

National employment paradox playing out locally

By LEONARD WOOLSEY | Posted: Wednesday, November 30, 2016 11:45 pm

Galveston, with an unemployment rate of 4.4 percent, has an employment problem.

In a series of investigative reports last week, The Daily News revealed the seemingly odd bedfellows of workers unable to find work and employers struggling to find qualified candidates.

Who would ever have envisioned a day when employers and potential job seekers would be looking at each other across a table unable to make a workable match?

Gina Spagnola, president and CEO of the Galveston Regional Chamber of Commerce, has heard the frustration from both sides — employers who can't find the right workers, and workers who can't find the right jobs.

While the Chamber is involved in the development of a task force designed to bring these willing parties together, the issue is more complicated than many would believe.

The task force, co-chaired by Myles Shelton, president of Galveston College, and Mike Dean, owner of Yaga's Cafe and president of Yaga's Entertainment, is trying to better understand the demands for skilled, semiskilled and unskilled workers in the maritime, medical and hospitality fields.

"The task force is too early in its work, but we do know there are needs," Shelton said. "There's always a supply and demand for every market, always a push-pull. There's an ebb and flow of people who are willing to work and able to work."

But this issue is not limited to Galveston, Galveston County or even Texas. This issue is reflective of a changing demographic across the country.

"We're facing a major shortage of skilled workers," said Stephen Klineberg, founding director of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University.

Blame the Boomers, again.

The leading edge of the baby boom generation is turning 70, but the new entry-level job pool is getting less education while the same jobs now require more training, Klineberg said. Electricians, welders and technical workers require a year or two of specialized training.

"They are being replaced by a very different population that doesn't have the resources," Klineberg said. "It's a crazy paradox."

The reality is workers coming into the workforce are finding entry-level jobs require a more advanced set of basic skills than those entering the workforce a mere generation ago.

"Education is now more critical than it ever was before," Klineberg said. "A lot of people out of high school can't find the jobs that used to be called unskilled."

Furthermore, the local employment picture is clouded with seasonal employment demand and temporary work visas (the J1 visa program).

In the end, however, local residents looking for long-term employment opportunities face a market demanding more from entry-level skills or semiskilled jobs. The solutions include education, certifications and understanding the time-honored skills of showing up on time, shaking hands and looking someone directly in they eye when speaking.

What everyone needs to understand is we need to find a solution to these employee/employer challenges.

• **Leonard Woolsey**