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SIXTY-ONE PEOPLE, including seniors from Monroe County High School, met with five local employers at the first-ever Job Fair sponsored by the Monroe County Chamber of Commerce and the Cooperative Extension

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...fice last Thursday.

"We'd like to get four to six good workers for general labor, and to cover absenteeism," said Ina Graves, there representing Anderson Forest Products. "The high school brought seniors out, and it was a good opportunity to connect. Finding people who are willing to show up for work is a definite problem around here, even though we offer incentives and bonuses. But everyone around here has the same problem."

Part of the issue is finding employees who can withstand a rigorous regimen of drug testing required by the Kentucky Drug Free Workplace program, which offers a 5 percent discount on workers' comp insurance. "We tested 12 people yesterday, and hope to get six clean results," said Graves. "We have to do pre-employment, post-entry and random testing."

Problematic as the drug issue is, it's only part of a bigger issue. "I've been with Anderson 21 years, and we have never had a problem like this," said Graves. "I'd like to see just one day when everyone shows up. Ideally, I'd like to hire 4-6 new people for a second shift skeleton group. I talked to a few prospects. We'll see." A young man approaches the table; he's at work on his college degree, and just wants "to see what's out there, locally."

Chuck Gantz of Millwood Pallet was impressed with the senior class, and hopes to lure a few good workers. "We got some applications, and passed a lot out," he says. "It's hard work we do, but if you do the work, you get the victory on the other end."

Loan officers Amanda Brown Wyatt and Justin King are there representing South Central Bank, which has openings in Barren County at a \$10 an hour starting wage. "Our bank has low to no turnover. Most of our employees are very tenured," says Wyatt. "We feel like we might have met a couple of good prospects today."

Maria Denton was there helping organize; as a member of Audubon Area Community Services, based in Owensboro, which administers a wide range of social welfare programs including the Kentucky Works Program, she has a strong professional interest in helping people transition from welfare (or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, as it is currently called) to work. She, along with everyone else in the room, acknowledges that jobs in our region are going unfilled. "There's a lot more opportunity out there than people realize," she said. "In the Barren River Region, especially in Monroe and Metcalfe counties, there are a lot more jobs than workers."

Mike Brown, chief financial officer at Stephens Manufacturing, said his time at the job fair felt well spent. "We're getting some prospects," he said. "We could probably use ten right now. Starting pay is anywhere from \$11 to \$14 an hour depending on the job -- and if we hire a welder, say, for \$13 an hour and they do right, they'll be making \$15 within two years."

Tompkinsville Mayor Scotty Turner was there representing the city. "We're always hiring," he

said. "The overall economy has picked up, which makes it more challenging. Our big turnover is from people failing drug tests." Employees of the city start at \$9 an hour, moving to \$10 after six months, and can obtain certifications on the city's tab that increase their pay still more.

By the time the job fair ended in mid-afternoon, 31 people had qualified for interviews for the 38 jobs being offered. The help wanted signs posted in front of many local businesses will remain. As lifetime resident and mayor, Turner said, he has inklings of the roots of the labor shortage. "Tompkinsville's economy was completely gutted by NAFTA, and some may have lost heart and handed that feeling down to the next generation," he said. "Many of the people here who work, work in Glasgow; meanwhile, people who live in Glasgow work in Bowling Green. The new Taco Bell was looking to hire 60 people, offering insurance, retirement accounts, tuition help for college -- the guy told me he spent ten hours accepting applications, and six people came in."

"And whenever a big factory calls, the first question is, what's your workforce like? I could sit there and lie all day long, but that's pointless. The community has to decide: do we want to just be a retirement community, or maintain industry? For industry you need people. I will say the seniors seemed interested, which says a lot about our teachers," Turner said.

"To be honest, I'm not sure what the answer is. I do know the opportunities are here in our factories, as well as in education and health care. And until the judicial system starts doing a better job eliminating drug trafficking, we're likely to keep facing this situation -- which is hard for employers and hard on the people whose lives are stuck in neutral."



RECRUITERS from South Central Bank chat with a prospect.



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