

ECONOMY

Parish ministries give assistance to unemployed

Church groups provide networking opportunities and support to individuals looking for jobs in these tough times

By Scott Alessi

As out-of-work individuals nationwide scour job-search websites and flip through the classified pages, many are discovering that the best path to re-entering the workforce may be through their local parish.

The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the national unemployment rate had risen to 7.2 percent in December, the highest it has been in the last 15 years. The number of people out of work has grown steadily since the economic collapse in October and is a dramatic increase over the unemployment rate of 4.9 percent only one year ago.

With companies continuing to cut employees from their payroll, parishes nationwide are beginning to launch ministries aimed at helping those who are looking for work to connect with potential employers and develop the skills necessary for finding a new job.

Offering assistance

Rena Chrysler, director of stewardship and administration at St. Edward Parish in Bloomington, Minn., told Our Sunday Visitor that the parish first began to notice that its parishioners were falling on tough times when the weekly collection began to dip.

After several members of the parish confided in pastor Father Mike Tegeder that they were looking for work, Chrysler said that they felt compelled to offer some form of assistance.

"Catholic social teaching talks about the dignity of work and the dignity of the human person, and for a person to have employment that brings dignity to them is one of our core beliefs," she said. "We feel like the church is here to be of help, and this is certainly an urgent need, so we want to make ourselves available in all ways that we can."

In early January, the parish announced that it would begin a "Job Transition Network" to publicize information about parishioners who are seeking employment. Individuals can submit information regarding their profession, skills and years of experience that will be posted

each week in the parish bulletin, as well as on their website and in a monthly mailer sent to parishioners, Chrysler said. The information will be posted anonymously and employers will be encouraged to contact the parish, who will then put them in touch with the person seeking employment.

Chrysler told OSV she is hopeful that the new endeavor will help connect business owners or human resources managers in the parish community with people who are out of work that they otherwise may not have met. She also said that those who make hiring decisions may be more likely to consider a candidate who is a member of their own parish.

"I think that there is an added level of trust of people within their church," she said.

Networking opportunities

While some parishes are just beginning ministries to help those looking for work, others have long-established programs to aid the unemployed.

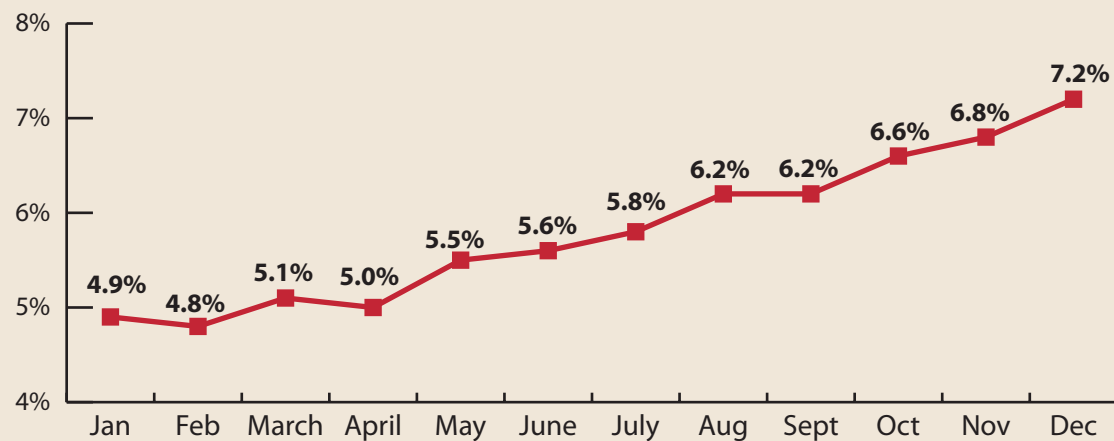
St. Patrick Parish in Yorktown Heights, N.Y., has been holding monthly meetings of its Employment Assistance and Resource Network (EARN) since 1989. The program, established by then-pastor Msgr. Dermott Brennan to assist a growing number of unemployed parishioners, aims to help individuals in need by educating them about the job-search process and giving them opportunities to develop their networking skills.

"We're not an employment agency and we don't get people jobs, but we do coach people," said Edward McEneney, a parishioner of St. Patrick who has been one of the group's coordinators since its founding. "Our mission is to teach people and to let them know what resources are available in the community."

McEneney, who also works full-time for a company that assists people in job transition, told OSV that the EARN ministry helps individuals learn what it takes to uncover job opportunities and to increase their number of potential contacts. Each month's meeting draws a crowd of approximately 20 people and features a guest speaker that will discuss various aspects of the process, such as networking, negotiating and interviewing, he said.

2008 unemployment rate

Last month, the Bureau of Labor Statistics announced that 7.2 percent of Americans were jobless in December, the highest number in 16 years and well above the 4.9 rate the year before. Overall, 2.6 millions jobs were lost last year.



"We remind people that they might be experts in what they've done for the past 10 or 20 years, but when it comes to job searching, that is a skill set you need to develop," McEneney said. "And that is what we help them with."

Over the last 20 years, the group has maintained the same format for its meetings and has succeeded in helping many individuals find new employment opportunities, indicating that they have developed a winning formula, he said.

Support system

In Michigan, where residents have been suffering from a decline in the automotive industry, unemployment assistance programs are widespread not only in Catholic parishes but in other religious and nonreligious institutions as well.

Over the past two years, Michigan has had an unemployment rate well above the national average, and currently the state's unemployment level is at 9.6 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Janine Krasicky, co-facilitator of the Shrine Career Network at Shrine of the Little Flower Parish in the Detroit suburb of Royal Oak, Mich., told OSV that unlike some of the other employment services available in the area, the Shrine Network focuses on giving people hope and support during a difficult time in their lives.

"When you don't have a lot of resources or money available to you, it is really scary," said Krasicky, who came to the group when she herself was out of work six years ago and later volunteered

Tips for successful job hunting

There are many different ways for individuals seeking employment to find a new job, with the best approach being to try many different options simultaneously. Among the best avenues for getting back into the workforce are the following:

- Talk to personal contacts, including friends, family, neighbors, acquaintances, teachers and former co-workers to learn about jobs that may not even be advertised.
- Directly contact employers you are interested in working for, even if they do not have current job openings listed.
- Check with professional associations for employment information, including career planning assistance, educational programs, job listings and job placement.
- Contact school career planning and placement offices, which often provide alumni with career counseling, listings of available job openings and workshop opportunities to develop skills such as interviewing and résumé writing.
- Use Internet message boards to network with others in your profession about career advice or available positions.
- Apply for volunteer opportunities to gain experience and meet with potential employers.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook

to help run the ministry. "I was in that position. I was married; I had a mortgage; I had a car; and I didn't know how I was supposed to pay for it. I wasn't sure what I was going to do, and it was nice to go [to the meetings] and realize that there were 20 other people like me."

Krasicky helps to coordinate monthly gatherings, which draw individuals from as many as 15 parishes in surrounding areas, she said. The group is also open to non-Catholics and members of other churches, which helps to broaden networking opportunities and to expand the types of information that people can share.

The only rule that must be

adhered to by those who attend the meetings is to maintain a positive outlook, Krasicky said.

"We try to foster an environment where we don't have any negativity, because that just keeps you stuck where you are and doesn't help you move forward," she explained.

"We want to uplift people and get them to see that this is really a great opportunity for them," she added. "It is hard to be in a position where you don't have money coming in, but it is an opportunity to take stock and think about trying to make your life more meaningful."

Scott Alessi writes from New Jersey.