

A.C. ready to work; 4,800 attend Stockton career fair

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ATLANTIC CITY — Job seeker Annette Speights arrived at the Convention Center before the sun rose Tuesday and long before the line that snaked through the lobby and up three levels formed.

“I need a job like I need to breathe,” said the 54-year-old Atlantic City resident, first in line for Stockton University’s first Atlantic City Gateway Career Fair.

Speights was one of more than 4,800 people who showed up and got in line before the 10 a.m. job fair start, hoping to get an interview or score a job with one of the 90 businesses participating.

The vendors spilled out into the hallway, and Stockton officials were making their way through the line instructing attendees to register before they got to the entrance. Some were doing on-the-spot interviews, while others were advertising available jobs and directing applicants to apply online.

The turnout of applicants was much higher than anyone expected, and Stockton officials decided to temporarily close the doors at 11:30 a.m. to make sure everyone had a chance to make it through the vendors before the 3 p.m. closing deadline.

Brian Jackson, chief operating officer for Stockton’s Atlantic City campus, said the response Tuesday was overwhelming. He said it shows “Atlantic City is ready to work.”

“Ultimately, I hope that people walk away with new opportunities,” Jackson said.

Although it was a turnout no one anticipated, it was one that should have been obvious in a region where five casinos have closed since 2014, with only one reopening as a hotel. As of December 2017, Atlantic County was one of the top metropolitan areas in the county for unemployment at 6.5 percent, according to federal data. The national average was 3.9 percent.

Atlantic City Councilman Kaleem Shabazz said he came out to see his constituents and support them in their quest for a job.

“I’m hopeful that a lot of people get employment from this activity,” Shabazz said. “It just shows people are eager and ready to go to work.”

He said the turnout was “bittersweet” because while it showed people want to find jobs, it also highlights the need for employment in the region.

“People are not getting up this early and standing in line because they have nothing else to do,” Shabazz said.

Speights said she has been out of work for more than a year after nearly 30 years employed at Bally’s. She was open to all possibilities.

“Whatever they have right now. I don’t mind working my way up,” Speights said.

By the time Speights made it through the job fair Tuesday morning, she had two prospects for employment. She was cautiously optimistic.

Some of the people who came out Tuesday were already employed, but looking for more stable or lucrative opportunities. Henry Caesar, 43, of Atlantic City, is currently a slot technician, but hopes to find a job at Hard Rock. Christine Parker, 45, of Northfield, said she has been working event security, but hopes to get a job at one of the casinos.

“Something better, more hours, long-term,” Parker said.

Francis Rodriguez, 22, of Galloway Township, graduated from Stockton University in the spring and hoped to find a new employer such as AtlantiCare to use her health science degree. Her friend Thomas Matthews, 21, of Atlantic City, said he was hoping to talk to employers such as the Atlantic County Utilities Authority. They were both happy Stockton took the initiative to provide a job fair for residents.

“I think it’s good for the community,” Matthews said. “Because it’s hard to get jobs.”

“And they’re good jobs,” Rodriguez added.

Leah Marshall, a human resources representative of the City of Atlantic City, said the city did not have any open positions, but they were collecting resumes for future openings.

“This shows me that this is what’s going on in Atlantic City,” Marshall said. “We’re still trying to recover from the casinos closing.”

Cathy Burke, owner of the Irish Pub, said the turnout was “phenomenal.”

“We’ve interviewed a lot of people,” she said. “There seems to be a lot of enthusiasm with the public.”

The new Stockton campus is expected to open this fall.

Participants should bring multiple copies of their resumes. Parking at the Convention Center is \$15. Hourly parking is also available at the nearby Wave garage and there is metered street parking in the area.