

Career best bets

By Ellen Marks / Journal Assistant Business Editor

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Ramon Antonio Crespo, a home health aide, cares for Frank Lujan three times a week at Lujan's home. Behind is Sam Chavez, Lujan's stepson. (Roberto E. Rosales/Albuquerque Journal)

Looking for a new career?

Software developers, as might be expected, will be in great demand in New Mexico as part of a nationwide boom in tech jobs. But have you ever considered becoming a debt collector? How about an oil and gas roustabout?

Those are among the jobs projected to be fastest-growing in the state through 2023, according to a new report by CareerBuilder, a human resources technology company.

The point of the study is to help people make smart decisions about career choices, says Michelle Armer, CareerBuilders' chief people officer.

"Job seekers should look at projected job demand and consider what roles employers in their desired area are looking to fill, and the degrees or skills needed for positions in those fields," Armer said in a written statement.

FASTEST-GROWING JOBS IN NEW MEXICO

HIGH-WAGE JOBS \$23.60 or more per hour	2018 jobs	2023 projected	change by %	Typical entry level education
Software developers	1,482	1,787	21%	Bachelor's degree, or relevant experience
Nurse practitioners	1,022	1,177	15%	Master's degree
MIDDLE-WAGE JOBS \$14.18 to \$23.59 per hour				
Debt collectors	1,078	1,276	18%	High school diploma or equivalent
Oil and gas roustabouts	2,733	3,155	15%	No formal educational credential
LOW-WAGE JOBS \$14.17 or less per hour				
Home health aides	7,940	9,561	20%	High school diploma or equivalent
Personal care aides	26,301	30,648	17%	High school diploma or equivalent

Sources: CareerBuilder, Journal

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The study lists occupations with the greatest demand in three categories: high-wage jobs that pay \$23.60 or more per hour; middle-wage jobs, \$14.18-\$23.59 per hour; low-wage jobs, \$14.17 or less per hour.

CareerBuilder based its projections on an “extensive analysis” of historic and current labor market trends, looking at 774 occupations as they are classified by the federal government, Armer said. The figures include those who work for a company, as well as those who are self-employed.

“By gaining experience that will help them to develop in-demand skills, job seekers looking to start a new position (can) build their résumés to make sure their skillsets are attractive to potential employers,” Armer said of the study.

Here are the top two fastest-growing jobs in each category in New Mexico:

- High wage: Software developers, nurse practitioners
- Middle wage: Bill and account collectors, roustabouts
- Low wage: Home health aides, personal care aides.

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SOFTWARE DEVELOPERS



Joshua Rivera, software developer for the RS21, at the company's Downtown Albuquerque office. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

For Joshua Rivera, the world of software development began with a science fair when he was a freshman at Rio Rancho High School.

His entry was a team project involving coding, Rivera said.

From there, he said, he developed a dream of creating video games – a common starting point for one of the fastest-growing professions in New Mexico.

Now, Rivera, 32, has been a developer for 15 years. His current title is director of development at RS21, an Albuquerque data firm.

He can't imagine doing anything else.

"My favorite thing has always been just solving problems," Rivera said. "That's sort of the crux of the whole job. It can be the most frustrating thing and the most satisfying thing."

He said entry-level salaries can range from \$55,000 to \$115,000. The average in New Mexico in 2017 was \$88,293, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Software development is projected to be the fastest-growing high-wage occupation in New Mexico through 2023.

“By all measures, it’s one of the fastest-growing industries there is, and when you combine that with very high wages, that’s the amazing part,” said John Mierzwa, founder and chief executive officer of Ingenuity Software Labs.

Mierzwa, founder of the Deep Dive Coding boot camp, said until about six years ago, there was “only one path to a software development career, and that was a (bachelor’s degree) in computer engineering.”

But the extensive training that boot camps provide and the demand for qualified workers has led many small- and medium-sized businesses to also consider training and skill rather than just a college degree, said Mierzwa, who is pushing an initiative to promote New Mexico talent to out-of-state companies that need software developers.

“One of the great things to me is ... now, with some of these other options, so many people are getting into the industry that wouldn’t have before – a lot more women, people of color, people who are low-income,” Mierzwa said. “It’s definitely helping our software industry to more closely resemble our population.”

NURSE PRACTITIONERS



Melody Avila, DNP, FNP, works at El Centro Family Health at Espanola Valley High School. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

Nurse practitioners in New Mexico like to point out that they are primary care providers and can be instrumental in helping to solve the state’s health care problems, especially in rural areas.

“We know that our population is aging,” said Melody Avila, a nurse practitioner at El Centro Family Health in Española who also teaches at the University of New Mexico. “The biggest need is we’re such a rural state.”

Unlike some other states, New Mexico allows nurse practitioners to work without the supervision of a medical doctor. They can diagnose illnesses, order tests and X-rays and prescribe medication.

That kind of independence is a “huge draw” in getting more people licensed and working in the state, said Rachel Bevan, executive director of the New Mexico Nurse Practitioner Council.

The occupation is considered New Mexico’s second-fastest growing in the high-wage category, according to the most recent study by CareerBuilder.

Nurse practitioners are licensed registered nurses who have graduate education, including clinical training. Those entering the field must have either a master’s or doctoral degree to become licensed, and they must have

national certification in a specialty area, such as pediatrics, gerontology or psychiatry, among others.

Bevan said annual salaries in New Mexico depend on a nurse's specialty but generally range from \$70,000 to as high as \$160,000. The average pay in the state in 2017 was \$109,330, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Avila's specialty is family health, and through El Centro she works at the School-Based Health Center at Española Valley High and the Rio Arriba Health Commons, which provides primary health care to people of all ages.

