

In Las Cruces, call-center business is booming

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The Associated Press State & Local Wire

September 18, 2006 Monday 4:40 PM GMT

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Section: STATE AND REGIONAL

Length: 744 words

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Dateline: **LAS CRUCES** N.M.

Body

More than 2 1/2 years ago, **Las Cruces** resident Trisha Thompson was looking for a job. Frontier Airlines was advertising an open house for applicants at its call center on Hickory Loop.

Thompson, 42, got the job and now takes as many as 70 calls a day for the airline.

"You never know what you're going to get every time you pick up the phone," she said. "You get to talk to all different kinds of people."

Of the 88,900 people estimated by the New Mexico Department of Labor to be in the **Las Cruces** area work force, Thompson is one of more than 1,000 folks who gets paid to talk on the phone.

In less than a year, the **Las Cruces** area has seen a pair of new call centers open with more than 500 jobs planned.

And while Excell Agent Services closed its **Las Cruces** call center in late 2003 and laid off about 300 workers, the city has gained those jobs back and then some. **Research Data Design** already employs 241 people at its **Las Cruces** facility, Frontier Airlines had about 170 employees at its **Las Cruces** call center and ChoicePoint reports that it has about 100 workers manning the phones.

Steve Vierck, the CEO and president of the Mesilla Valley Economic Development Alliance, said that other companies are also looking at Dona Ana County.

He said many of the companies have reported that they are attracted to the fact that the **Las Cruces** area has not yet been saturated.

"What they have told us is that they look at metropolitan areas that don't have a lot of call centers already," Vierck said. "There is a rule of thumb that if less than 2 to 3 percent of the work force is employed in a free-standing call center, they feel like that market is not saturated."

He said that before this year, about 800 people in the county worked at a call center, which is less than 1 percent of the work force for this area.

Also, the fact that the **Las Cruces** area has many bilingual residents is an attractive draw to companies.

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"A lot of businesses these days are serving bilingual markets," Vierck said.

Frontier Airlines opened its facility on Hickory Loop, just off of Avenida de Mesilla, six years ago.

Manager Ruben Valdez said his company really studied the city before it made the commitment.

"Frontier did a nationwide search. Las Cruces was in the top five, then the final two and then we made the decision," he said. "One reason was that we knew we were going to be able to hire a highly qualified work force."

Employee Courtney Weeks, 26, has worked for Frontier for more than a year and has her own opinion about why companies come to Las Cruces.

"I think that we're very friendly," she said. "Las Cruces is not too big, but it's big enough and we tend to have a lot of positive, friendly people here."

Brian Ramirez, site operator with Research Data Design on Commerce Drive, said the fact that Las Cruces is home to New Mexico State University was attractive to the company.

"RDD has three sites and they are all in college towns," he said.

The company collects data for clients and expects to see more business, and maybe hire more workers, as the political season heats up.

As for ChoicePoint, its call center on University Avenue "is an outbound/inbound facility that serves the insurance, mortgage and pre-employment services industry," according to Chuck Jones, the company's director of external affairs.

ClientLogic's call center here is working with Direct TV to provide service to its customers.

"Direct TV is what we call an enabling client; they're willing to partner with us and come into a community and take a risk," said Pete Martino, senior vice president for operations at ClientLogic. "Anytime you come into a community, it is a risk, an unknown. When you sign up a huge amount of work force that we're committing to this location 500 jobs is a big commitment."

Martino said that the company has already hired about 300 workers at the Las Cruces location at 2100 Summit Court. The company opened the Las Cruces building earlier this year.

CyraCom, a provider of language services to hospitals and other health-care institutions, opened its facility on Divot Avenue this spring.

"This is a wonderfully welcoming community," said CyraCom President and CEO Michael Greenbaum. "We considered 12 cities and, at the end of the day, we narrowed it to three and hands down, this was the best choice on so many levels."

The company originally said the facility is eventually expected to create more than 100 jobs.

Information from: Las Cruces Sun-News, <http://www.lcsun-news.com>

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newswire

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Subject: CALL CENTERS (92%); EMPLOYMENT SEARCH (90%); LABOR FORCE (89%); BUSINESS NEWS (78%); LAYOFFS (78%); ALLIANCES & PARTNERSHIPS (73%); ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT (73%); LABOR DEPARTMENTS (73%); LAYOFFS & DISMISSALS (73%); CITIES (67%); RANKINGS (67%); ECONOMIC NEWS (65%); EXECUTIVES (65%); NM Las Cruces Call Centers (%); Business,Travel,Transportation,Labor (%)

Company: EXCELL AGENT SERVICES LLC (56%); CHOICEPOINT INC (55%)

Industry: NAICS561499 ALL OTHER BUSINESS SUPPORT SERVICES (55%); NAICS524298 ALL OTHER INSURANCE RELATED ACTIVITIES (55%); NAICS511210 SOFTWARE PUBLISHERS (55%); SIC7374 COMPUTER PROCESSING & DATA PREPARATION & PROCESSING SERVICES (55%); CALL CENTERS (92%); BUSINESS TELEPHONE SERVICE (91%); AIRLINES (90%); PRESS AGENCY RELEASES (90%)

Geographic: NEW MEXICO, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (79%); United States; NorthAmerica

Load-Date: September 19, 2006

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