

STILL LOOKING

JOB'S ARE EASY TO FIND, RIGHT? NOT FOR THESE MASSACHUSETTS RESIDENTS



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Culinary innovator Sam Putnam of Arlington (right) showed Jefferson Alvarez of Lawrence how to break down a chicken at UTEC in Lowell.

By Deirdre Fernandes

The Massachusetts economy is red hot, with the unemployment rate at its lowest in 16 years. Employers fret that they can't find enough workers, and help wanted signs are posted on store windows across the state.

But in the training kitchen at UTEC Inc. in Lowell, that booming economy, marked by a 2.8 percent jobless rate in December, is a world away.

Here the crew, mostly in their 20s and at work deboning chicken, peeling onions, and washing dishes, are eager to be part of a state labor market that, on the surface, looks to be the best since the dotcom boom of the 1990s. But for them, regular

employment has been elusive. Dogged by spotty work histories, incomplete educations, and sometimes a criminal record, these would-be workers have struggled during this economic recovery.

So they've landed at UTEC, where their minimum wage is subsidized by grants and fund-raising, to build the skills they need to get work.

"I applied to jobs," said Jeff Alvarez, 23, of Lawrence. "Nobody ever called back. I thought nobody wanted me."

Alvarez spent two years in jail for stealing cars but is hoping the UTEC program, which incorporates high school equivalency classes, training on machinery and in kitchens, and the development of

consistent work habits, will offer him a chance to participate in the state's booming economy.

He has company.

Massachusetts might be tied for the second-lowest unemployment rate in the nation, but tens of thousands of residents are without jobs. Many more, about 114,000 people on average last year, are working part time, even though they want fulltime work. While the traditional unemployment rate has fallen to 2000 levels, the broader measure of joblessness that includes part-timers and those who are discouraged and have stopped looking for jobs was about 7.7 percent late last year, still a full 3 percentage points higher than it was at the turn of this century.

"When you look at the unemployment rate, it's fabulous news, but as you dig deeper you see it's not consistent," said Jerry Rubin, the president of Jewish Vocational Service, a nonprofit that trains workers. "It's pretty clear that 2.8 percent number doesn't reflect the entire labor market situation."

Even the nationwide job market has some room to improve. On Friday, the Labor Department reported that employers increased their payrolls by 227,000 jobs in January, but the unemployment rate actually ticked up by a tenth of a percentage point to 4.8 percent because more of the unemployed are out looking for work. The broader measure of joblessness for the nation also inched up, from 9.2 percent to 9.4 percent.

Older people, as well as minorities, the disabled, and those with criminal records, often have trouble finding a job. The same is true for those who have been out of the workforce for long stretches,

have never earned a college degree, or don't speak English.

The average unemployment rate for minorities in 2016 was 5.2 percent, compared with 3.2 percent for white residents. The jobless rate for those without a high school diploma was 10 percent, on average, last year — nearly quadruple that of residents who had a bachelor's degree.

More than a third of potential workers are not even looking for work, perhaps dispirited by an economy that has left them behind. The state's labor force participation rate fell through the recession and has stayed soft, with 64.9 percent of able residents working, compared with 67.4 percent in 2000.

Some of the decline is because of more baby boomers retiring and fewer younger people being available to fill their positions. But automation and technology have also eliminated many jobs, such as grocery store clerks and bank tellers, leaving workers who would have taken those jobs with fewer choices in a changed economy, said Alicia Sasser Modestino, an economics professor at Northeastern University.

Many employers, from health care firms to manufacturers, are hungry for workers, but they need people who can handle more complex tasks or be trained to do so, she said.

"When you do get to below 4 percent unemployment, the people who aren't participating in the labor force face typically high barriers," Modestino said. "These are the folks who are left behind even when times are good. It's really hard for employers to figure out who is the most employable among this group, and who is trainable."

And these workers can face discrimination, Rubin said.

Companies are sometimes reluctant to consider older workers for fear that their skills are out of

date, or workers with disabilities who might require accommodations in the workplace, Rubin said. State policy makers say they recognize

that drawing these workers back is a more challenging task, but they say without expanding the current workforce, companies might be reluctant to grow and the Massachusetts economy would probably slow.

"If companies can't find a skilled workforce, they won't expand here," said Nancy Snyder, president of Commonwealth Corp., a state agency focused on workforce issues that disburses state grants to nonprofits addressing the skills gap. "Businesses are beginning to look at more nontraditional employees, as long as they can and are receiving the training that the company needs."

Commonwealth Corp. is distributing about \$2.3 million in grants statewide to focus on the long-term and chronically unemployed. Some need English-language classes, while others are geared to older workers who need to update their computer and technology skills, Snyder said.

Others might need to finish high school or prove they can go to work consistently and be receptive to training, Snyder said.

The state is hoping to invest in programs that have developed partnerships with employers, so that workers are guaranteed a job if they successfully complete training, she said.



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Brenda Anderson of Lowell has struggled to keep a job because she is a single mother of two children. She is learning culinary skills at UTEC, which incorporates high-school equivalency classes, training on machinery and in kitchens, and the development of consistent work habits.

While programs targeting the chronically and long-term unemployed are still new, the state's other efforts to boost worker skills have shown some success, Snyder said.

Between 2013 and 2016, Commonwealth Corp. spent \$4.5 million on programs to close the worker skills gap. More than 900 residents participated, and 74 percent got jobs afterward.

Gregg Croteau, executive director of UTEC, said he is getting more requests from companies looking for workers, including grocery stores, hospitals, food processors, and wood product manufacturers. But helping these young workers develop the skills that will ensure they are successful takes time, he said.

About 80 percent of the participants who complete UTEC's program are employed two years later, Croteau said. "It's not a six or nine month journey. Our young people are going to take a couple of years to work through their bump," Croteau said.