

Displaced workers finding work outside region

BY JOHN D. HOMAN
THE SOUTHERN

MARION — Kevin Pierce of Herrin is one of the lucky ones. He didn't miss a beat after losing his job of 14 years at the Herrin Maytag plant.

Just a few days after the plant closed in late December, Pierce began making the trek to Belleville to work through the week at the Chelar Tool and Die plant. He returns home on the weekends.

"My old boss at Maytag is friends with an engineer at Chelar, which is how I made the connection," Pierce said. "I sent them a resumé and everything kind of worked out from there."

Chelar Tool isn't the only employer dipping into Southern Illinois' deepening pool of unemployed workers. Recruiters from companies statewide are showing up area job fairs and help wanted ads from out of state are popping up in newspapers across the region.

Mark Sepich, human resources recruiter for the Caterpillar Company in Peoria, said his company participated in a job fair hosted by Man-Tra-Con at John A. Logan College last month. The idea was to touch base with some of the displaced workers of Maytag to see how many might fit into Caterpillar's plans as an employee.

"We have some openings on our production floor and are always looking for good, qualified employees," Sepich said. "From what we have seen, Maytag workers have a lot of skills that we desire. They are both experienced and dedicated employees."

One Herrin resident is already employed at Caterpillar. Sepich said several other former Maytag employees have filled out job applications online.

"We're working through Man-Tra-Con and may soon be doing some testing for different jobs," Sepich said.

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WORKERS: Finding jobs outside region

FROM PAGE 1B

Kristen Poshard, transition services coordinator for Man-Tra-Con in Marion, said Caterpillar has been the most aggressive company outside of Southern Illinois in pursuing displaced workers. A couple of out-of-state coal companies, a correctional facility in southeast Missouri and Sony DADC, based in Terre Haute, Ind., also have shown interest in the region's displaced workers.

Sony manufactures DVDs similar to those Technicolor Universal Media Services employees in Pinckneyville manufacture.

Sony is presently advertising available positions in local newspapers — positions that include graphic artists, industrial and process engineers, manufacturing supervisors and production maintenance technicians. Sony DADC officials did not immediately return telephone messages Friday. Workers at Sony DADC produce the Blu-ray disc, a disc format designed for high definition video and data storage.

"We want to deal with businesses that are going to follow through with their interest and offer jobs," Poshard said. "One thing

that's important to understand, though, is that many of our displaced workers aren't interested in leaving Southern Illinois. Our workers really love it here, which is why such a large percentage is going back to school to learn another trade.

"By the start of the summer semester, about 50 to 60 percent of Maytag workers will be enrolled in class," she continued. "The pay may be great up in Peoria at Caterpillar, but Peoria is not Southern Illinois."

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