

# The CourierNews

## What to do when the recession hits you

*Look for jobs in demand and a good fit for your talents*

By Steven Ross Johnson  
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ELGIN – Standing near a welcome table greeting visitors, Salvation Army of Elgin Major Ken Nicolai looked across the room to take in the sight of an idea he helped foster.

"We were seeing a lot of new people in our office, and they really didn't have a clue about where to go for assistance," he said. "So I thought it would be good to have something where all of the agencies might be in one place, especially in this rough time when a lot of people are in need of assistance."

Touted as Elgin's first "Agency Fair" earlier this month, the area's non-profit organizations set up booths at the Hemmens Cultural Center, offering people information on the services available for those in need. Nicolai said his agency is dealing with the highest demand for aid he has seen in the past several years.

The efforts of area agencies to get the word out about available services underscores a growing problem faced by millions of Americans currently out of work: how to approach a job market with a dwindling number of prospects.

Statistics from the Illinois Department of Employment Security showed the state's unemployment rate at 7.6 percent, or about 488,000, for December, with an estimated 16,000 out of work in Kane County.

**"It's a hard job market right now for a displaced person that was part of a layoff," said Rob Wilson, president of Westmont-based resources outsourcing company Employco. "There's a lot of people looking for work right now."**

As Elgin resident Michael Wilkinson can attest, the search for work can be daunting.

Due to a family emergency about a year ago, Wilkinson, 44, left his position in the communication room at Provena Saint Joseph Hospital in Elgin. He handled incoming calls and made announcements over the hospital's PA system to direct emergency staff within the hospital.

"I'm online looking now more than I've ever had," he said. "I used to not sweat it too much, but I'm actually looking all the time now."

**According to Wilson, that's why job seekers should look at whether demand exists in a particular field as well as for the skills they possess.**

**It's important for job seekers to stay motivated, apply for as many jobs as possible and keep several versions of a resume on hand, highlighting skills in different fields, Wilson said. He also suggested highlighting attributes that could set an applicant apart from the rest of an increasingly competitive field.**

**"People are hiring, but it's selective," he said. "Because there are so many people who are unemployed, companies are looking for the best they can find."**

Wilkinson said competition for positions within his field has left him unemployed for about a year, a totally different outlook compared to what was available just a couple of years ago.

"When I was working full-time years ago, getting a job for me with my qualifications ... I knew I could be hired real quick," Wilkinson added. "There was never a fear or worry until recently. It's definitely tightening up."

Wilson said he has not seen one job that is more in demand, but his company has had success in placing people in a number of professions, including accounting, clerical and health care.

### **Economy trumps need**

At around 8 a.m. on a Monday, students in Kim Plate's Dental Assisting program at Elgin Community College were beginning their lab work, practicing taking X-ray pictures of teeth affixed to models sitting in a mock dentist office.

As one of a handful of fields currently experiencing a demand by employers, schools such as ECC have seen an increase in the number of enrollees looking for training or re-training in the hopes of attracting more interest from prospective employers.

Plate, director of the program, said recruitment for employers has remained steady, with the vast majority of graduates able to find work within their field.

"Teeth don't go on vacation; they don't answer to the recession," she said. "You're still going to have people who have problems with their teeth -- it's ongoing health care."

As a career that has traditionally been dominated by women, Plate said dental assisting has also seen a lot of turnover because of a number of mitigating circumstances.

"Being a career (made up) of women, sometimes there's change-overs," she said. "They stop and have children or move with their husbands to their jobs."

But even the health care jobs that were once in demand have seen a shift, according to Cindy Luxton, dean of health careers and director of nursing at Harper College in Palatine.

A veteran in health education for the past 25 years, Luxton said similarities could be drawn from the 1980s, when a slowing economy made for a tougher job market. Anecdotally, she said, there has been talk among professionals about hiring freezes, despite the need for more nurses. As a result, "institutions are taking a step back on hiring students coming out of programs," she said.

Although the current recession means more competition among nurses, Luxton said employers and ultimately patients benefit by getting the most qualified candidates. She said people should consider first and foremost whether a job in health care is right for them, as opposed to whether it's the most financially secure.

"It's not always a good thing to have someone end up in a classroom in nursing that's not a good fit for the profession," she said.

**In terms of the future, Wilson said the outlook is not positive for the short run, with more job cuts expected in the retail industry as consumer spending declines. Predictions have indicated the economy may begin to recover as early as later this year to sometime in 2010.**

**No matter when it begins, Wilson expects no quick returns to pre-recession levels.**

**"The economy is going to take multiple years to recover to back where it was a year ago," he said. "When the recovery does start, I think it's going to be a long and slow process."**