

Work force development taking a fiscal hit at a bad time

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Work force organizations in the Tampa Bay area continue to face increasing demands as the economy falters, but they will have to do more with the same or in some cases less money for programs.

The 2008-09 fiscal year budget for WorkNet Pinellas is \$9.7 million, down nearly \$1 million from the current year, while Tampa Bay Workforce Alliance's allocation remains essentially flat at \$20 million.

Suncoast Workforce Board, which provides employment services in Manatee and Sarasota counties, has a preliminary budget of \$5.5 million for this fiscal year compared to \$6.3 million last year.

CUTTING STAFF

A layoff of 10 Suncoast employees is expected when federal funding for a special juvenile offenders program ends, said Leslie Loveless, director of operations.

Cuts in youth and veterans programs and dislocated worker services are expected.

Over the past six years money for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families programs has dropped 32 percent, Loveless said.

"We are anticipating the TANF service needs will go up," she said. "What is really disturbing is that veterans funding over the past six years has decreased 34 percent."

The organization experienced a 33 percent increase this year in the number of job seekers compared to 2006-07 while the number of job orders dropped.

First-time visitors to the board's programs tallied nearly 31,000 this year.

"Over the years, work force boards have maximized their efficiencies," Loveless said. "We're all doing the best we can."

SEEKING GRANTS TO HELP

WorkNet Pinellas, which had been successful in obtaining grant money in previous years, already has proposals out in an attempt to land competitive grants for various programs, said Ed Peachey, CEO and president.

WorkNet is partnering with other work force boards in seeking \$2 million in U.S. Department of Labor grant money for science and technology programs.

WorkNet Pinellas has lost some money because grant funding for a veterans program has run its course, Peachey said.

"It's been a real roller coaster this year," he said. "At one point, we were looking at a pretty big hit in funding because the feds rescinded about \$13 million in Workforce Investment Act money, but the state substituted other money to support the welfare-to-work programs."

TRAFFIC UP, DOLLARS DOWN

The upcoming fiscal year will be "very challenging" for the Tampa Bay Workforce Alliance, said Renee Benton, CEO and president.

"We will be where we are this current year as far as funding, but our traffic has increased," Benton said. "We will have essentially the same money with 30 percent more people looking for jobs."

Unemployment claims filed with the organization totaled 18,000 from January through April this year. It was the highest level the alliance has had in a decade.

An up side to the work force situation is the skilled employee pool, Benton said.

"Employers in the region have the opportunity to hire people they haven't had access to in the past," she said. "People are getting nervous about possible layoffs."

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