



JEFF TAYLOR/THE WINCHESTER STAR

Trex employees at right, Maria Smith (right), corporate recruiter; Rian Payne (center) corporate recruiter; and Deana Carter, talent acquisition manager, talk with job seekers during the Workforce Initiative Board's Employer Expo.

Employer Expo in Winchester attracts hundreds of job seekers

By BRIAN BREHM
The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — Most of the people who attended Wednesday afternoon's Employer Expo at Shenandoah University (SU) were looking for a new challenge, or perhaps their very first job.

At least one person, though, was looking to survive.

Kassie (The Star agreed not to share her last name) is a 20-year-old who dreams of starting a career in computer coding. She's certainly got the chops because she was previously accepted to the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) but, unfortunately, was unable to attend.

On Tuesday, Kassie's world came crashing down around her. She lost her home in Capon Bridge, West Virginia, and has no money to rent another apartment.

Before suddenly becoming homeless, Kassie had already planned to attend the Employer Expo with the hope of connecting with a future employer. By Tuesday night, though, she realized that getting a job was an immediate necessity, so her attendance became more important than ever.

Kassie had no car and no ride, so she walked from Capon Bridge to Winchester.

"It took nine-and-a-half hours," she said



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Virginia State Police Senior Trooper Stuart Pauley, a recruiter, talks with Shenandoah University junior Daniel Lobanov during the Employer Expo Wednesday at Shenandoah University's James R. Wilkins Jr. Athletics and Events Center.

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on Wednesday. "I got here at 8:30 this morning."

While Kassie hopes to work with computers, she said she's willing to accept any job at this time so she can get back on her feet.

"She'll start working tomorrow!" said Yvette Williams, a Navy Federal Credit Union employee who was working as a volunteer at Wednesday's expo. Williams said she made herself Kassie's "godmother" for the event and was taking her from table to table in an attempt to find a company that would hire her on the spot.

"She walked all night, nine hours," Williams said of Kassie. "I made it my business to get her out there [in front of employers]."

Wednesday's Employer Expo was a regional job fair put on by the Workforce Initiative Board, which is comprised of the economic development departments of Winchester and Frederick, Clarke, Warren and Shenandoah counties. Exhibitors met with attendees to tell them about job openings at their companies, and participants also attended workshops to bolster their job-seeking and interview skills. Everyone who went to at least one workshop was entered into a drawing for three \$1,000 scholarships that were given away at the end of the event.

Vanessa Santiago, deputy director of Winchester's Economic Development Department and the principal organizer of Wednesday's expo, said she was pleased to see such a strong turnout of job seekers.

"We had 100 people come



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Stephens City Mayor Mike Diaz volunteers to shoot professional-quality headshots of job seekers like Paula Sibert for their LinkedIn and social media profile pages during the Workforce Initiative Board's Employer Expo Wednesday at Shenandoah University's James R. Wilkins Jr. Athletics and Events Center.

in within 30 minutes," Santiago said. "It's insane."

A wide variety of positions were available at the expo, she said, some of which did not require a college degree or previous experience.

"I asked the FBI if they needed a degree and they said no," Santiago said about the federal law enforcement agency that was on site seeking new recruits. "With the FBI, you'd think you'd have to have a master's [degree] but you don't. For their entry-level positions, you just need to have expertise in something."

Also among the more than 80 exhibitors at Wednesday's Employer Expo was Virginia Works, the state agency formerly known as the Virginia Employment Commission that helps people like Kassie find good jobs fast.

"We have resumé [writing] assistance, online job-search assistance, headshots and a resource table here to help job seekers be more successful," said Ashley Moslak, the veterans employment manager for Virginia Works in Winchester.

Behind Moslak, Mike Diaz of Virginia Works was offering free headshots to any expo attendee who asked.

"It gives people an opportunity to feel better and more encouraged about going out and talking to employers," Diaz said about the headshots, which recipients can add to their resumé, LinkedIn profiles, email signatures and more.

One of the companies participating in the Employer Expo was TFC Poultry, a turkey processing facility that opened last year in Winchester's North End. Production Coordinator Trey Williams said he spoke with a steady stream of potential employees.

"We're hiring for a lot of positions," Williams said. "Anybody that's got any skill set at all, we're looking for them. I'd like to find a home for them at TFC."

The local jails were also looking for workers Wednesday. The Northwestern Regional Adult Detention Center in Frederick County and Rappahannock-Shenandoah-Warren (RSW) Regional Jail in Warren County were

both exhibiting at the expo.

When asked why someone would want a job behind bars, Brianna Taylor of the RSW Regional Jail said: "A lot of people want a career in corrections, and people who want to work in law enforcement use us as a stepping stone."

Some nonprofits were also seeking employees at the expo. That included NW Works of Winchester, an agency that provides job training and placement services for adults with special needs.

Kyle Winans, office coordinator for NW Works, said working for a nonprofit may not make you rich but it is very rewarding.

"When you're working for a nonprofit, you're really making a difference," Winans said. "You're really helping whoever you're working with."

Speaking of people needing help, Kassie was still looking for a job that she could start immediately as the Employer Expo drew to a close at 6 p.m. If your company is looking for a talented young woman with strong computer skills, drop a line to Santiago at vanessa.santiago@winchesterva.gov and she'll put you in touch with Kassie.

"We're going to be connecting her with some more resources," Santiago said.

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Shenandoah Valley Westminster-Canterbury Administrator Andrew Heishman and Director of Human Resources Cindy Hunter talk with job seekers during the Employer Expo.