

Skills, trades, education key to breaking unemployment grip on Doña Ana County

LAS CRUCES - Unemployment continues to worsen in Doña Ana County, rising to 7.7 percent while the state's employment outlook has improved slightly to 6.3 percent.

That news came as no surprise to Amy Avila, a 30-year-old mother of two who spends her days trying to find a paying job — something she has not had since 2014. Avila, a Mayfield High School graduate, said she's been actively seeking a job for about six months, but faces some obstacles. A mini-stroke and open-heart surgery kept her from seeking employment for a while and, while she was recovering, she lost some of the skills she had been honing by volunteering as an office assistant at both the NM Workforce Connection and NM Works in Las Cruces.

While her skills are something she can sharpen, Avila, like many of Doña Ana County's unemployed, has only her high school degree and her volunteer work to sway employers to hire her. Still, she follows up on leads and submits at least 20 applications a week. So far, she's had zero takers, she said.

"It's difficult," Avila said. "I only have a high school diploma, but most employees are looking for someone that has a degree. People with no degree get passed up. I think I have more experience than someone who does have a degree and I'm getting passed over."

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Richard Wagner, the site manager of the southwestern area of New Mexico Workforce Connection, agreed that times are hard. But, he said, he's starting to see a turnaround, with more people hiring. He expects to see an uptick

when the final August numbers are released, due in part to schools returning to session. While teachers, who are under contract throughout the year, don't qualify for summertime unemployment, jobs such as cooks, bus drivers and substitutes will be returning.

“It looks better,” Wagner said. “People are starting to spend money. When people spend money, businesses start hiring, positions open up.”



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The lobby of New Mexico Workforce Connection office in Las Cruces where clients can work on resumes or search job listings. Friday September 15, 2017 (Photo: Josh Bachman/Sun-News)

Wagner said the local Workforce office still sees between 750 and 900 clients per week in Las Cruces. Businesses are recruiting through his office in increasing numbers. Last week, between 45 and 50 people were hired for jobs at Holloman Air Force Base following a recruitment drive. Olam Spices and Vegetables recently interviewed 160 candidates through the office and

between 110 and 115 people were hired for seasonal work, Wagner said.

And, he said, degrees are becoming less important. Business owners and managers are looking for people with good personal skills and a strong work ethic. A trade or skill is becoming as important as a degree in many instances, he said.

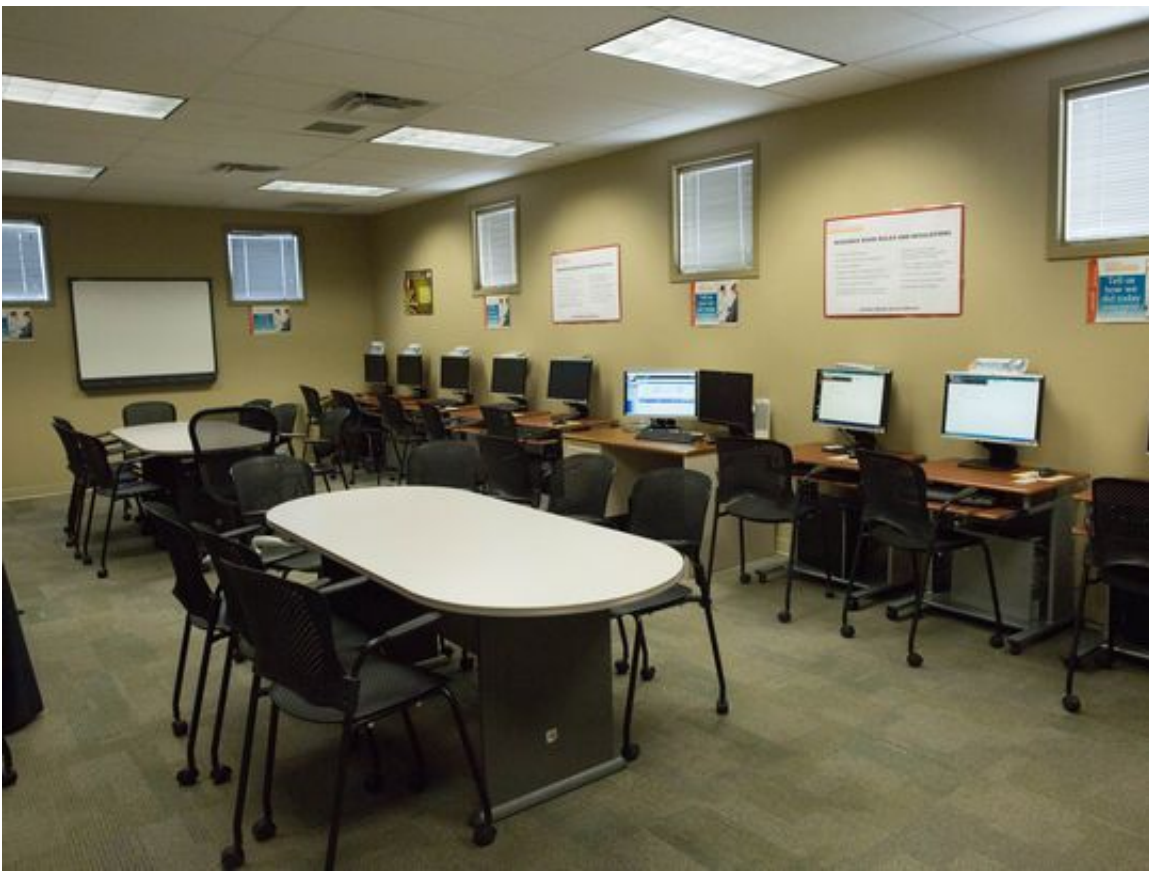
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Wagner said a high school graduate with a trade certification — welding for example — can leave high school and enter the workforce with a salary higher than many professionals with a degree. And those skilled jobs “don’t go away” despite changing technology.

