



It's a job-seekers' market in the Lower Hudson Valley. Here's why and who's hiring.

Mike Randall | April 6, 2022

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Leslie Hollingsworth has 16 years of experience teaching third grade in New York City.

She enjoyed the position — it's easier to mold their minds in third grade, she said of teaching young children versus teenagers — but circumstances have led her back to the job market. On a recent Thursday, she visited a job fair in Peekskill, where the Peekskill City School District's table was among the longest.

"My family recently moved up here," said Hollingsworth, who now lives in Mohegan Lake, "so now I'm looking for a job here. My kids go to school here."

COVID-19, and the "Great Resignation" tied to the subsequent safety restrictions and lifestyle changes, has drastically altered the employment landscape. More than two years after the beginning of the pandemic, the unemployment rate locally is roughly back to where it was before COVID, and the job market is strong, according to Thom Kleiner, executive director of the Westchester-Putnam Workforce Development Board.

However, staffing shortages continue to be "pretty consistent across the board" for a number of fields, Kleiner said, making it a job seekers' market. Employers have also needed to adjust expectations when it comes to such issues as remote work, as the pandemic exacerbated hurdles that have kept candidates out of the workforce, such as a lack of affordable child care.

In the Westchester area, staffing shortages have been especially damaging in two areas: health care, one of the largest employment fields in the region; and leisure and hospitality, including tourism.

Both industries were hurt in very different ways by the pandemic. While the quantity and severity of the work required from healthcare workers has led to burnout and early retirements for those on the frontlines, safety concerns forced extended shutdowns of non-essential hospitality businesses. Some leisure activity businesses and restaurants continue to feel the pinch from a population of residents still not ready to return to regular indoor activity.

Those two sectors are also where the most hiring is taking place, or at least where the greatest depth of employment is being offered.

Health care opportunities

Kleiner said workers are not just needed for jobs like nurses and medical assistants, but "also those in the back office operations" — supporting positions in all areas, right down to secretarial jobs and other clerical posts.

Westchester County is launching a new initiative called the Healthcare Talent Pipeline Program, Kleiner said. A joint effort of the county and the Westchester County Association, an advocacy agency for the business community, it will recruit and train 100 job seekers for high-demand health care jobs.

The Healthcare Talent Pipeline Program aims to connect individuals with barriers to employment with employers with significant talent shortages.

The Westchester County Association and Westchester Community College are jointly sponsoring a health care career fair from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. April 22 at the White Plains Education and Training Center, 303 Quarropas St.

Unemployment rates fall

Westchester County's unemployment rate for February, the most recent month for which state numbers are available, was 3.8%, down from 6.5% one year ago. In February 2020, the month in which the "novel coronavirus" was beginning to become a concern locally, the unemployment rate was 3.9% in Westchester.

The parabolic rise and fall was similar in Rockland and Putnam counties.

In Rockland, the rate in February 2020 was 3.7%, increased to 6.3% February 2021, and dropped to 3.4% two months ago, tied for the third-lowest rate in the state.

In Putnam, 4.0% unemployment in February 2020 increased to 6.1% 12 months later, but was down to 3.5% this February.

Unemployment is a measurement of residents out of work and actively seeking it, not just all those without a job.

Unemployment rates are also adjusted seasonally, accounting for such expected hiring changes as the holiday shopping season and summer employment. Hospitality jobs are available at vacation spots or seasonal businesses, such as pools and summer camps.

For example, Legoland New York in Goshen is about to open for its first full season, after an abbreviated 2021 season that didn't get underway until July 9 due to COVID-19.

"It's more than just a summer job," said Legoland spokesperson Matt Besterman.

While Legoland's peak time is between Memorial Day and Labor Day, its theme park actually operates from April to December, and its hotel is open all year.

Legoland has a staff of 1,500, known as "model citizens," and Besterman said they "cast a wide net" to fill those positions.

Varied jobs available

Dozens of job seekers like Hollingsworth visited the Peekskill Central Fire Station job fair last month. Some were looking for a new job in their chosen field, and others were looking to change professions.

"I'm a server in a restaurant," said Justice Waller, 25, of Peekskill. "I'm looking for a better job than the one I have now, and this is a great opportunity to see what jobs are available."

Waller is hoping to get some type of administrative job, in an office or corporate setting.

In addition to local employers, one agency from Albany also was represented: the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision.

Beatriz Urciuoli, a corrections officer who spends a lot of her time on the road recruiting workers, got a lot of people stopping by her table.

Urciuoli said in addition to prison guards, the department offers a number of civilian jobs, including food service, clerical and vocational positions, and counselors.

Meanwhile, with development and real estate booming amid the pandemic, construction jobs are also available to those with the skills or aptitude. The United Brotherhood of Carpenters also had a table at the fair.

"I'm hoping to find a job in construction," said Prince Marsh, 23, of Peekskill, who's working in a six-week internship for that city. "I found a few prospects here, and it looks like I might have a potential job here."