

In a tight Connecticut labor market, young workers looking for summer jobs have many choices, leaving employers scrambling for workers

Singer, Stephen . Hartford Courant (Online) , Hartford: Tribune Publishing Company, LLC. Jun 6, 2022.

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FULL TEXT

A tight labor market is giving young workers plenty of opportunities to find jobs, making it harder for employers to hire for the summer.

The Metropolitan District shut Lake McDonough beach in Barkhamsted for Memorial Day weekend, and it will remain closed until further notice because of a shortage of lifeguards. The lake is generally staffed by 10 or 11 lifeguards and “we don’t have anywhere near that,” said Nick Salemi, spokesman for the Metropolitan District. Barring swimmers on the unofficial first weekend of summer –the boat launch will remain open –is disappointing because Lake McDonough was closed the last two years due to the pandemic. The lake requires lifeguards and does not have a “swim at your own risk” policy.

The state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection also is looking to hire lifeguards at state beaches, but is finding fewer applicants than in the past, spokesman Will Healey said. DEEP is reaching into high schools, community colleges and colleges, participating in career fairs and advertising on the state jobs website, online jobs websites and social media channels.

The agency boosted lifeguards’ starting pay to \$19 an hour, up from \$16, and ranging up to \$21 per hour.

Lynsey Winters, marketing director at Lake Compounce, said hiring began in November, with efforts to recruit current employees for the summer. Jobs were posted in January and February and three job fairs were held in March and April to fully staff the more than 1,100 jobs, she said.

Tyler Dammling, a landscaper at Lake Compounce, said he’s gotten “little bumps” in pay and feels “kind of valued here.”

“It’s pretty easy to stay here,” he said.

Patrick Flaherty, director of research at the Connecticut Department of Labor, said youths are more likely to work in restaurants and retail, which were hit the hardest during pandemic-induced shutdowns ordered by the state. Older workers, leery of COVID-19 health risks or considering other reasons, are “not taking jobs at the pace they’ve had,” he said, clearing the field for younger workers.

“This is a good market for youth,” Flaherty said, adding that the labor market is strong for workers of all ages.

“Businesses throughout the economy are scrambling to find workers.”

During the week ending May 14, 10,170 jobs were posted, a decline of 2,668 new job ads or 21% over the week. The statewide decline is comparable to a 20% nationwide decline, according to the Department of Labor.

Brian T. Kench, dean of the Pompea College of Business at the University of New Haven, said teen workers are benefiting from a higher minimum wage and “markets are in their favor.” Connecticut legislation enacted in 2019 and pushed strongly by labor unions and their legislative allies called for increases over five years. It’s currently \$13 an hour, will rise to \$14 July 1 and reach \$15 by June 1, 2023, a nearly 50% increase from where it stood three years ago.

“That’s what’s going to get them off the couch and into the workforce,” Kench said.

Teens are taking jobs at supermarkets, restaurants and resorts that are begging for workers, he said. Workers under the age of 20 comprised the smallest age group submitting unemployment insurance claims, according to the state Department of Labor. Processed claims for the week of April 16, the most recent week reporting complete data, numbered 125 for workers in that age group. In contrast, 3,426 workers in their 20s had continuing unemployment compensation claims and 5,113 workers in their 30s submitted claims. The numbers were comparable for workers in their 40s, 50s and 60s. More than 116,000 employees between the ages of 14 and 21 represented 8% of Connecticut's workforce last year, according to the U.S. Census. Jalil Shabazz, youth program manager at the Northwest Regional Workforce Investment Board, said jobs are available across the board in retail, manufacturing, government, social service agencies and the trades such as carpentry. "Our business partners have stepped up with jobs," he said. NRWIB, which provides resources for job seekers and employers, has made a better effort to reach out to communities to enlist employers and get the word out to job seekers of opportunities, he said. *Stephen Singer can be reached at ssinger@courant.com.*

DETAILS

Subject:	Age groups; Employers; Pandemics; Labor market; COVID-19; Workforce
Business indexing term:	Subject: Employers Labor market Workforce
Location:	Connecticut; United States--US; Lake Compounce
Publication title:	Hartford Courant (Online); Hartford
Publication year:	2022
Publication date:	Jun 6, 2022
Section:	News - Connecticut
Publisher:	Tribune Publishing Company, LLC
Place of publication:	Hartford
Country of publication:	United States, Hartford
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
Source type:	Blog, Podcast, or Website
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2673447247
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/tight-connecticut-labor-market-young-workers/docview/2673447247/se-2?accountid=44910

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Last updated: 2022-06-07

Database: Hartford Courant

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