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BUSINESS

'I don't know what to do.' More pay isn't helping some Central KY employers fill jobs

BY KARLA WARD

UPDATED JUNE 25, 2021 4:43 PM



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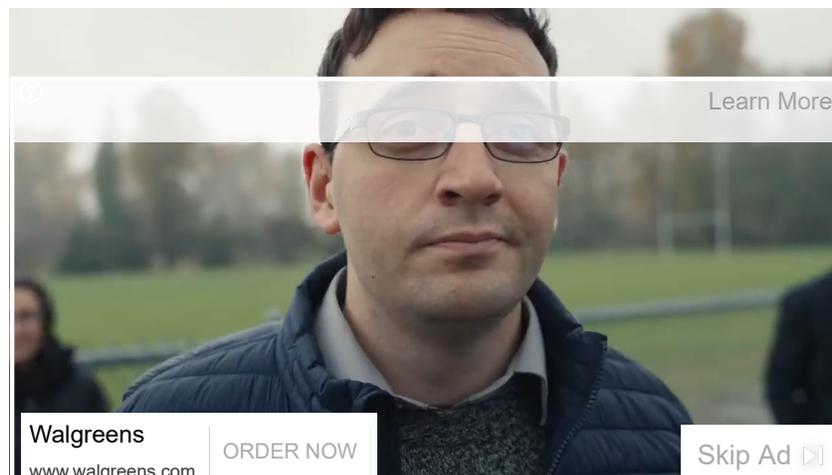
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To fill vacant jobs, many Lexington employers are turning to bonuses, salary increases and tuition reimbursement with limited success, forcing businesses to adapt to having more work than hands to do it.

Commerce Lexington President and CEO Bob Quick said local companies are increasing wages and offering sign-on and attendance bonuses to lure job seekers. Other businesses have had to cut their hours of operation because of a lack of staff, and Quick said he's heard of companies sharing workers.

While people often think service and hospitality jobs are most affected, Quick said all industries are struggling with hiring.

TOP ARTICLES**AD**

“This is all sectors,” he said. “These are high-wage jobs that we’re talking about.”

There is disagreement over whether extra COVID jobless benefits are keeping workers off jobs. Some blame lack of child care, elder care and desired jobs in higher-paying industries while noting Kentucky’s unemployment rate fell dramatically from 16.9 percent to 4.5 percent as of May, just above April 2020 levels. Nevertheless, Gov. Andy Beshear Thursday said [\\$1,500 bonuses would be given to the first 15,000 unemployment insurance claimants](#) who re-enter the workforce between June 24 and July 30.

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Meanwhile, Alfalfa’s owner Wali El-Amin said he had raised wages, but it hasn’t resolved his labor problem.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said. “People are applying, but they’re not coming to the interviews.”

And those who do often don’t stay long, which El-Amin said is costly in terms of time and money.

“It takes six weeks to two months to train a person,” he said. “People just in and out, in and out.”

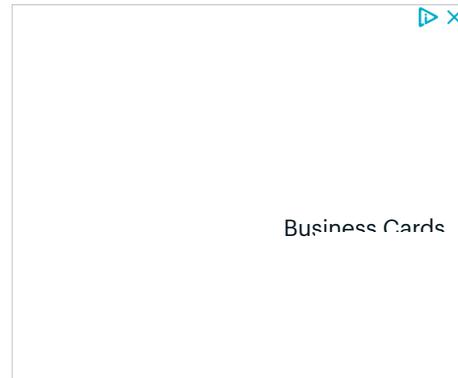
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“A lot of my employees are mothers,” he said. “They can only have sitters for so long.”

A few weeks ago, the downtown restaurant cut back on the days it is open because of the lack of workers, and El-Amin said he’s slowly working to add those hours back.

The labor shortage is “its own pandemic,” said Gary Holland, CEO of One Holland Corp., which operates 35 LaRosa’s, Skyline Chili and First Watch restaurants in Kentucky and Cincinnati.

“Lexington is in a super problematic situation,” he said. “It almost feels like anyone that wants to work in the restaurant industry is working.”

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But, he said, “even high schoolers aren’t as excited about getting a job right now as they used to be.”

NEW CHALLENGE: KEEPING EMPLOYEES ASKED TO DO MORE

While dealing with labor issues, he said, sales have shot up.

