

Waves of job-seekers hit Ocean House

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Jamie Felker, with her 9-month-old son, Wyatt, on her lap, interviews for a job at the Ocean House hotel during a job fair at the Westerly Armory on Tuesday. The Ocean House, a \$140 million replica of the original hotel in Watch Hill, is slated to open in June.

Hundreds turn out looking for work at rebuilt resort/hotel in Watch Hill

Westerly - If Nancy Patterson could get a job at the Ocean House with a salary that equaled her unemployment benefits of about \$500 a week, her year-and-a-half long ordeal would be over.

If Daniel Hostettler, managing director of the Ocean House, could hire 200 full- and part-time workers to restore the charm of the luxury resort and hotel, he would open the resort as scheduled in June.

Construction on the original Ocean House began in 1868. More than 136 years later, demolition began in December 2005 to make way for the \$140 million "replica" that stands in Watch Hill today.

On Tuesday, as hundreds turned out at the Westerly Armory to interview with Hostettler's staff of 30, it looked as if Hostettler would easily meet his goal. But prospects were more daunting for people like Patterson.

Laid off from Foxwoods Resort Casino in October 2008, Patterson has had her mortgage cut in half through the federal Home Affordable Mortgage program and her unemployment benefits extended more than once. The Westerly resident sat in a chair Tuesday, looking poised and polished, but acknowledged she's "down to bare bones" financially.

"I've paid things off," she said, "wiped out the 401(k)."

For his part, Hostettler had mixed emotions as he looked out at the sea of expectant faces, happy to have a lot of job candidates but empathizing with the job-seekers' plights.

Still, Hostettler and his staff were looking for eagerness and optimism among those gathered to submit to interviews Tuesday.

About 200 jobs will be filled, Hostettler said, ranging from guest relations and restaurant managers to floor valets that combine the skills of butler and housekeeper.

"We're really not looking for skills," he said. "We're looking for behavior: Are they charming? Do they want to take care of guests? We'll train them on the skills. What we want to know is: Do they really have that passion ... for making people's vacations great?"

Job candidates began arriving from as far off as Groton, North Stonington as early as 8:15 a.m., said Michael J. London, who handles public relations for the Ocean House. By midday, 300 people had been interviewed. After a break, they reopened in late afternoon and had more than 300 people in line waiting to be interviewed.

Laid-off workers from Foxwoods Resort Casino, college students and people who have been unemployed for a year or more lined the walkway into the street, then waited in lines when they got in the door.

After filling out applications and submitting resumes, they sat in rows of seats waiting for a series of four interviews that might lead to a call back.

Hiring ran from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 4 to 7 p.m. Tuesday. More interviews will be conducted next Tuesday.

Near the tail end of the line snaking along Dixon Street, Fred Webster of South Kingstown, R.I., said a job in the kitchens at Ocean House might make the best use of his skills since he used to own a catering business, but he was willing to take whatever positions might be offered.

Webster said he's been out of work for about a year after a stint in telecommunications and 14 years in catering. "There's nothing out there" in terms of jobs, he said. "And there's so many people unemployed, a lot of jobs go to people within (an organization) before you get there."

Inside the armory, Kathleen Gilbertie and Margaret Saunders of Pawcatuck stood in line, résumés and references in hand. Gilbertie was laid off from Foxwoods last July. Saunders lost her job at Ametek SCP of Westerly, which makes cables for submarines, she said.

"It's a long road to get hired," said Gilbertie. "I figure the more you put yourself out there, the better your chances."

College students like Marissa Zeppieri and Jamie Didone, both of Westerly, were looking for waitressing jobs. Their strategy? "Be friendly, nice," Zeppieri said.

Raymond Young III of Groton was one of the lucky ones. Laid off by Troon Golf of Arizona, which manages the Mashantucket Pequot Tribe's Lake of Isles golf course, he emerged from a round of three interviews with a request to return today for a fourth.

Young was hoping to get a position as a valet.

"I think they're looking for somebody who has a lot of energy," he said. "I like to talk to (customers). When they see you the first thing in the morning, they're happy, you're happy, and it makes you feel like you've accomplished the job for the day."

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