By the numbers

Nationally, the unemployment rate for August was little changed at 4.4 percent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Job gains were seen in manufacturing, construction, professional and technical services, health care and mining. In August, 7.1 million people were unemployed nationally.

New Mexico saw an unemployment rate of 6.3 percent in July, the last month for which statistics have been analyzed at the state and county levels. That is a slight improvement from 6.4 percent in June, 6.6 percent in May, 6.7 percent in April and March, 6.8 percent in February and 6.7 percent in January, according to BLS.



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The New Mexico Workforce Connection multi-use room, where employers can use the space for interviews and clients can use the computers for practice interviews. Friday September 15, 2017. (Photo: Josh Bachman/Sun-News)

The BLS ranks New Mexico 49th among the states, just above the District of Columbia and Alaska, which had unemployment rates of 6.4 percent and 7.0 percent, respectively. North Dakota has the lowest unemployment rate at 2.2 percent.

Doña Ana County posted a 7.7 percent unemployment rate in July. That's an increase from 7.5 percent in June, 6.8 percent in May, 7.1 percent in April, 7.5 percent in March and 7.6 in February and January, the BLS reports.

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Across the state, Union County posted the lowest unemployment rate at 4.3

percent and Luna County posted the highest, 10.7 percent.

Where are the jobs?

New Mexico's reliance on oil and gas revenue and our heavy dependence on federal spending has hampered the state's rebound from the recession, state economists have said. The fact Doña Ana County's biggest employers are the federal government and educational institutions — neither of which are expanding or adding additional jobs — contributes to the slow recovery.

“The economy as a whole in New Mexico is not doing well,” said Jim Peach, a New Mexico State University economist. “We don't have anything really going for us. Oil is coming back a little bit but three years ago we had hundred-dollar oil and now they're celebrating if we get close to \$50 (a barrel). As of June, we still had 1,500 to 1,600 fewer jobs in the state than we did in December, 2007 when the great recession started.”



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The New Mexico Workforce Connection offers help to veterans and unemployed New Mexicans Friday September 15, 2017. (Photo: Josh Bachman/Sun-News)

There are some bright spots for the state. The Facebook data center being built in Los Lunas is bringing construction jobs ahead of it's opening. The film industry is doing better than many expected. There has been growth in the health care industry. Tourism has continued to bring dollars into the state. Santa Teresa continues to be an economic engine driving growth in the southern portion of the state.

“We ought to celebrate when we get a success or two,” Peach said. “It’s not that we are totally failing. But have we been able to get out of the great recession? No.”

Finding a solution

Last week, El Paso Electric added \$10,000 to an [existing two-year, \\$140,000 grant](#) from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to The Bridge of Southern New Mexico to analyze and bring together the county’s existing educational resources in an effort to build a workforce that meets the need of existing and potential employers. The result is the Workforce Talent Collaboration, a group of local business, community and educational leaders that has been convened by The Bridge.

Tracey Bryan, president and CEO of The Bridge, said last week’s [Domenici Public Policy Conference](#) in Las Cruces, highlighted the importance of education in alleviating poverty and the need to focus on Science Technology Engineering and Math, or STEM, skills when preparing students to enter the workforce.

It’s also important that the community as a whole does a better job in letting young people know that there are careers in the technical trades that are available here and do a better job of preparing those students for those jobs.

Many well-paying positions are available for students with only a high school education and certification in a technical field.

“If you want to spur economic development more quickly, it’s not about diversifying your economic development efforts but rather concentrating them on fast-growing, high-wage industries,” Bryan said, paraphrasing a recent article by NMSU’s Peach.

“That’s what we’ve done,” she continued. “And, while this plan is nearing completion, we see the opportunities that are there when we harness the assets we already have to build the workforce and the future we all want. And that’s not just for our young people, it’s for the unemployed, the under-employed and the low-skilled worker who just needs to know how close they are to being able to get the education and training they need to take advantage of the opportunities here.”

Those opportunities can be accomplished with the schools, colleges, universities and training programs already available in Doña Ana County, she said.

“We need to help our young people understand that success happens at many levels, including career certification and associates degrees,” she said.

“Because, in some cases, they actually out-earn a four-year degree.”

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