

Newly Jobless NJ Casino Workers Try to Cope

Written by Administrator

Monday, 13 January 2014 17:54 -

At a minute past midnight, Debra Wagner was suddenly unemployed.

A housekeeper for 23 years at the Atlantic Club Casino Hotel, she was one of 1,600 workers who lost their jobs early Monday when the struggling casino shut down, the victim of a glut of casinos in the northeastern U.S.

Just a few hours after a handful of remaining customers and last-shift workers counted down the casino's final five seconds, Wagner stood in line with hundreds of others at a union hall, hoping to score a \$20 supermarket gift card and some help in filling out unemployment paperwork.

"I had planned to retire here," she said. "Right now I'll collect unemployment, and maybe in the spring somebody will start hiring. Hopefully."

But that seemed unlikely. With casinos popping up in states all around it, the Atlantic Club fell victim to the cold efficiency of the marketplace: Analysts have long said that in this region, there are too many casinos and not enough gamblers to keep them all afloat.

Two rival casino companies paid a combined \$23.4 million to shut down the Atlantic Club and remove what they considered unneeded capacity from the market. Tropicana Entertainment bought the slot machines, table games and customer lists, while Caesars Entertainment bought an 801-room hotel it has no immediate plans for.

Wagner can't even turn to family for help.

"Both my sisters worked there, and so did my mom," she said. "We're all out of jobs, all four of us. We can't even help each other."

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Once Atlantic City's top-earning casino, where then-owner Steve Wynn clowned with Frank Sinatra in commercials, bringing the legendary singer an armful of fresh towels, the Atlantic Club went out with a whimper. In the hours before the 12:01 a.m. closing, its restaurants and bars had all shut down, and many gamblers and employees had already left.

A few die-hards that stayed on the casino floor until the end, counting down its final five seconds as dealers who were suddenly unemployed burst into tears and hugged each other. Within moments, casino staff began stacking and counting chips and preparing to remove cash boxes from the casino floor.

"Where was our support?" asked Kathy Buonasorte, a cocktail server for 28 of the casino's 33 years. "They all left us. No politician helped us. No one came to save us."

On the sidewalk outside the casino, she hugged fellow server Beth DeLuccia, who she described as the first friend she made at the casino. Nearby, server Maureen Cohen had just finished her final shift.

"I served my last drink at 4 this afternoon," she said. "It was incredibly sad. Can you believe how pathetic it's going to be to come over (a nearby) bridge and see a closed casino?"

"It's a sad day," said David Rebuck, director of the state Division of Gaming Enforcement, who watched the shutdown process begin right after midnight. Dealers and security personnel set to work counting the take from the casino's final day. Overnight, workers were to read the meter on each of the hundreds of slot machines, empty the cash containers and secure them in the counting room. At some point on Monday, armored cars were to remove the remaining cash.

The hotel's safe deposit boxes had been emptied hours before the shutdown as the final hotel guests checked out, and front-desk cashier drawers were already removed, leaving gaping holes.

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