

WORKFORCE

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number of available hourly jobs is fierce — largely because it's not just teens who are applying for them. Adults and even seniors are going after positions that were once exclusively the bastion of young people.

"Things have gotten really competitive" said Michael Serge, a 16-year-old home-schooled student who lives in Vanderbilt Beach. "I've never had a hard time finding a summer job before, but this year it's been impossible."

Michael was living in Tallahassee last summer and easily found work as a ticket taker at the local movie theater. He has applied to several mall retailers this year, but to no avail. "My father has been paying me to help him with chores around the house, but it's not the same as having a job," he says, adding that he's still watching the classifieds to try to find more formal work.

Renee Ward, a former corporate recruiter and the founder of Teens4Hire.org, one of the largest job-focused Web sites especially for teenagers, says that finding work this summer has been particularly tough for teens, largely because hourly positions that have traditionally been "teen" jobs, are now going to "folks who have been laid off from their regular jobs, have depleted their 401ks or need additional money to pay for prescriptions or medical expenses."

In its "Special Report: Children of the Recession" CBS reported teen unemployment today is at its lowest rate since World War II. The same report revealed that 45 percent of U.S. teens held jobs during the summer of 2000. That number dropped to 33 percent last year, and is expected to drop sharply for 2009.

Unfortunately, for many teens this summer a job is more important than ever. They need an income not to finance trips to the mall, but to help the family stay afloat.

Last summer, 16-year-old Francisco Rivera of Golden Gate contributed money for groceries and utilities and paid several of his father's medical bills (the family has no health insurance) with money earned at his summer job in a restaurant that has since closed.

So far this summer, Francisco is unemployed. "I've applied to seven or eight places, but I haven't heard back from any of them yet," he says. Because he's younger than 18, he's not eligible to work in a restaurant that holds a liquor license. Mall retailers, too, have age requirements, mainly because federal laws limit the number of hours younger teens can work per week. Hollister, for example, requires employees to be at least 17 years of age. The California-based clothing store Forever 21 requires all of its employees to be at least 18 years of age, in compliance with California law.

Francisco is also limited by the fact that he must be able to walk or ride a bike to work, because his family shares one car. "So far, I've been mowing lawns and doing handyman-type jobs, but it's not steady, and I'm not really making very much money," he says.

Another big contributing factor to the slump in teen employment is the downturn in the retail sector of the economy, according to Andrew Sim, director of Northeast University's Center for Labor Market Studies. "Retail stores have long been traditional venue for teen summer employment," Mr. Sim says. "It's hard to imagine that the slowdown of this sector won't have a significant impact on the teen job outlook."

One bright spot is that many municipalities across the country are aware of the current atmosphere and are taking steps to try to improve things.

The city of Fort Myers launched a special program to provide additional summer jobs for area youth. The "Step Up To Work" initiative provides 20 jobs within different departments of the city for teens 14 and older. The selected applicants start-



COURTESY PHOTO

Competition for the limited number of available hourly jobs, such as working in a restaurant, is fierce — largely because it's not just teens who are applying for them.

ed work on June 9 and will be on the job for a total of 10 weeks, assisting the city's camp counselors, answering phones and the like.

The Fort Myers program was the idea of Michelle Faulkner, staffing manager for the city's Human Resources Department. During a four-day hiring period in late May, nearly 100 teens applied for the 20 positions, Ms. Faulkner says.

In addition to local programs, the recently signed 2009 Stimulus Act provides \$12 billion for youth activities, along with creation of millions of jobs for workers 24 years of age and younger. To learn about jobs in the area for individuals ages 14-24, contact the local Career One Stop Office at <http://www.careeronestop.org>, as well as the local office of the U.S. Department of Labor Employment Training Administration.

For teens who can afford to be without income, several career builder sites suggest that this just might be the perfect summer to consider volunteer work or professional internships for academic credit. "These types of experiences build character, compassion and work ethic and ultimately improve hire-ability later on," says Mr. Sim, who adds that volunteer work and internships allow teens to "try out" careers that they might want to consider in the future.

A number of organizations in Fort Myers offer opportunities for students to earn their required high school community service hours. The Lee County Alliance of the Arts offers volunteer positions for teens 14 and older in the summer camp program that serves primary and middle school kids. Lydia Black, executive director at the Alliance, says the popular program of weekly themed camps centered on visual, literary and theatrical arts, as well as music and dance, has from 25 to 40 teen volunteers each week. They assist camp counselors and serve as mentors for camp participants.

