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People find jobs, and hope, at an East Patrol trailer in KC's urban core

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The vibrant paint swirls covering the exterior of the trailer at the East Patrol construction project certainly distinguish it from the typical job site office.

But it's what's going on inside the trailer at 26th Street and Prospect Avenue that has construction job seekers and other unemployed residents talking.

Since January, more than 500 people have flocked to the building seeking jobs, training — or just hope and some encouraging words. And many are finding it with the help of GG Owens, manager of JE Dunn's information trailer.

The steady stream of visitors to the trailer is a graphic illustration of just how starved people in the urban core are for job opportunities. And while the original intent was to identify workers for the East Patrol project itself, the appeals for help have led Owens to search out other possibilities so people don't go away empty-handed.

"If you have a project where it's maybe 75 to 100 jobs, and you have 600 people that are wanting employment, it would be a good thing to make sure they have something else they can come here for," she said.

City officials say more than 70 people who visited the trailer qualified for a program called Section 3, designed to employ low-income residents from the surrounding neighborhoods on the construction project. Dozens more have found at least part-time work elsewhere, and more than 100 have been referred to training programs that can lead to decent-paying warehouse jobs.

The need is clearly profound around the East Patrol police station and crime lab construction site, bounded by 26th and 27th streets, Prospect to Brooklyn avenues, in the 64127 ZIP code. Census survey data between 2008 and 2012, the most recent years available, showed the unemployment rate in that ZIP code was 19.4 percent, compared with 9.9 percent citywide.

Owens says many of the people she has seen have been unemployed for six months or even several years. Some have been jailed or suffered other setbacks, and many had no construction background or aptitude.

"A lot of people that come in here, they're looking for something to help change their lives," she said.

One of those people is Terry Hodge, 51, who lives just blocks away at 25th and Olive streets. He had worked for years in retail but was laid off about a year ago.

He visited the trailer shortly after it opened last November and credits Owens with telling him how to get his Section 3 certification and required construction safety classes. He gradually networked with job contacts and got hired March 2 with Rodriguez Mechanical Contractors, helping to install water lines, storm drains and manholes at the East Patrol site.

It's demanding physical labor, but he welcomes it.

"This is the best job I've had in my 51 years," he said. "I got it and I haven't looked back."

Big changes

To be sure, the East Patrol project has not been without controversy. Costs skyrocketed from \$57 million to \$74 million and forced the city to redesign the project.

The chosen site required acquiring 128 parcels and relocating about 60 residents, including elderly homeowners who had lived there for decades. A few filed lawsuits.

City Councilman Jermaine Reed, who lives in the Wendell Phillips neighborhood where the project is located,

acknowledges the sacrifices of those forced to move.

But he said it's a huge financial shot in the arm for a neglected part of town, and the city is committed to making sure the project generates construction jobs now and becomes a catalyst for more jobs in the future.

"The bottom line is that we want to make sure people are employed in the community that look like us, so minorities as well," he said.

Phillip Yelder, director of Kansas City's Human Relations department, said city officials and the joint venture team of JE Dunn and Alexander Mechanical had a goal of employing at least 70 Section 3 workers on the project. They now expect to exceed that goal.

He acknowledged many construction jobs on the site may last only a few months. But he said the city has numerous other projects underway or scheduled to begin, and those who get Section 3 certification through the information trailer referrals can use that as the first step to other job opportunities, including union apprenticeships.

Typically project trailers are just places for the construction managers and plans and drawings, Yelder said, but the East Patrol information trailer has gone beyond that role.

"It's actually taking it now to trying to help the community as a whole," he said.

Even the trailer paint job served as a community outreach. Youth artists from ArtsTech, an urban arts education program, helped give the trailer its colorful, inviting exterior.

Site work is well underway. Construction on the police station foundation should begin very soon, and on the crime lab foundation within a month. The information trailer is expected to remain until the first quarter of 2015, and the project should be completed by December 2015.

Job prospects

One person who visited the trailer was Jay Lewis, branch manager for Labor Smart, an Atlanta-based temporary staffing company that opened a local office last June. It has relationships with Bartle Hall, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and numerous hotels, with jobs ranging from banquet servers and cooks to janitorial and warehouse positions.

Owens agreed to send people his way, and Lewis estimates several dozen have found extended temporary jobs or made the transition to permanent positions.

"A lot come out of desperation and an immediate need of some type of income," he said. "We keep them busy to work on a regular basis, and it can be a foot in the door to full-time employment."

Owens also has directed many more people to training that can lead to job openings at warehouses.

A friend told Irene Griffen, 41, about the trailer several months ago. She lives not far away, at 38th Street and Myrtle Avenue, and wanted a change from her restaurant management career.

Griffen hasn't found a job yet but just completed a construction safety and forklift training course at the Pioneer Campus of Penn Valley Community College.

"The trailer gave me leads," she said. "Forklifts are used everywhere. I'm putting out applications this week."

Jens Moller, 46, took the same class and also is now pursuing some promising leads. He has lots of construction skills but recently got out of prison for multiple DUIs and is living at the Community Release Center in the West Bottoms.

He said Owens didn't turn him away as some others have.

"She's helped me with my resume," Moller said of Owens. "She's helped me with people skills a lot. She's helped to open doors that I couldn't have opened before."

John Edwards is pastor of Full Faith Christian Center at 7800 Troost Ave. and owner of All Purpose Construction Co., one of the East Patrol project subcontractors. Edwards said the project can help disadvantaged people find work, either on the site itself or elsewhere in the city.

"Not everyone will be hired," he said of the East Patrol project. "But it will allow them to get the certification that they need to go other places and apply for jobs. It's a great opportunity, and hopefully, prayerfully, it'll branch out and start doing some things for the neighborhood."

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