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Workers wanted

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By APRIL M. HAVENS

Facing a shrinking work force and lower employee retention, local shipbuilders are joining others in Louisiana and Alabama to support the Gulf States Shipbuilders Consortium in launching a job campaign.

The new work force initiative, which focuses on getting coast residents to rethink their perceptions of the shipbuilding industry, looks beyond filling openings temporarily and urges residents to make careers within the sector, program participants say.

"Shipbuilding is certainly not like it was in the 1930s and '40s," said Jerold Shepherd, training manager and recruiter at VT Halter Marine, which has yards in Pascagoula, Moss Point and Escatawpa.

"This is a viable way to make a good living," he said. "Back then, an individual had to do a whole lot more to get things done, like lifting heavy loads and enduring fumes, but technology has changed so much that it is safer and easier."

Halter Marine employs about 1,200 people, according to Chief Executive Officer Boyd "Butch" King, and Shepherd said every week there are 10 to 20 openings in the company. On a recent day, Shepherd said that 16 positions were open, mostly for welders, pipefitters, electricians and "pretty much any craft area."

Entry pay for these jobs is about \$11 per hour, he said, and positions top out at about \$19 per hour.

The new campaign is reaching out to middle school and high school students. It's encouraging them to enter post-secondary training schools to learn the trades associated with shipbuilding, and it's using a regional approach to focus on long-term employee retention.

There are about 4,000 shipbuilding positions that need to be filled in the tri-state coastal area, according to Dennis Fanguy, chairman of the board of the Gulf States Shipbuilders Consortium.

A work force shortage hurts shipbuilders in more ways than one, companies say. With fewer workers, many employees are made to work overtime to finish contracted work, and contracts can be lost because buyers need a vessel sooner than it can be delivered.

Northrop Grumman, which employs about 17,000 in its Gulf Coast operations in Louisiana and Mississippi, is in severe need of pipe welders, said Kevin Amis, vice president of operations.

"We could take to the tune of 75 to 100 of those right now," he said. "Pipe welders are a huge struggle for us."

Amis said the company is usually ready to hire any talented applicant, so it's hard for him to pin down an exact number of vacant positions.

He did note, however, that he could currently take 30 to 50 machinists, a group that employs mostly "older, seasoned employees who could retire in the next couple of years." Finding new blood to fill those vacancies will be vital to operations.

Next year, Northrop Grumman will need 300 to 400 more structural welders as ships enter stages of construction that demand the increase, Amis said, and by August he will need to increase the Gulfport yard's composite work force by 130.

Entry-level pay for these jobs starts at about \$15 an hour, he said, but the company is looking for people who want to do more than turn a quick buck.

"We're trying to build a career, not just fill a job," he said. "We want people who want to be here."

Amis thinks he can recruit that type of employee by showing potential workers what shipyard jobs are all about.

"Shipbuilding is very hot and environmentally-constrained type work," he said. "It's not an A/C environment in all cases. It's hot, hard, physical work, and we need to make sure they understand that."

But if those conditions don't repel qualified candidates, the company will welcome them into their "shipbuilding family," Amis said.

Many qualified candidates have completed community college vocational training or an on-site apprentice program. The most-qualified will have three to five years of experience, said Mike LeLeux, a human resources recruiter for Trinity Yachts in Gulfport.

Even though experience is always helpful, LeLeux focuses much of his recruiting effort on high schools.

"We need youths to know what is available to them, because not all kids are going to college," he said. Trinity does not have an apprenticeship program, and instead refers those interested to the community college for vocational and technical programs, which will allow them to enter the work force making about \$13 an hour.

Trinity Yachts employs 860 but has a need for 300 more aluminum welders, ship and pipe fitters, marine electricians, outfitters and carpenters, LeLeux said.

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