“Our restaurants are super duper busy,” he said, and employees are working hard to keep up.

Last year, Holland realized that he would have to up his game if he was going to hang onto the employees he has while hiring new ones for the new restaurants he’s opening. He said the company doubled down with an intense focus on recruiting.

“We just want to make sure that everyone is feeling extremely respected,” he said.

Besides increasing everyone’s pay and providing additional bonuses, Holland implemented a tuition reimbursement program that pays up to \$5,200 a year for employees attending college.

In the past, he said the company hired people at a starting wage of \$10 to \$12 an hour. Now, he said, “we don’t even bat an eye paying them \$14, \$15, \$16” when an applicant interviewed is clearly “a people person.”

It’s working.

He was able to hire the 63 people he needed to open a new LaRosa’s pizzeria in Richmond late last month and the 35 people needed to staff the new First Watch that opened Monday in Georgetown.

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“Taking care of people and treating them right,” Holland said. “That has paid dividends for us through this pandemic of staffing.”

WHERE CAN WORKERS GET JOBS AT HIGHER PAY?

Holland’s company is one of many [employers who are raising the minimum wage](#) and offering special perks, such as sign-on bonuses to help get new employees in the door.

Lee’s Famous Recipe Chicken, which is preparing to reopen its Richmond Road location, offers [a \\$600 bonus](#) for new employees, WKYT reported.

At Amazon, a spokesman said employees can earn up to \$20 per hour and get up to \$1,000 in the form of a sign-on bonus.

White House Clinics, which operates in Madison, Jackson, Estill, Garrard and Rockcastle counties, announced earlier this month that it was raising the minimum wage to \$15.14 an hour. The organization said it has added nearly three dozen new jobs during the pandemic and has multiple openings.

CEO Stephanie Moore said in a news release that the wage increase “encourages career growth for current employees and helps White House Clinics attract new employees in today’s competitive job market.”

“We certainly feel like the work that we do is important, and if a national company can make these commitments to their staff, then we certainly felt like it was important even as a small rural organization to make a similar commitment,” she said in a video release.

The University of Kentucky has offered a series of [increases to its minimum wage](#) in recent years, but it sees fewer applicants, said spokesman Jay Blanton.

Across its system, Baptist Health had more than 1,900 vacant positions open as of last Friday, including about 300 job openings in Lexington.

Spokeswoman Ruth Ann Childers said the organization’s medical group offers some sign-on and retention bonuses to bring in workers, and hospital employees can get a referral bonus if they recruit friends or family members to work in some of its allied health and nursing jobs.

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The Lexington-Fayette County Detention Center is down by about 66 staffers, facing the greatest need it's had in years, said Maj. Matt LeMonds.

Earlier this month, when the jail held its first hiring event since the pandemic hit, LeMonds said, just one person showed up during the time he was there. He said a few more applicants had trickled in during the days after the event.

"It's tough," he said. "We're not just competing with the police department. We're competing against Amazon. We're competing against Kroger, Costco, Meijer."

When he started working at the jail 13 years ago, LeMonds said, there were people on a waiting list to work there. "It was selecting the ones that we want versus weeding out the ones that we can't have," he said.

Aside from the recent hiring event, LeMonds said the jail has taken out ads on television and social media and has put a wrap on one of its vehicles with hiring information.

LeMonds said the pay rate is locked in by collective bargaining agreements, preventing the detention center from just offering a raise. But he talked up the stability of the position and its "great" health and retirement benefits. "Throughout all of COVID, I never had to worry about having a job," he said.

Mark Fichtner, who owns Carson's Food & Drink, said he made sure that was the case for his restaurant employees, too, and it has paid off.

While restaurants were closed to indoor dining, he said he averaged the amount his employees had been making in tips and paid them what they would have made rather than laying people off.

"It was expensive," he said. "I didn't lose anybody during that time."

He said it allowed the restaurant to pick up immediately with the same level of service customers were used to.

But there have still been challenges brought on by labor shortages and supply chain problems elsewhere.

"We're at times having problems getting food. We have problems getting wines," he said. "Deliveries for food at times is for or five hours late. Liquor deliveries are late."

This story was originally published June 24, 2021 1:29 PM.

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