

Jewish Family Services is in the news as a part of the solution for unemployment (February 10, 2008).

The Columbus Dispatch
Ohio's Greatest Online Newspaper

Networking among recently unemployed

Job seekers look to one another for encouragement

Sunday, February 10, 2008 3:42 AM

BY **ALAYNA DEMARTINI**



Mark Willford, 48, a laid-off network engineer, pays \$550 a month for health insurance for his family. "It's like a payment on a Porsche," he says.

They call themselves the Success Group, though everyone here recently was laid off from a job.

Each week, they meet to talk about their accomplishments: whom they've contacted, where they've interviewed, what job they've applied for. The leader buoys them with announcements of who just landed work.

In a recent meeting, everyone had to answer the question: What's your plan for finding a job?

A woman who wants to be a teacher is now working as a substitute. An accountant said he had begun shaping up his resume. A chiropractic technician said she had just started looking and didn't have a strategy yet.

"The ice has been broken," said Mark Willford, a network engineer. He had just met someone through an online service that helps link job seekers with professionals in their fields.

Willford spoke optimistically about finding a job. "I don't know if it's denial," he said.

"A lot of people don't expect the job search to take as long as it does," said April Walters, a career counselor for **Jewish Family Services**. The East Side agency runs the Success Group for people who have been laid off and are looking for work.

Most in this program are mid-career professionals with college degrees. The number of such people who are out of work -- people such as Willford -- is rising, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

"They're more likely to be unemployed these days than they would have in the past and when they lose their jobs, they're taking longer to be employed again," said Andrew Stettner, deputy director of the National Employment Law Project, which advocates for improved working conditions. The fastest-growing group of unemployed people is the experienced and educated in the 45-to-54 age range, Labor Department statistics show.

Willford, 48, was laid off from his job as a network engineer for Verizon in July 2006. Since then, he has worked sporadically in temporary positions in network engineering. His last temporary job ended in early November.

Living on unemployment and savings, the Hilliard resident hopes to find a permanent job with benefits. For now, he's paying \$550 a month for health insurance for his wife and four children.

"It's like a payment on a Porsche," he said.

The computer field he has worked in for decades is not as stable as it was because many of the jobs being cut in America are moving to India. And that frustrates Willford.

"Why don't we just outsource Congress?" he said.

The jobless rate in Ohio is even higher than the national rate. Ohio's unemployment rate has topped the national rate since 2003 after decades of mirroring or falling below it. In December, the state's unemployment rate spiked to 6 percent, while the national rate was 5 percent, the highest in two years.

Every other Monday night, the Scioto Ridge Job Networking Group gathers in a Sunday school classroom at a Hilliard church to trade support and tips for their job searches. Everyone there is a mid-career professional and most are college graduates.

Ken Lazar, a district manager for Kelly Services, started the group two years ago. At the first meeting, eight people showed up. On Monday night, 87 discussed how to answer tough interview questions.

"It's a sign of the times," Lazar said. "There are jobs out there. The issue is it's very highly competitive. You've got to be really good at networking."

Mike Puleo has just started working on that. With only one week left of unemployment benefits, Puleo, 50, has stepped up his job search. He was an accountant for Huntington Bank for 10 years with a "workaholic" schedule of 60 to 80-hour weeks. Then on July 2, he was laid off.

"When I got out, I just wanted some time to enjoy myself. ... I really wanted to relax," he said.

A healthy savings and a weekly unemployment check of \$355 allowed him to coast. But recently he shifted into a higher gear with his job search. He primped his resume and started crafting a pitch for why an employer should hire him. He's been out of practice with both.

Although now immersed in the job search, he takes breaks to work on his "fixer-upper" North Side house and dabble in day trading with his 401(K) investments.

(For information about the Scioto Ridge Job Networking Group, see www.sciotoridgejng.com. For information about Jewish Family Services' Success Group, contact Karen Hughes at 614-559-0177 or 614-231-1890.)

Dispatch news researcher Susan Stonick contributed to this story.

ademartini@dispatch.com

Most people participating in one program are midcareer professionals with college degrees.