The Alliance posts its application on line and begins interviewing for volunteer positions in March each year. "We received more than 100 applications this year — maybe a little more than usual" said Ms. Black, who adds that the volunteers are asked to commit to a week of service at a time. "Some students serve for just one week, while others are here all summer, depending on their interest and availability," she says.

Ms. Black adds that many of the present volunteers attended the camp themselves

when they were younger, and really enjoy the chance to help the younger students. "The younger kids really look up to them, and we expect them to behave like role models," she says.

The summer camp program at the Alliance relies heavily on the teen volunteers, Ms. Black adds. "We wouldn't be able to serve the number of campers we do if it weren't for our teen volunteers. They are invaluable to us. In return, we help them gain training and experience, so it's really a great situation for everyone all around."

Another Fort Myers organization that offers volunteer opportunities for teens is the Calusa Nature Center and Planetarium. Joe Mulvihill, a volunteer and board of trustees member, says teens 13 and older help with the summer camp program and in turn earn community service hours. Mr. Mulvihill says teen volunteers are required to work for one full week, although many stay on for several weeks or even for the whole summer. "The teens really love it," he says.

While most experts concur that finding employment might not be easy for teens this summer, they stress that it is not impossible, and they offer the following suggestions for young people hoping to improve their chances.

On her Web site, Ms. Ward advises teens to apply in person, looking neat and professional. "Employers are looking for help that they can count on to be responsible and reliable and to understand the overall needs of their business," she says. "Try to demonstrate these qualities, as well as a strong work ethic, a positive attitude and a willingness to learn new things." Her site also recommends looking for work in places that are likely to see an increase in business over the summer, such as swimming pools, recreational, theme and amusement parks, kid's camps, movie theatres and similar venues.

Despite all of the difficulty, some Southwest Florida teens are faring well. Andrew Fenstermaker actually landed two jobs to help him raise cash during his last summer before heading off to college. Andrew, whose family resides in Naples, attended prep school in New Hampshire. He is working on the golf course maintenance crew at the Country Club of Naples, and is also driving a tram at Moorings Park until he heads off to Franklin Pierce University in New Hampshire in late August. "I believe I was very lucky," he says about his two jobs. "I know there

Helpful Web sites

www.Teens4Hire.org
www.careeronestop.org
www.snagajob.com
www.groovejob.com

Top 10 qualities employers seek in teen applicants

1. Well groomed
2. Good oral and written communication skills
3. Application filled out neatly and completely
4. Basic math, reading comprehension and reasoning skills
5. Ambition
6. Courtesy
7. Trustworthiness
8. Self-motivation
9. Willingness to learn
10. Reliable

Developing and demonstrating the following "soft" skills will also help in the job hunt:

1. Organization — The ability to manage time efficiently and maintain an orderly work area
2. Problem solving — The ability to identify, analyze and solve problems that may arise
3. Teamwork — The ability to work with others and for the good of the employer

Source: www.teens4hire.org

are plenty of kids who are having a really hard time this year."

Andrew works early mornings at the golf course and then from 4-7 p.m. at Moorings Park each weekday afternoon. "I was fortunate to receive a basketball scholarship which will pay for my school tuition," he says, "but I'm going to need money for books, supplies and extras, so I'm putting a lot away."

Austin Jennings, a rising senior at Seacrest Country Day school in Naples, is returning to the same summer job he's had for the last four years, at a fish processing factory in Harbor Springs, Mich. His parents were friends with the original owners of the factory, and he has returned every year to secure his place.

Austin reports that that several of his school friends have had a difficult time finding summer jobs this year, because many local employers have been reluctant to staff up during a time that is traditionally slow in Naples. "The economy has been so bad. I think most businesses are really doing their best to save money wherever they can," he says.

Ms. Ward and several of the other experts remind teens that the ultimate goal of summer work is to make money, and that finding a job is not the only way to accomplish that goal. "There are plenty of ways that kids can hone their entrepreneurial skills and in some cases earn even more money than they would at the hourly minimum wage," says Ms. Ward.

Teens, and even tweens can babysit, pet sit, dog walk, run errands for elderly neighbors, tutor younger children, mow and weed lawns, help clean out closets and garages and perform a variety of other tasks that people are willing to pay for.

Of course, not all teens are looking for jobs this summer. Recent Naples High graduate Bradley Canada is happily taking the summer off before heading off to Rollins College in Winter Park, Fla., in the fall. "I guess I see this as my last summer to spend with my high school friends, our last chance to be free," says Bradley, who adds he's using his time off to prepare for school in the fall and to take small trips to visit friends in and around Naples.

If freedom is an option, this is probably a good summer to take it. ■