



Job Losses Hitting Hard

By D'ANN LAWRENCE WHITE

The Tampa Tribune

Published: August 20, 2008

Editor's Note: This is the second installment in an occasional series about how Brandon area residents and businesses are coping with inflation, high gas prices and other effects of the nation's troubled economy.

BRANDON - The staff at the Brandon office of Tampa Bay WorkForce Alliance is on a first-name basis with Andrew Bassford of Riverview.

Bassford visits the office at 9250 Bay Plaza Blvd., Tampa, sometimes once, sometimes twice a week. There, he fills out applications and looks to see if he's qualified for any of the new jobs posted at the center created by former Gov. Jeb Bush and the Florida Legislature in 2000.

"It's frustrating. I've been here close to 50 times in the past year and haven't found anything," Bassford said. "I just want a job that will pay most of my bills. So far, I haven't found anything that will cover 50 percent of my bills. And my expenses are low. I own my own home and I'm ahead on my FHA Federal Housing Administration loan."

Bassford worked in the construction industry for 20 years and spent the last 15 years earning what he thought was a "decent wage" as a journeyman bricklayer.

Until recently, he said, the work was steady. Most of the jobs he got came from the county, building new schools to accommodate the ever-growing student population.

But residential development has ground to a halt, and state-allocated funds for school construction has been suspended. Bassford and others who depended on the construction industry for their livelihoods are joining the growing list of the area's unemployed.

"I've given up looking for construction work," he said. "I got my Class A driver's license so I can drive freight trucks."

Bassford said he's been offered jobs ranging from \$8 to \$11 an hour. He needs at least \$15 an hour to make ends meet.

According to the Homeless Coalition of Hillsborough County, a wage-earner in the Tampa Bay area must earn \$15.71 per hour, or \$32,378 a year, to afford a modest, two-bedroom apartment and utilities at the average market rate of \$817 per month. That's nearly 2 1/2 times

the state's minimum wage of \$6.79 per hour.

DataPlace, a Web site that assembles housing and demographics data based on the 2000 U.S. Census, lists the average price of an apartment in Tampa Bay at \$654 a month, and the average cost of a home at \$128,629.

Brandon's median income depends on the source. Some real estate Web sites list the annual household median income in Brandon at \$28,339 a year, and job search Web sites show it at \$58,561 a year. Hillsborough County's Web site lists the 2004 median income for county residents at \$44,850.

Those same sites vary as to Brandon's unemployment rate, listing it from 3 to 5.2 percent. The unemployment rate in Brandon is probably more in line with Tampa Bay's average of 5.9 percent, according to the state Agency for Workforce Innovation.

That unemployment rate takes into account recent layoffs affecting Brandon residents. Those include 100 jobs lost at the Brandon financial services center for Coca-Cola Enterprises, 750 layoffs following the closing of the Home Depot call center at U.S. 301 and Falkenburg Road, 121 job eliminations at the Albertsons distribution center in Plant City, 75 jobs lost at Lazydays RV Center in Seffner and 1,100 jobs eliminated at U.S. Central Command at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa.

Monesia Brown, director of the statewide Agency for Workforce Innovation, said 508,000 of 9.25 million people in Florida's labor force are now out of work, a loss of 78,100 jobs over the past year. In the Tampa Bay area, 79,858 people are looking for employment. The Tampa Bay area leads Florida in jobs lost, with 23,100 fewer jobs since the beginning of the year.

That news doesn't come as a surprise to Regina Carter of Brandon, who has spent the past two months knocking on doors and filling out applications after being laid off.

"I have extended unemployment, but that only gives me \$80 a week," said the single mom with a 7-year-old daughter. "That barely pays the utilities for my apartment. I'm already two months behind on my rent. I could get evicted any day. I'm just doing my best to make it."

Further complicating matters, she has no car, and Hillsborough Area Regional Transit eliminated the bus route near her apartment. She must walk an hour to get to the nearest bus stop to get a ride to Tampa Bay WorkForce Alliance so she can fill out job applications and schedule job interviews.

Working with Hillsborough County, WorkForce Alliance provides free help to job candidates by assessing their skills, providing training, posting resumes, referring them to jobs and hosting job fairs.

The alliance has been hosting jobs fairs this summer for the international discount grocery retailer Aldi, which plans to open 25 stores in central Florida by mid-November and bring 400 jobs to the area.

One of those stores will be in the former Albertsons grocery store at 810 E. Brandon Blvd., at Kingsway Road, said Aldi spokeswoman Norma Lopez.

"Whenever possible, Aldi tries to reuse existing development rather than build new," she said. Aldi, founded in Essen, Germany, in 1948, plans to open that store in September.

Pay for manager trainees starts at \$20 an hour, and cashiers start at \$10 an hour, about 10 to 30 percent more than other stores in the market. In addition, Aldi provides full medical and dental insurance, as well as a 401k for employees who work more than 20 hours a week.

With those incentives, more than 100 people showed up during the first few hours of the Aldi job fair in Brandon.

"We were very, very pleased with the response at the local job fairs," Lopez said. "It's nice to be able to open up stores when other grocery chains are closing stores. We're hoping to give a boost to the local economy."

Demetra Zimmerman of Brandon said she hopes to find something better for herself, a career that will open up new possibilities.

"I've done door-to-door sales and commission work," Zimmerman said. "But I have a daughter to support, and I'd like to do better for myself. It's definitely difficult out there. The economy is down. No one is hiring. But I'm very motivated."

Zimmerman was on her way to interview for an assistant management position paying \$20 an hour.

Bassford was also in a tough spot.

"In 20 years, I've never seen the economy this bad," he said. "Now, one job won't do it. You've got to get a second job."

"I'm looking for any job at this point," Jonathan Laureano of Brandon said as he filled out an application at the WorkForce Alliance. "The company I was working for shut down, and I've been looking for a month. I've been doing day labor to get by, but you can't live on \$8 an hour. That won't even pay for your gas. So I'm looking for any kind of industrial or warehouse work."

Hector Hernandez of Tampa is a full-time college student who had been working part time. But, with the price of gas and other expenses, he said he's going to have to get a full-time job if he wants to stay in school.

"The economy is so bad, I can't make it without working full time," he said.

Reporter D'Ann Lawrence White can be reached at (813) 657-4524 or dlwhite@tampatrib.com.

Find this article at:

<http://brandonnews2.tbo.com/content/2008/aug/20/br-job-losses-hitting-hard>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

©2008 Media General Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Member agreement](#) and [privacy statement](#)