

Federal grants available locally for former Silicon Valley employees

Los Baños Enterprise, Front Page, September 10, 2004, By Greg Garrison

Merced County residents who have been dislocated from their high tech or transportation jobs in Santa Clara County due to mass lay-offs or company closures can now receive federal and state funding to pay for services to help them find new employment.

Attorneys are in the process of finalizing a contract to allow a portion of the \$1.3 million National Emergency Grant from the Department of Labor that was originally designated for residents of Santa Clara County to be transferred to Merced County, where many employees and former employees of Silicon Valley companies live. The grant goes toward training and job placement.

The grant applies to anyone in these fields who has been a casualty of mass lay-offs or company closures from Jan. 1, 2003 to June 30, 2004. Former employees of certain specified companies can receive funding even if they were laid off almost four years ago.

"This collaborative partnering and leveraging of dollars will provide a great opportunity for our local residents who were laid off from the technology and transportation fields to receive training and employment in another field," said Sandy Lemas, supervising specialist for the Merced County Department of Workforce Investment.

The emergency grant was created to soften the unemployment increases that resulted from the economic blow caused by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The transportation and high tech industries were hit hard following the attacks, and many companies were forced to lay off hundreds of employees.

The grant will provide enough to fund services for 50 Merced County residents and can offer up to \$5,100 for one person. An orientation for those interested in receiving services paid for by the grant was held at Worknet on Aug. 27, but only a small number of people attended and many spots remain open.

Worknet of Merced County is the local employment resource center where people can go to find out if they are eligible to benefit from the grant. The Los Baños branch has taken the lead in handling the funding because of the city's location near Santa Clara County.

In the Silicon Valley, 119 former high tech or transportation employees took advantage of the grant, said Mahea Lani, who is in charge of Special Projects for the Silicon Valley Workforce Investment Network.

Merced County did not apply for the grant. But Lani and others at the Silicon Valley career centers understood that many of the employees of Santa Clara County companies commute in Merced County, and specifically Los Baños because the cost of living is cheaper.

"We are concerned with all the Workforce Investment [groups in the state]," Lani said. "We're very excited about this partnership with Merced and Los Baños."

Those at Worknet said that although it is hard to complain about the grant, they wish Merced County would have received it earlier. The award has been effective since Oct. 1, 2003 and will last until Dec. 31, 2004. The deadline to enroll is tentatively set for Sept. 30, but Lemas said the County hopes to get that date extended until December.

A larger problem may be that many of those who were laid off as many as four years ago have had to find other full-time employment in the meantime. Many, Lani said, have moved out of the state.

"Some of the employees have been laid off so long that they had to do something else," Lemas said.

If a person found new employment, but it is not full-time, that person still qualifies for the grant.

For those who qualify, the grant allows for them to receive several services. At Worknet, a person will go through a series of assessment tests to determine what possible fields he might be work well in. The person can then choose a specialty and receive training to better prepare him for the work. Finally, the person is assisted in finding employment. Often the new line of work is not in the same field as the person's former position.

"They can be trained for anything we feel is appropriate," said Brian Cutler, an employee training specialist at Worknet.

Even if a person does not think he qualifies, he should visit a local employment resource center to find out for sure. The person will likely qualify for some type of services, Lemas said.

Lani said the grant eases the fears of many employees who were laid off by making the search for a new job more focused.

"They didn't know what to do with their skills," Lani said. "Now that they have the grant, they feel like they have more hope."

The Los Baños office where a person can go to find out more is located at 800 7th Street. You can also call 826-7241.