

## Former A.C. casino workers reshuffle their lives

Written by Administrator  
Sunday, 01 March 2015 08:06 -

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The logo for 'The Inquirer' news outlet, featuring the text 'The Inquirer' in a white, serif font on a blue rectangular background.

Out in the casino diaspora, the workers from Atlantic City tend to want to keep a low profile. They know how it can turn out, turn sour, end abruptly.

Those who lost jobs - some 8,000 in 2014 - or saw the writing on the wall in Atlantic City and were able to find work elsewhere have moved on. When necessary, they also have moved, sometimes leaving their families in New Jersey.

They're now at casinos in Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Florida, Connecticut, Las Vegas, Detroit, even Wisconsin.

Out in the wide world of Atlantic City's lost East Coast casino monopoly, there are jobs to be had, many along an I-95 corridor that can feel like one long casino hop.

"A lot of people scattered around," said Franklin Carranza, a bartender who worked until almost the last day at Showboat, then transferred to Caesars' newly opened Horseshoe Casino in Baltimore, nestled on Russell Street in a nook enclosed by I-95, I-295, and I-395.

"I opened Revel and I closed Revel," said Svitlana Tretyak, 29, finishing up a cocktail-server shift at Maryland Live!, 12 miles outside Baltimore. "Not everyone was as fortunate as me to be able to just pack up and move."

The exodus is evident in declining school enrollments in Atlantic County - Egg Harbor Township

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lost about 200 students in two years - and in for-sale signs on houses.

Free and reduced-lunch rolls have shot up in recent years - in Egg Harbor Township it went from 27 percent to 47 percent of the district's 7,700 students - reflecting the thousands of unemployed casino workers who remain in limbo.

### Exhausted benefits

This month, according to a benefits timetable compiled by the New Jersey Department of Labor, 1,891 casino workers are due to exhaust their unemployment benefits, with about 100 more every week after that through mid-July.

Current unemployment rolls account for only about 4,700 workers, about 53 percent of the total laid off - leaving federal, state, and local officials - who have a \$29 million federal job-training grant to spend - trying to account for the rest of them.

"Can we assume that this group already secured employment within the industry, outside the industry, or moved to other areas of the county for employment?" Max Slusher, economic-development director of the Atlantic County Improvement Authority, asked in an e-mail to a working group organized by the U.S. Department of Labor. "How many of the unaccounted-for did not qualify for any unemployment benefits and fell completely through the safety net?"

Said Richard Perniciaro, professor at Atlantic Cape Community College, which will do intake for the national emergency grant, "For those that have disappeared or moved or whatever, we have no way to track them."

Some question the amount of money devoted to the job-training mission. Existing schools already have former casino workers training in medical-technician and other classes.

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### Better spent

Atlantic County Sheriff Frank Balles, whose list of sheriff's sales is at a record 736 active cases, thinks the money could be better spent. "Twenty-nine million dollars for retraining people for jobs that aren't here," he said. He's hoping for a mortgage-assistance program to offer up to \$50,000 in aid for each laid-off worker.

For those able to get out - the ones without houses to sell or families to relocate, mostly - new jobs could be compromises.

Transferring Caesars workers lost seniority, and some, like Carranza, left families behind. He rents an apartment in Baltimore for his weekend bartending shifts. For now, he prefers Pleasantville to Baltimore as his family's home base.

"It takes a toll on the family," Carranza said, slinging Heinekens at Horseshoe as a Chinese New Year crowd gathered to hear a pop singer. "We just had to take what we were able to get. A lot of people couldn't handle moving."

At Horseshoe, servers and dealers also hail from Showboat. One dealer said he came from shuttered Revel - the place that made Ray Rice infamous - to work at Horseshoe - a stone's throw from the Ravens' field, the place that made Rice famous.

About 117 miles up I-95 from Horseshoe is Parx, which just hired 70 new dealers and where workers have jobs at a casino whose clientele looks a lot like the old A.C. bus trippers, with a higher percentage of Russians and Orthodox Jews taking up seats at the blackjack tables.

### New jobs

Many laid-off workers retired; others reinvented themselves behind Wawa counters, on security details, or as dog walkers. Some, Tretyak said, already had second jobs at other casinos.

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Some found new work in other Atlantic City casinos. Since September, after the Showboat, Revel, and Trump Plaza closings, the Borgata has hired 144 people, spokesman Brian Brennan said, mostly in food, beverage, and hospitality.

Caesars did not give a figure for how many transferred from Showboat to its other properties. It also did not let Maryland Live! participate in job fairs to place Showboat workers, said Maryland Live! spokeswoman Carmen Gonzales, who did time in Atlantic City as part of Pinnacle. Maryland Live! hired about 100 Atlantic City workers and plans to take on more, in Maryland and Philadelphia.

The contraction of the Atlantic City casino industry also led to another exodus.

Young professionals in more forward-thinking parts of the industry, like Jason Spencer, a vice president of entertainment, nightlife, and lifestyle marketing at Caesars Entertainment, fled. Others, like crews at Revel's HQ and Ivan Kane's Royal Jelly Burlesque, were stopped in their tracks.

Spencer, 35, now runs TrendScend Marketing, a consulting firm in Atlanta.

"It was a combination of the actual industry and the city, just looking into the future and seeing it was on a path of shrinkage, if you will," Spencer said. "With budgets being cut, you're in more of a refraction stage. I hit a ceiling."

Sometimes, leaving Atlantic City also meant leaving an environment under siege.

Tretyak, a native of Ukraine, traded the black mini-dress she wore as a server in Revel's 11th-floor Sky Cafe for the shorts, boots, and fishnet stockings of her new job.

Tretyak, who moved to Baltimore with her boyfriend, says her tips are much improved at Maryland Live!, where gamblers pay for drinks.

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Others got promotions - sometimes alongside former supervisors - or landed in upper management.

SugarHouse has been a good place for women to land. Two top managers, vice president of gaming Rosemarie Cook and vice president of operations Randi Talley came - and still commute - from Atlantic City, where top-level women are few.

"The biggest difference is certainly the mind-set," said Cook, who left the Borgata for SugarHouse. "There's a high energy here. You're not dealing with that everyday doom and gloom when the numbers come out. I don't want to hurt the feelings of people who work in Atlantic City, but it's great for the psyche."

Talley left Bally's as vice president of slots and security. She is looking to hire a food and beverage manager. SugarHouse's expansion will mean 500 new jobs, most of them full time. SugarHouse prioritizes Philadelphia and Pennsylvania applicants, but she expects more A.C. people to apply as benefits end.

"Some are taking a deep breath," she said.

### 'Saved'

SugarHouse table-games dealer Karen Russo came from Trump Plaza, where she was laid off in 2010, then rehired in 2012. "SugarHouse saved me," she said. The floor is busy - busier than Atlantic City had been in years, she said.

(She tweeted recently: "Philadelphia BlackJack players love to surrender! Rocky wouldn't give up he would hit his hand.")

Michael King, 60, who worked at the Taj Mahal and Revel and who now works as a dual-rate

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shift manager and dealer at the Hollywood Casino in Perryville, Md., said regulation changes in 2011 allowed earlier layoffs at casinos. People left A.C., some, like himself, returning to open Revel, then leaving again.

"It's tough getting full-time employment," said King, who still owns a tattoo parlor in Cape May County. "You know what I miss most? All the people I worked with."

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