

Stockton Record

Parity pause: Recession making it tough for S.J. companies to maintain their workplace diversity efforts

By Jennifer Torres
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Carmen Hughes has worked for the San Joaquin Regional Transit District for 32 years, currently as one of the agency's 113 female drivers - that's about 63 percent of its operators.

"When you have the general population that we have here ... it's very important to have diversity," Hughes said on a stop Friday afternoon at the Downtown Transit Center.

In a recently compiled report required by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the RTD detailed the demographics of its staff, noting how many are male, how many are female, and how many are members of racial or ethnic minority groups.

The same report lays out its current-year goals for hiring women and minorities: zeros across the board.

"The goal is to see the workplace reflect the community," General Manager Donna DeMartino said. But, like many other employers, the RTD isn't hiring right now.

The layoffs and hiring freezes that have come in the midst of a staggering economy have been obstacles in efforts to build, and sometimes even maintain, a diverse work force. They also reveal the ways in which many minority workers are more economically vulnerable than their peers.

Though it's not actively hiring and recruiting now, the RTD is proud of the diverse staff it has built so far, DeMartino and Human Resources Director Mary Ann Collier said.

Its executive team is composed entirely of women, and racial and ethnic minorities account for 68 percent of its staff. That basically reflects the overall makeup of the county's population.

"In any viable business, you have to make sure your organization reflects your customer base," Collier said.

Local school district officials have said they have the same goal, though it has been difficult to attain.

As of the 2008-09 school year, 74 percent of San Joaquin County teachers were white,

compared with 25 percent of students. (Meanwhile, only 28 percent of teachers of any race were men.)

This spring, more than 1,000 county teachers received layoff notices.

Project Impact, an alternative credentialing program run through the San Joaquin County Office of Education, was designed, in part, to attract underrepresented groups to teaching.

"We're in a little holding pattern right now because of the economy," said Catherine Kearney, who oversees the program.

But, she said, Project Impact will continue working to recruit a diverse teacher corps, preparing for future hiring needs.

"I talk about the incredible need that there's going to be for teachers in the next few years," Kearney said. "I know that the economy has kind of slowed this down a tiny bit, but people are still going to retire."

It's not just hiring freezes that have been setbacks to workplace diversity, but also the "last hired, first fired" rules that tend to govern layoff decisions, said Charles Gallagher, who leads the sociology department at La Salle University in Philadelphia.

Women and minorities gained entry into some fields relatively recently, and lack of seniority leaves many vulnerable.

"A lot of it has to do with seniority, especially for civic workers," he said. "They might be the ones lowest in the queue. On the face of it, it looks fair. The reality is, these positions weren't open to minorities or women really until the 1970s."

Also, he said, the service jobs many women and minorities hold often are lost first during recessions.

According to recently updated census figures, unemployment rates in the county varied widely by race in 2008, with black men and women out of work in much larger percentages than their white and Asian counterparts.

"It's 'Goodbye, Nanny,' or 'I can cut my own lawn because I have no disposable income,'" Gallagher said. "Jobs get shed, and the ones that get shed are the ones in which you see racial minorities overrepresented."

Simma Lieberman is an Albany-based consultant and co-author of the book "Putting Diversity to Work: How to successfully lead a diverse workforce."

Even struggling businesses should know that to develop new customers, "We have to understand culture, background, religion," she said. "And we need to have people in our

organization who look like those people."

Short of hiring, she said, employers could consider developing relationships with black chambers of commerce, women's associations, gay and lesbian organizations and other groups that represent minority interests.

At the RTD, DeMartino said, the focus will be on retaining the diverse staff it has.

"We really want to make that a priority so that the people using our services feel comfortable using our services," she said.