

Seasonal workers struggle to find jobs

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Tommy Holloway, 53, needs a job.

Since the Joe's Crab Shack on Pier 19 closed in August where he worked doing a variety of jobs, Holloway has been on the search.

He has worked a number of seasonal employment jobs since leaving high school back in the late 1970s.

The going has not been easy.

Holloway's experience is one familiar to many in Galveston County.

"I have been providing service for people that have fallen between the cracks for 32 years," Ted Hanley, director of the Jesse Tree, a faith-based social services nonprofit, said.

"Employment has always been a piece of that puzzle. What happens to hourly wage workers is not a pretty picture."

The unemployment rate in Galveston currently hovers about 4.4 percent.

Yet numerous businesses around the island and county are concerned with not being able to find enough workers to fill open positions.

How can this be?

Those at the forefront of the discussion cite a number of different factors.

Much of the Galveston County workforce is seasonal work — that is, much of the service industry has high demand for workers in peak tourist seasons and less so during the offseason.

June of this year registered a total of 108,639 jobs in the county, Parker Harvey — senior regional economist with the Gulf Coast Workforce Board — said.

While the general trend in employment numbers has been up since 2009, the June jobs number is up from a valley of about 104,000 jobs in January of this year — a difference of a little more than 4,000 jobs by season.

Specific industries trend more toward seasonal employment than others. Educational services and transportation and warehousing are both resistant to seasons, while arts, entertainment and recreation and accommodation and food services rank near the top in displaying seasonal trends, Harvey said.



Labor - Seasonal Workers

Milecent Joy, a seasonal worker from the Philippines, works in the kitchen at the Hotel Galvez Friday, Nov. 18, 2016.

“Education gets people out of poverty,” Hanley said. “As an employer, you are not an educator. You might train. But they don’t expect to teach. So employers get frustrated. They aren’t accustomed to dealing with this.”

Prospective employees looking to make a living are forced to string together a number of different employers in hopes of getting by.

“It takes a mindset change,” Freda Marie Brown, executive director of St. Vincent’s Episcopal House, said. “Unfortunately it gets hard to stay in an apartment and they don’t think long-term. They’re just trying to keep their heads above water.”

A common complaint of employers is employees’ failure to show up to work on time, to do the assigned task and to display a willingness to complete a variety of chores.

“There’s what’s called a one-paycheck wonder,” Hanley said. “They’ll work two weeks, get drunk and then not show up to work.”

Another complicating factor is the list of requirements employers look for in potential workers.

One reason Holloway sees for his extended stint of unemployment is a misdemeanor assault charge he got in 1988.

“My background causes a lot of friction,” Holloway said. “I spent 20 days in jail 28 years ago.”

Some employers reported tolerating some criminal history, while others said that would be an employment turnoff.

“We just don’t have the resources to go out and investigate and make sure everything is in the up and up,” Susie Gillis said.

Gillis is the owner and manager of the UPS Store in Galveston at 6341 Stewart Road.

Furthermore, the lack of skills hurts numerous applicants for seasonal work.

“It’s not a hard job,” Gillis said. “It’s just that little detail stuff you’ve got to keep up with — addresses and names. The shortest we’ve had someone is a month and everyone else a little longer.”

Holloway, for instance, does not have computer skills and has no driver’s license.

“To work for the city, you need a driver’s license to get a job,” Holloway said. “That’s an obstacle for a lot of guys. Galveston’s revenue from tourism is in the millions, but they don’t see why they can’t hire in certain spots. Businesses hire who they want to hire.”

Struggling to find the needed workers in Galveston County, employers have started turning to J1 visa students as a means to fill seasonal employment holes.

The J1 visa program is a U.S. State Department program that allows some workers from certain countries to work in the United States legally. The J1 visa summer work travel program allows foreign college students to work for a few weeks to a few months in this country. In 2015, Texas had 3,082 participants in the summer travel program.

“It was wonderful,” Juan Bernal said. “I loved it.”

Bernal is a flight attendant with a Colombian airline, who previously worked at the Hotel Galvez on a J1 visa.

Although Bernal enjoyed his experience, it did not come without pitfalls.

“I was by myself in an apartment at first,” Bernal said. “It was nice. Then, the day after, all these guys came. It was a three-bedroom apartment with one restroom. And there were nine of us living there.”

Other J1 workers worry about losing their visas and running into trouble with their Galveston County employers, with or without cause.

“They’re just so scared,” Bernal said. “They worry about what their boss will say and the work. They worry about losing their visas and losing their jobs.”

The solution to all these different issues regarding seasonal employment, Hanley said, is a complicated one.

“People are always looking for simple answers to complex questions,” he said.

The answer, simply put, is training — not just on job-specific skills, but teaching those looking for seasonal work on the basics.

This is work groups such as the Jesse Tree and St. Vincent’s House works to accomplish.

“We work to add skills for people and look for ways to maximize people’s skill sets,” Hanley said.