

Layoffs hit area unemployment offices

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They were assigned to the front line in the effort to get 113,000 unemployed St. Louisans back to work.

Now, nearly 60 people serving in various capacities in Missouri Career Centers throughout the region are themselves out of a job.

“It’s going to be worse than it already is. I can’t imagine,” unemployed city resident Alfreda Lewis said as she departed the St. Louis Agency on Training and Employment near downtown Wednesday afternoon.

Lewis, 55, has been checking in at SLATE once every four weeks, and often more, since her layoff as a medical records clerk 19 months ago.

The cuts stem from a statewide loss this fiscal year of more than \$9.3 million — 30 percent of the federal Workforce Investment Act allocations that finance training and education programs across Missouri. The revenue is funneled to counties and municipalities by the Missouri Department of Economic Development.

The cuts coincide with a gradual improvement in a regional unemployment rate that peaked at 11.1 percent 14 months ago. Still, at 8.6 percent, area joblessness is more than 3 points higher than it was at this time five years ago. Nor does that figure reflect the underemployed or discouraged applicants who have stopped searching for another job.

In the city — where the ratio of unemployed applicants for every job opening is 10-to-1 — more than 30,000 people filed into SLATE during the first quarter of the year, according to Executive Director Michael Holmes.

Missouri Economic Development spokesman John Fougere said the agency has not yet determined the statewide impact. It seems clear, he added, that the state will “be scaling back specialized programs that target specific clients.”

Employees at career centers in the St. Louis area, meanwhile, took an immediate hit when the investment act reductions took effect July 1. SLATE eliminated 14 positions; St. Louis County put 42 out of work; and St. Charles County pink-slipped five more.

The downsizing additionally sparked a larger overhaul in the delivery of services to the unemployed. Most notably, St. Louis County last week turned management of its workforce development initiatives over to Better Family Life, a nonprofit job training and social services provider.

The agency's \$1.6 million, one-year contract with the nonprofit job training and social services provider signals the end of a significant part of the 30-year workforce development relationship between the county and St. Louis Community College system. Better Family Life has already hired at least five of the community college career counselors who lost their jobs with the college.

Elsewhere, the loss of the federal funds eliminated any hope the city and county might offer a youth summer jobs program in 2011.

It also has forced restructuring of Bounce-Back St. Louis, a group that provided support and counsel to technology executives displaced by the recession.

BounceBack will operate under the auspices of SLATE when the restructuring is complete.

Better Family Life, in an expanded capacity serving newly displaced workers, will oversee intake and counseling, the first steps

in steering the laid off toward the training or education programs that can help them get back on the job.

St. Louis Community College had been responsible for such preliminary operations. The college will still provide training and education to displaced workers.

Rod Nunn, the director of workforce development for the community college, pledged to sustain the school's longtime working relationship with Better Family Life.

"Our role as a prominent provider to help dislocated workers in this region retool themselves continues," Nunn said. "Hopefully, the workers will not be affected by changes in the contract."

Carolyn Seward, chief operations officer at Better Family Life, concurred: "If a customer walks through the door, we want to be able to get them to the right vendor. And St. Louis Community College is definitely one of those."

Seward and Nunn say a united effort on behalf of the unemployed is imperative.

"Initially, I wasn't happy that (St. Louis County) chose to go in a different direction," said Nunn. "But we will continue to support and collaborate with our partners, including Better Family Life."