Avila is from Española and is committed to "being able to make an impact on the community I grew up in."

There is great reward, she said, in "being able to see a child and then providing care for their parents and then they bring in their grandparents. I can really take care of the entire family as a whole," Avila said.

DEBT COLLECTORS



180 Resolutions debt collector Amber Tafoya talks with a client. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

It's not what you think.

The stereotype of a debt collector as a nasty bully threatening to throw people out of their homes when their rent is overdue is not necessarily accurate anymore.

Take Amber Tafoya, for example.

Tafoya works at 180 Resolutions, with a daily assignment of 100 to 150 accounts involving people who owe money for everything from medical bills to student loans to property or rent debt.

Instead of intimidation, Tafoya relies on empathy and compassion to "just build a rapport with them."

"It's very fulfilling," said Tafoya, who has been doing the job for 13 years, following in the footsteps of her mother, who also was a debt collector. "You have some people with situations they felt they couldn't get out of. You try to talk to them about what they want to accomplish and help them reach that goal."

The job of debt collector is projected to be the fastest-growing middle-wage occupation in New Mexico through 2023.

The annual pay at 180 Resolutions, which is owned by the New Mexico Educational Assistance Foundation, is anywhere from \$29,120 to \$43,680, depending on experience, said Grace Tackman, an assistant vice president. Benefits include incentives such as bonuses on top of the pay, she said. The average salary in New Mexico in 2017 was \$36,530, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Tackman said the agency has some difficulty finding employees who can meet all the requirements: passing a background check and aptitude test and demonstrating a commitment to staying in the job in the long term, among others. Training a new hire takes about six months, and managers don't want to invest that much effort in someone who is a short-timer, she said. Training includes learning how to properly talk to people with "high anxiety levels" who might "lash out," Tackman said.

For that type of reaction, Tafoya said, she has grown "a thick skin." But she said she's often able to turn the situation around by making a connection – quickly before the debtor can hang up.

"I always tell everyone – just communicate with us," Tafoya said.

OIL AND GAS ROUSTABOUTS



Oil rig roustabout Jonathan Montes of Carlsbad at an oil rig south of Artesia. (Greg Sorber/Albuquerque Journal)

If you're physically fit, able to work long hours, know a lot about maintenance and want to earn good money, here's the job for you: oilfield roustabout.

"They're very much in demand," said Gregg Fulfer, owner of Fulfer Oil and Cattle Co. in Jal. "It's a basic need in the oilfield – it's the heart of what gets everything done."

Jonathan Montes of Carlsbad has been doing it for several years and is fine with 70-hour workweeks (sometimes they stretch to 90 hours) because of his annual pay: \$85,000 last year.

Montes, who works for 50-50 Backhoe Service in Artesia, also enjoys the job. He's a "pusher," the person in charge of a crew that does everything from construction and building fences to repairing well or gas line leaks to the more dangerous job of making sure line valves are functioning properly.

And there's a lot of lifting of heavy pipes and other equipment, so it requires someone who's in pretty good shape, said Fulfer, who became a roustabout right out of high school.

Oil and gas roustabouts are projected to be the second-fastest growing occupation in New Mexico through 2023, among jobs described as middle-wage, according to a study by CareerBuilder. The job can pay anywhere from the low \$50,000s up to \$120,000, depending on experience and the amount of overtime earned, Fulfer said.

Pay in New Mexico also depends on demand, Montes said. Several years ago, before the oil surge in the Permian Basin, Montes made \$55,000, more than a third less than he's making now.

It's not the easiest way to make a living. Montes works from 6 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., but with transportation from whichever oilfield he's working at to his home in Carlsbad, he usually has a 12-hour day. On busy days, he doesn't get home until 2 or 3 a.m.

"Right now, it's a boom," he said. "We are busy."

HOME HEALTH AND PERSONAL CARE AIDES



Ramon Crespo cooks a meal for client Frank Lujan. (Roberto E. Rosales/Albuquerque Journal)

Ramon Antonio Crespo has a simple response when asked about the rewards of his job as a home health aide: "I love the people."

Crespo, who recently earned a nursing assistant certificate, mostly takes care of seniors in their homes, although sometimes his patients are in assisted living centers.

His duties cover the details of a life: preparing meals, helping clients shower and providing medication, among numerous other duties, although he says there is one overriding obligation.

"My job is to comfort people," says Crespo, a 56-year-old native of Cuba.

Crespo says he makes a "big connection" with his clients, who suffer from such conditions as dementia. He also forms a bond with family members who are grateful for his services.

Home health aides, ranked as the fastest-growing low-wage occupation in New Mexico, can expect to start out at minimum wage, said Leah Steimel, a community health consultant with Encuentro. That's \$7.50 in New Mexico, although higher in Albuquerque and several other cities in the state. Those with more experience might earn \$11 or \$12 an hour, she said. The average wage in New Mexico in 2017 was \$11.47 an hour, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Workers must undergo a background check, but training "is all over the place," depending on the employer, Steimel said. Those who are placed through Encuentro, go through the organization's extensive training program. They learn about such medical issues as drug interactions, dietary needs, operation of oxygen tanks and how to take vital signs, Steimel said.

Personal care aides, the second-fastest growing low-wage job, is one notch below home health aides with a focus on "very basic" client needs. However, not all agencies distinguish between the two, and there's not always a difference in pay, Steimel said. BLS figures show the average pay in 2017 was \$9.83 an hour.

As for Crespo, his interest in helping older people stems from the time he spent taking care of his mother and father while living in Cuba before they both died around the same time.

“It broke my heart,” he said.

Contact the writer.

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