

Rapid Response Team Helps The Unemployed Find Work

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Life comes at you fast. The South Central Workforce Rapid Response team is trying to be even faster.

The program, partially funded by the state's Department of Labor, aims to rapidly re-employ adults 18 and older after a layoff.

Using meetings (known as Rapid-Response Events) with the affected workers, the organization utilizes a multipronged approach to a layoff by meeting with folks and the affected entity before and after a layoff and seeking to help both employer and employee.

"We want to hear about the layoffs before they are going to occur — and all our services are free of charge," said Michelle Smith, communications and employment engagement manager with South Central Workforce. "I just need someone from the company to contact me or get me a name and a phone number and then I reach out."

The service applies to nonprofit and for-profit entities as well as big and small organizations.

"When Bed Bath and Beyond left, there were about eight workers left, but we still did a Rapid Response," Smith said, noting that when a farm in Moxee closed, 129 people were laid off, and they also did a Rapid Response.

She said a nursery in Mabton will close later this month, laying off 55 workers.



Members of the Rapid Response Team. From left are Misael Madonado, People For People, Susy Moran, and Michelle Smith, South Central Workforce. Not pictured are Cesar Castillo, Employment Security Department, and Josie Garza, Yakima Valley College.

Smith added that while this service is available statewide, South Central Workforce serves Yakima, Kittitas, Klickitat and Skamania counties.

Sometimes, an employer preparing for a layoff says no to having a Rapid Response event, Smith said. Some employers might feel bad that someone external found out about their upcoming layoffs, while some other employers might not want their employees to spend work hours participating in an event of this nature and not working.

In that case, Rapid Response offers meetings during lunch or after working hours. Such flexibility sends a solid message to the employer.

"As an employer, you don't want to lay people off anyway,"

Smith said. "You're already sad, so we can come in and say, 'Look, you care so much about your workers that we are going to help your workers until the end because you let us into your premises.'"

Sometimes, that means showing up at 6 a.m., 2 p.m. and 7 p.m., like they did when a Sunnyside business went through layoffs.

"And we held sessions in English and Spanish," she said. "We give a verbal presentation and then we also give the same thing we just said in writing, so that the worker can take it home and discuss everything that's available to them with their family before they are laid off."

Once Rapid Response reaches out, the employer receives help

with its transition to layoff, and the employee receives help connecting with unemployment benefits, getting health benefits through Washington Health Plan Finder and being introduced to WorkSource.

Smith said that sometimes, the trick is to add patience to the mix and hang on to the last day.

Often, if a plant is closing, you're eligible for unemployment, which means you're eligible for retraining dollars through what Smith termed a 'Dislocated Worker Program.' The catch is that the worker needs to stay at that company until the day they let you go. It's not always easy when the bills are due and the cupboards are bare.

"Too many people say, 'Oh, I'm going to get let go,' and run to get another job," Smith said. "They miss out on some dollars that could've helped them finish their high school diploma, get a GED or transition to another job that is more in demand, like CDL drivers. That's the route some workers from Sunnyside took, and Rapid Response was able to pay for their CDL training."

"That's the whole idea behind Rapid Response: to get people out of a layoff situation and into an in-demand occupation. That's why I am talking to you. I want to make sure more businesses know about these services free of charge."