, Sept. 19 at 4 p.m. at the Quail Ridge Golf Course, 2801

Indiana Ave. in Baker City.

**Donna Weir:** Graveside service will be Saturday, Sept. 25 at 11 a.m. at the Eagle Valley Cemetery in Richland. Arrangements are under the direction of Tami's Pine Valley Funeral Home & Cremation Services. Online condolences can be made at [www.tamispinevalleyfuneralhome.com](http://www.tamispinevalleyfuneralhome.com).

### POLICE LOG

**Baker City Police**  
**Arrests, citations**  
SECOND-DEGREE CRIMINAL TRESPASSING: John Marsik Guthrie, 49, Baker City, 10:50 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 1 in the 500 block of Campbell Street; cited and released.  
HARASSMENT: Breanna Marie Clark, 28, Baker City, 9:21 a.m. Wednesday, Sept. 1 in the 1600 block of Cherry Street; cited and released.

## TRACING

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county's sharpest weapons in the fight against COVID-19, said Staten, director of the Baker County Health Department.

In contact tracing, a county or state employee telephones people who have tested positive and asks them about those they might have been in close contact with, and thus potentially exposed to the virus.

Contact tracers then try to contact those people to let them know about the possible exposures, Staten said.

Contact tracers don't divulge the name of the person who tested positive, she said.

The value of this process, Staten said, is that it alerts people who might have been exposed to the virus. That can encourage them to be aware of any symptoms they might develop, and potentially result in them either being tested, or quarantining to avoid infecting others, Staten said.

"Contact tracing is one of the main ways we can mitigate the spread," Staten said. "But we need our community's help and cooperation."

But recently, fewer people are willing to talk to contact tracers, or to suggest people who they might have been in close contact with, Staten said.

"While we understand that positive cases are trying to protect their friends and family from having to quarantine or that they are embarrassed that they may have exposed someone to COVID-19, it is important for your contacts to know they are at increased risk of having COVID-19," she said in a press release.

Without effective contact tracing, Staten said it's difficult to discern any patterns in how the

virus is spreading.

A large majority of the county's cases over the past month or so are considered "sporadic" — meaning they don't have a definite source.

Ineffective contact tracing exacerbates that problem, Staten said.

Baker County reported a record number of cases — 300 — during August.

The previous monthly record was 196, in December 2020.

On Thursday, Sept. 2, the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) released its weekly report on breakthrough cases — people who test positive more than two weeks after being fully vaccinated.

Baker County has had 46 breakthrough cases through Aug. 28, the majority — 31 — being reported from Aug. 1-28, according to OHA reports.

Breakthrough cases account for about 5% of Baker County's 947 cases from Jan. 1 through Aug. 28; the first county residents to be fully vaccinated reached that status in early January.

For the period Aug. 1-28, breakthrough cases accounted for 11.5% of the county's 270 cases.

That's a lower percentage than Oregon's statewide figures. According to the OHA reports, breakthrough cases have constituted from 15.9% to 20% of weekly statewide cases since late July.

The 15.9% figure was for the most recent week, ending Aug. 28.

Staten pointed out that although COVID-19 vaccines aren't 100% effective, the vast majority of fully vaccinated people who become infected have minor symptoms or none at all.

Although the OHA doesn't list hospitalization data for breakthrough cases at the county level, statewide, 4.9% of breakthrough cases have been hospitalized, and 0.9% have died.

WIC is a public health nutrition program serving Oregon families. Even if you do not qualify for SNAP or the Oregon Health Plan (OHP), you may be eligible for WIC. Check online at [healthoregon.org/wic](http://healthoregon.org/wic).

### TO SUPPORT YOU WE OFFER:

- Pregnancy & breastfeeding guidance
- Wholesome foods
- Nutrition-focused counseling
- Free health screenings
- Connections to resources

WIC is all about healthy babies, kids, and families. If you are pregnant, breastfeeding, or have a child under 5, WIC could be for you!



QUAIL RIDGE GOLF COURSE PRESENTS

## Veteran's Appreciation Day!

**FREE Golf** for Baker & Union County Veterans & their families\*

**FREE BBQ** from 11am - 1pm

\*Family includes spouse/partner and dependents

\*Cart & club rentals included

VETERAN SERVICES & INFO WILL BE AVAILABLE AT THE CLUBHOUSE.

PARTICIPANTS ARE ENCOURAGED TO CALL AHEAD FOR TEE TIMES (9AM TO 2PM). PLEASE CALL 541-523-2358.

CURRENT STATE COVID GUIDELINES WILL BE FOLLOWED.

**Sunday, September 12, 2021**  
**9am to 3pm**

