

Job fair offers hope to displaced Shearer's workers

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East Oregonian



People gather around a booth for Lamb Weston during a job fair Wednesday, March 16, 2022, at the Hermiston Community Center in Hermiston.

HERMISTON — Meeting employers at tables near the entrance of a recent job fair, Val Hoxie said she felt overwhelmed by the people's expressions of community and warmth.

"People were looking for ways to help," she said.

There were 47 companies represented at 52 tables at the job fair Wednesday, March 16, at the Hermiston Community Center.

Hoxie, Hermiston Chamber of Commerce executive director, helped organize the event in response to a massive layoff following the Shearer's Foods Hermiston plant fire. The company laid off all 231 of its employees at the facility.

Companies look to put workers to work

Employers at tables met with an estimated 200 to 300 job seekers. By the end of the fair, which took place between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m., the employers said they had met with many people, including individuals laid off from Shearer's. They said it was a successful event, and they hope to begin hiring from the pool of these job seekers soon.

At least one of the company representatives had worked for Shearer's. Candice Chavez, a rack decommission manager for Amazon, said she worked for Shearer's in Hermiston for around 10 years, ending in November 2020.

She called her leaving "bittersweet." She said she enjoyed working for Shearer's. She grew a lot during that time, she said, and she left only because Amazon gave her even more opportunities to grow.

She said she has seen the Shearer's site since the fire, and it filled her with "a lot of emotions." She put in a lot of hard work there, she said, and it felt miserable seeing everything go up in flames, literally.

Still, she said, there is life after Shearer's. She was able to move on after she ended her job with the company, and she felt confident other people can do likewise.

"There are opportunities for people out there," she said. "You can see it all over in here. There are places people can go for jobs, and they need to have hope."

Erik Estrada, protection technician with Corteva Agri-Science, also had advice for job seekers. He said he recommends people to accept help from other people.

"We want to help them in the best way that we can," he said.

He said he spoke with former Shearer's workers, and he felt good he could be of assistance to them in finding work.

There were a few job postings on the Corteva table at the job fair. They were for a maintenance coordinator, a field research intern and a production technician.

The production technician job comes with a \$1,500 sign on bonus, starting wages of \$20 per hour and benefits. Estrada said this job or others at Corteva would be good for recently displaced Shearer's employees.

Another company representative, Tom Clouse, also was looking for workers. Supervisor of operations for Williams, an energy company, Clouse said he was happy to speak with the former Shearer's workers.

These employees, he said, have a lot of good experience, including work with programmable logic controllers.



Job lists for companies at the Port of Morrow line a table Wednesday, March 16, 2022, during a job fair at the Hermiston Community Center.

"We can use that," he said. "That's why we're here," a coworker said.

Perry Lamprey, who also was representing Williams at the job fair, said he was pleased with the people he had met from Shearer's, and he was hopeful of being part of a solution to put people in jobs.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Elsa Enriquez, a human resources employee for Walmart Distribution Center, Hermiston. She said she met one former Shearer's employee whose story stuck with her.

Enriquez said the woman she met was older and did not speak English. She was successful at Shearer's, and she was worried she would not be able to find another

job, Enriquez said. Though Walmart did not hire the woman on the spot, Enriquez said she did give her information about applying for a job.

It is possible, she said, that Walmart will hire her and other people like her.

"It was devastating what happened to them, and I think there are things we can do for them," Enriquez said. "I feel good about that."

Representing the Port of Morrow, Kimberly Rill, workforce training specialist, was at the job fair to tell people about jobs at several local companies. She passed out job posts from companies including Boardman Foods, Amazon, Tillamook and Threemile Canyon Farms.

"It's a sad situation," she

said, "but I think there are a lot of opportunities for people."

She added she had spoken to many people, including Shearer's employees. The Port of Morrow, she said, was happy to be part of the many groups helping out.

Becky Self, Inter-Con Security recruiter, agreed. She said the Shearer's workers have gone through something that was "really devastating." Her husband, she said, was a volunteer at the site of the fire, and she could attest to the awful situation they were facing.

Now meeting with the former employees, she said she was glad to be assisting. As Shearer's, she said, is offering people six weeks of severance, it is good for them to be out looking for jobs and thinking long term.

Inter-Con, she said, has 20 positions it is trying to fill, and she could see Shearer's workers doing well as security officers.

Samantha Hoisington, of Oregon Department of Corrections, was trying to attract people to be corrections officers. She told people that they could start as officers for Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution, Pendleton, then shift over to maintenance if they were interested.

This might be a good direction for Shearer's employees, she said. Requirements for a corrections officer include

being 21 years old, passing a background check, having a high school diploma and possessing a driver's license. She said that if, after being with EOCI for a while, officers could shift over to a position within the prison that might be more suitable to their skill sets.

Meanwhile, Becky Cherry, human resources recruiter for Community Counseling Solutions, was at the fair looking for people who could work as peer support. She said her company is growing and could fill 40 openings, and she was happy to tell former Shearer's employees of opportunities.

Even Blue Mountain Community College, which was promoting its educational programs at the job fair, had jobs to fill. Tammy Krawczyk, dean, workforce development, regional education and strategic partnership, was looking for candidates for a number of jobs. Those jobs included financial aid advisor, athletic trainer and a program assistant at Two Rivers Correctional Institution, Umatilla.

She said she met several people at the job fair and was happy to be part of it.

Chamber employees call the job fair a success

Hoxie, the chamber director behind the fair, said she remembers the day of the fire. She could see it from her office. She looked out and reported having felt ill.

Her feelings changed, however, when she started hearing from employers. As the smoke still rose from Shearer's, her phone started ringing, she said. People wanted to help. That is when her office teamed up with the city of Hermiston to set the job fair into motion.

"We knew we had to do something," she said.

At the end of the event, while many people were packing up, another chamber employee stated her feelings about the job fair.

"This event makes me proud to be part of this community," Ami Little, chamber personal relations director, said. "When someone here is hurting, we help."

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