

Casinos boost wages

If you're dealing blackjack or parking cars at a Mississippi Gulf Coast casino, chances are your pay is better – maybe 30-40 percent or more – than it was before Hurricane Katrina devastated the gaming industry last August.

„Wages and salaries are increasing significantly,“ said Bill Kilduff, general manager at Isle of Capri Resort in Biloxi where 1,400 people are employed. „Hourly positions that paid USD 7 or USD 8 are now paying USD 10 to USD 13 an hour.“

Kristi Wells of Ocean Springs, a front desk clerk at Isle of Capri who's been on the job for slightly over a week, said she switched jobs because of better pay and benefits. She had worked at Days Inn in Ocean Springs.

„It wasn't hard finding another job,“ she said.

Two-hundred employees went back to work last month at Treasure Bay Casino and Hotel in Biloxi, and positions that once paid USD 7 an hour are up to USD 9 an hour, said Susan Varnes, chief operating officer at Treasure Bay.

The increase in wages and salaries is because there are more jobs to fill than people to fill them, said Larry Gregory, executive director of the Mississippi Gaming Commission. The cost of living is higher as many people rebuild or find housing to rent, and higher salaries and wages are an incentive for people to return to work on the Coast, he said.

„It's a very competitive business hiring and retaining employees,“ he said, noting casino executives have told him positions for hotel housekeepers and cooks have been the most difficult to fill.

About 6,000 employees are back at work at the five Biloxi casinos – IP, New Palace, Isle of Capri, Treasure Bay and

Boomtown – that have reopened, Gregory said.

Before Katrina, the 12 casinos on the Coast employed 15,000 people. „We’re hoping to have 13,000 people back to work by the end of September,” Gregory said.

About 3,800 employees will go to work when Beau Rivage Resort & Casino in Biloxi re-opens on Aug. 29, the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

„We have more than 60 percent of our employees coming back,” said Mary Cracchiolo, director of public relations at Beau Rivage. „We are still hiring and have a lot of opportunity to offer. Our employment center is open, and our Web site – www.workatbeau.com – has all the jobs posted.”

Kilduff said Isle of Capri is hiring for all salaried and highly compensated positions.

Hourly positions are those such as security guards, food and beverage workers, dealers and hotel workers.

The average salary of a blackjack dealer on the Coast is USD 57,600, which includes tips, Gregory said. The average salary of a valet runner on the Coast is USD 20,500, which includes tips, he said.

„The positions such as dealers, valets and food and beverage employees do very well with tips,” Varnes said. „Usually those types of employees make more money from tips than the person supervising them.”

Depending upon the casino and its policy, some positions such as dealers may pool tips and split them, Varnes said. A valet, on the other hand, may not pool his tips with the other valets, depending upon company policy.

Highly compensated positions are employees who are certified public accountants, engineers or directors of various areas such as casino operations, food and beverage or facilities.

Directors are typically in charge of 200-400 employees.

The average salary of a gaming floor supervisor on the Coast is USD 47,900, Gregory said. The average salary of a slot machine supervisor is USD 50,300, he said.

Denise von Herrmann, associate professor of political science at the University of Southern Mississippi and editor of the book *Resorting to Casinos: The Mississippi Gambling Industry* published this year, said it's nearly impossible to talk sensibly about wages in the gaming industry because of the diversity of jobs.

She surveyed workers at casinos in Tunica and on the Gulf Coast in 2003 and 2004.

„The industry includes very low-wage, low-skill workers bussing tables in the restaurants and changing beds in the hotel rooms, as well as higher pay and higher skill positions on the gaming floor,“ she said.

„Once you move into supervisory and professional jobs, casinos tend to pay at or just above the prevailing average. For example, accountants in casinos tend to earn as much as junior associates at local accounting firms, public relations jobs in casinos pay the prevailing salary and benefits for similar jobs in noncasino businesses at the Coast,“ she said.

Von Herrmann said the surveys in 2003 and 2004 found median family income for casino employees was between USD 30,000 and USD 39,000. She has not conducted surveys since 2003 and 2004.

„A large number of casino employees have two family members working in the industry, she said. „So, by that standard, we could assume the average per person would be more like USD 17,000-19,000 per year. That squares also with those who reported a specific salary level when we surveyed them. Many were right at, or right under USD 20K.“

Before Katrina, casinos on the Coast shared information about wages and salaries so they would know average pay, Varnes said.

„We used that to make sure we were consistent with the market,“ she said. „We haven’t done that since the storm, but our human resources people network and are good about sharing information.“

Employees, especially those paid by the hour, eagerly share what other casinos pay, she said. „Some of our employees get phone calls from other employers seeking them and they share that information,“ she said.

Varnes said about 90 percent of the employees at work at Treasure Bay worked there before Katrina.

Varnes said Treasure Bay has only one opening at the moment and that’s for a staff accountant. The salary will take into account the applicant’s experience, she said.

„Now that unemployment has run out a lot of people are headed back to work,“ she said. „As the other casinos open, I’m sure they have loyal employees just waiting for them to reopen. When you spend a lot of years with a company and earn your vacation, you don’t necessarily want to start over with another company.“

Beter Benefits

Casinos that have reopened since Katrina seem to be offering better benefits than they did before the storm, Gregory said.

Treasure Bay has a stronger benefits package now than it did before Katrina, Varnes said. „We were able to get better medical insurance than before,“ she said.

Both Treasure Bay and Isle of Capri have medical clinics that full-time and part-time employees and their families may use for USD 5 per visit and pharmacies that fill prescriptions for

free or at discounted prices. It's a cost savings for the casino as long as employees use it, Varnes said, and a convenience for employees.

„We have a few employees who choose not to get major medical because they know they only have to pay USD 5 per visit to the clinic,“ Varnes said.

Isle of Capri's benefits don't stop with medical insurance and a clinic. Benefits also include a meal each day in the employee cafeteria. „It's a competitive perk that you offer,“ Kilduff said.