

Economic Survival Fair attracts more than 500

Rolf Boone

Brandon Williams of Centralia got a bag of clothes, a haircut and lunch — all for free — during Saturday's Economic Survival Fair, which drew hundreds of people looking for free services or help finding work.

Williams said he and his wife have been looking for work for two months, searching in Lewis and Cowlitz counties, both of which have unemployment rates of about 14 percent.

"There are so many people looking for work and there's not enough work," he said.

That's a painful reality for an increasing number of South Sound residents, as evidenced by the turnout at the fair. Organizers estimated that 525 people attended.

The Volunteer Center of Lewis, Mason and Thurston Counties organized the four-hour fair, which was at Olympia High School, executive director Sara Ballard said. More than 40 other vendors and sponsors were involved, including the United Way of Thurston County.

Booths and tables lined the hallways and filled common areas of the school. Attendees could get free foot baths, free clothes for job interviews and free haircuts.

Charles Hedden of Olympia, his wife, Eva, and two of their children attended the fair.

Hedden was laid off from his job at a Tacoma-area sawmill and is studying at South Puget Sound Community College to become a welder, an occupation that should provide a starting wage of \$17 an hour, Charles said.

He said that although he sees job openings, few pay more than the state's minimum wage of \$8.55 an hour.

Not everyone at the fair was in search of employment.

Joleen Karl of Olympia and her granddaughter Ashley Tash-Karl had lunch, attended a class for children about saving money and planned to learn more about an organization that visits senior citizens called Friend to Friend.

"We're in the process of finding a friend," Joleen Karl said.

Ashley, meanwhile, went from table to table during the fair, getting boxes on her "pink passport" checked off so she could collect a toy at the end of the day.

Some volunteers at Saturday's fair, such as Pam Haight, also are looking for work.

Haight recently returned to South Sound after spending 15 years working in higher education in Hawaii as an academic adviser.

The college job market has slowed, so Haight joined the Volunteer Center to network, learn more about the community and stay "intellectually active," she said.

"It's a good opportunity to get out and talk to people," Haight said.

The state of the economy will determine whether another Economic Survival Fair is held next year, Ballard said. She described the Volunteer Center as a nimble organization that can respond quickly to meet community needs.

"If the need is still here for this fair, we'll be happy to support it," Ballard said.

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