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## Organizers run out of kits for drug tests at event for former prison inmates

SAN BERNARDINO – About 60 people who once were behind bars climbed over that tough obstacle Thursday to find work at a Spirit of Love Church job fair.

The gravity of the jobless situation here was underscored by the hundreds of unemployed former inmates turned away after the organizers, expecting a thousand or fewer applicants, brought only that many drug-test kits and were forced to shut down two hours early at the church on Base Line.

The long line of job seekers wound its way around Base Line and into a Westside neighborhood.

“It’s been pretty hard if you’ve got a felony record,” Augustine Medina, 34, of Highland, said. “It’s been up and down. Sometimes I get temporary jobs.”

Medina said he served time at Tehachapi State Prison after being convicted on a charge of possession of a controlled substance.

He said he’s been free for about a year, but work is hard to come by when he has to admit on job applications that he has done time.

“I fill them out and nothing happens for me. Mostly because of my record,” Medina said.

Medina and the others were trying to find an employer who would be willing to look beyond their criminal pasts and give them a chance at earning a paycheck.

All of Us or None, an advocacy group for former prisoners, organized Thursday’s job fair to help ex-convicts find work, but the number looking for work far outnumbered the jobs available.

The job fair was scheduled to be open from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., but the gates closed around noon after the last drug test kits were used.

Job seekers were required to take a drug test before they could meet with prospective employers.

“It’s just a huge statement of the need,” Kim Carter said. “People want to go to work. If they can get a job they can stay clean and get out of trouble.”

Carter said fair organizers scoured city and county databases and mailed 60,000 letters to potential employers in hope of finding businesses willing to give convicted felons another chance.

Nine organizations set up booths.

Bloomington Recycling was one of the companies that came to the job fair. Human resources representative Griselda Gonzalez said the recycling plant needs forklift operators, drivers and other laborers.

"They're the best people to work with because they have an opportunity to have a job," Gonzalez said of the job fair's job applicants

Volunteers offering hot dogs, chips and water broke the bad news to the many job seekers who didn't get to meet prospective employers.

"Be nice. Smile. Let them know it will be OK," Carter called out to those who had the unenviable task of turning away those who were still in line.

Volunteers collected contact information from the people who were left standing outside the gates.

Carter said they will be invited to a future job fair, but she doesn't know when that will be since there's no funding available for a second event.

Of the hundreds who looked for work Thursday, Carter said 64 people found jobs.

Helen Johnson, who said she served 8 1/2 months in various institutions after a petty theft conviction, landed a job as a braider at Clippers Family Cuts, a San Bernardino salon.

She had been out of work since her release about a year ago.

"I feel great," she said. "I've been doing hair all my life. It's something I love doing. Finally, God blessed."