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Texas Worker Retraining Funds Run Out

By Bonnie Pfister

The Texas Workforce Commission has run out of money to retrain workers whose jobs have gone overseas and is appealing to the federal government for an emergency infusion of cash.

Immediately affected are about 200 former Levi's workers who originally had expected to enter retraining programs at St. Phillip's College this Monday.

The commission already has distributed \$ 11 million to regional work force centers in the first seven months of the year, about the same amount it spent in all of fiscal year 2003, TWC spokesman Larry Jones said.

The TWC has halted any further spending from the federal program, called Trade Adjustment Assistance, for the next 90 days, Jones said, and has asked the Labor Department for an additional \$ 8.5 million.

Jones said the gap wasn't due to miscalculation but to a greater-than-expected number of layoffs.

With an estimated 300 to 350 new workers certified for retraining every month, about 1,000 unemployed Texans who will have signed up to start learning new job skills this summer may have to wait until at least August.

Many of the 800 San Antonians laid off after Levi Strauss closed its last U.S. blue-jeans sewing plant in December began registering for help through the TWC's regional affiliate, Alamo Workforce Development, even before their jobs ended. Several already have enrolled in retraining classes at area community colleges and technical schools.

On Wednesday, some workers who had planned to start studying at St. Phillip's on the trade-retraining money this Monday learned their start date had been delayed for a week.

Thursday, TWC began spreading the news that anyone not beginning classes before the end of April would have to wait to be registered for the retraining program.

That also eliminates them from a related income support program that kicks in if regular unemployment benefits run out before they finish school.

Dianne Zapata, a 23-year Levi's veteran, was furious at having to deal with yet another roadblock.

"We're not young ladies any more," Zapata, 47, said. "We were there for a long time trying to raise our kids ... and now the doors are getting shut on us." Zapata already had faced her share of frustrations by the time she got the news Thursday.

Her dream was to work her way up to be a crime scene evidence technician, and last year, once she felt her daughter was old enough, she began taking criminal justice classes at night.

She planned to continue that training but was dismayed to find that criminal justice had been removed from the list of programs that trade-retraining funds would cover. She decided to switch to warehouse management when she was told the funds were temporarily shut off.

"I need to hurry up and get a degree so I can get another job and get on with my life," Zapata said. "It honestly has been a disaster." Trade Adjustment Assistance dates back to the Kennedy administration as a way to retrain workers displaced by opening U.S. borders to international trade. The program was expanded in 1993 with the approval of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

But funding is limited: only \$ 220 million for all 50 states. Several states -- including Oregon, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania -- fell short of trade-retraining funds last year. Jones said Texas was forced to temporarily freeze trade adjustment spending two years ago.

Express-News Reporter Elizabeth Allen and News Researcher Kelly Guckian contributed to this report.