

Looking at the jobs picture

By Gay Plair Cobb, guest commentary

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As the country looks forward to Labor Day festivities that include backyard picnics and department store sales, it is fitting to take a moment to think about our neighbors who have little cause to celebrate — those who are unemployed or about to lose jobs.

For many Americans, the economic news just seems to get worse. In Oakland, which never fully recovered from the last recession, the official unemployment rate reached a staggering 10.3 percent in July, compared with the state's jobless rate of 7.3 percent.

The results of this economic crisis are tangible every day at the Oakland Private Industry Council's (PIC) Career Center, where growing crowds of the unemployed come to meet potential employers, scan the Internet for job leads, enroll in training classes and workshops and receive advice on writing resumes and polishing interviewing skills.

Last year, we had 97,026 visits to the Career Center, and we expect the number to greatly increase this year.

Unfortunately, the ability of programs like ours to provide adequate support for job seekers is severely strained. Despite the growing need, federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding in California has been cut nearly in half since 2001.

The PIC also participates on a "Rapid Response" team that has provided on-site assistance to hundreds of workers at companies that are downsizing or going out of business. Recently these have included the Waterfront Plaza Hotel, Metro Furniture, ATA Airlines, Wachovia Bank, Broadway Motors, the Port of Oakland and Children's Hospital.

But, the numbers by themselves do not reveal much about the human impact that losing a job has on individual workers and their families.

One of our customers, Nicole Fleming, equipped with a college degree and office experience, has applied for dozens of full-time jobs, but cannot find steady work to support herself and her two children. Laid off two years ago as a customer service representative, she only been able to find occasional jobs as an office temp.

Consider also Reg Bailey, laid off after working 15 years as a truck driver, household appliance installer and warehouseman. After attending a biotechnology training program, he applied for more than 100 jobs in a six-month period and never landed an interview. He is now homeless.

Too many of our workers are bewildered and frightened; many have worked at the same company for years. They worry about their medical benefits and what will happen to their pensions. They suspect their skills are stale or too specific to the place where they worked, rendering them uncompetitive in the current job market.

While the outlook is grim for anyone who loses work, the challenges are worse for workers who are older, younger, disabled or of minority status. For example, the unemployment rate for young African Americans, age 16 to 19, reached 32 percent earlier this year. For several million of these young people, the future seems to offer close to zero opportunity of finding a job through which they can support themselves.

A humane society must offer hope to those who are entering the labor market, who have lost their jobs, are losing their homes and have cars that sit without gas in their driveways.

The economy is now the number one issue in the presidential election; we urge the public to judge the candidates for what they can do to create employment, promote job training and enhance the living standard of working Americans.

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