



THE LAKELAND TIMES

T-BIRD WRESTLING

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MINOCQUA, WISCONSIN • TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2022

\$1.00

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Lakeland's labor pains

Locals sound off on the hiring shortage

By Kelly Holm
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

Less than two years after the early pandemic-fueled unemployment spike, jobless numbers are at generational record lows in many places throughout the country, including the Lakeland area. According to Federal Reserve Economic Data (FRED) statistics, unemployment in Oneida and Vilas counties is at 2.1 and 2.3

percent, respectively — numbers unseen in the last three decades of record-keeping.

Yet these figures are cold comfort to people like Wendy Hull, the time-share coordinator at The Beacons of Minocqua resort, who can't seem to find staff in sufficient numbers even when business is booming.

"All of us on our management team were cleaning last year every weekend, and that's not our job,"

Hull said. "The first summer I was here (at The Beacons) was 2017. There were probably 20 housekeepers. This last summer, we had eight."

Hull serves on the Minocqua Chamber of Commerce board with three other lodging managers. All of their facilities had a busier 2021 than previous years, and all, she says, have struggled with finding employees.

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Assembly GOP passes a package of law-and-order bills

But Democrats say the bills are unsustainable

By Richard Moore
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

The GOP-majority state Assembly passed a suite of what they call tough-on-crime bills late last week that they say will address law enforcement staffing shortages, among other things, but Democrats assailed the package for its use of one-time dollars and called it unsustainable.

The bills ranged from providing tougher penalties for attacking corrections officers to the use of federal pandemic funds to reimburse law enforcement agencies for the recruitment, training, and recertification costs of officers.

"These proposals help to address legislative language issues in our state statutes, assist our law enforcement officers across the state, both rural and urban, with staffing shortages, and aim to better protect our state Department of Corrections (DOC) staff and teachers," Rep. Calvin Callahan (R-Tomahawk) said.

Callahan said the bills to ease staffing shortages and protect corrections officers were of paramount importance.

"Wisconsin's correctional institutions are suffering from dangerously high staff vacancy rates," he said. "Lincoln Hills, for example, stands at a staff vacancy rate of 41 percent. I've heard horrible stories from the employees at Lincoln Hills, and now, these corrections bills I've authored make safety the state's priority when it comes to our state corrections staff."

Callahan says the state has 13,576 working law enforcement officers, the lowest number in at least a decade.

Among the bills, one would increase the maximum imprisonment penalty for battery against a corrections officer by five years and would require that sentence to run consecutively to any sentences being served. A second bill would require the DOC to make a record of any battery against a correctional officer or teacher by a prisoner and would also require that those records be reported to the law enforcement agency with jurisdiction over the facility.



WKSRA COMES TO MINOCQUA

BRIAN JOPEK/LAKELAND TIMES

Ten-year-old Ben Meyer of Michigamme, Mich., leads his brother, Derek, 11, and Alex Neumann, nine, Merrill, in one of the races held Saturday, Jan. 29, during the Wisconsin Kids Snowmobile Racing Association's Aqua Bowl Snowmobile Championship in Minocqua.

Initial steps underway for Vilas County drug treatment court

By Brian Jopek
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

This year, Vilas County will get a second circuit court judge, something several people in county government, as well as recently retired Vilas County circuit court judge Neal Nielsen, have worked for years to see come to fruition.

His successor, former Vilas County district attorney Martha Milanowski, appointed as Nielsen's replacement last summer, said during a meeting in Eagle River on Jan. 27 that second judge will provide an opportunity for the county to pursue establishment of a drug treatment court.

The meeting included Vilas County social services director Kate Gardner, Vilas County sheriff Joe Fath, his undersheriff, Pat Schmidt, Vilas County jail director Bill Weiss, Niki Leicht, administrator for JusticePoint and Heather Kierzek, problem

solving coordinator with office of court operations for the Supreme Court of Wisconsin, among others.

Gardner, in an interview with *The Lakeland Times* prior to the Jan. 27 meeting, said establishment of a drug treatment court in Vilas County "has been something we've wanted to do for a long time."

"I know the sheriff's interested in it," she said. "Of course, it's very complimentary to the jail program we're in partnership with the jail on."

That was a reference to an award-winning alcohol and drug recovery program developed by Weiss.

Gardner also touched on the second judge aspect as a reason for pursuing establishment of a county-wide drug treatment program.

In 2013, the Lac du Flambeau Band of

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Print Run 4,800
Vol. 129 - Issue 99
1 Section, 20 Pages

