



ASHLEY L. CONIT | BDN

Tony Gomme (left) cuts up apples during a culinary class at Eastern Maine Community College in Bangor on Wednesday. Gomme (right) and Beau Sibley both were laid off at Verso Paper mill in Bucksport last year. Thanks to federal programs, the pair are working to start new careers.

Class

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slightly different tools and strategies to the goal of re-training and re-employing workers who have lost their jobs due to competition from foreign imports, as is the case with most Maine paper-making jobs.

Workers who choose to prepare for new careers can have their schooling or training paid for, including tuition, books and other expenses. Their unemployment benefits may be extended while they complete their education so they don't have to juggle school and work. Workers over 50 may qualify for a temporary

wage subsidy that helps bridge the difference between what they earned at their previous job and what they earn as an entry-level employee in a new field. And, if their new job skills land them a position that requires them to move, they may qualify for a relocation allowance, Upham said.

Popular retraining options for former millworkers include health fields, Ed Upham said, as well as culinary arts, hospitality management, building trades, mechanics, boat building, welding and computer sciences. Two-year degree programs and one-year certifications at Maine's community colleges are the most accessible options, he said, but some programs are also available through the

state's technical high schools and the University of Maine system.

Upham said older workers face unique challenges when they are displaced. While younger workers have more time to start a new career and may be open to relocating, he said, older workers are often less willing to start over in a new field at lower pay, less confident of their ability to learn a new skill set and less willing to relocate from a community where their families may have lived for several generations.

A chance to pursue a dream

But relocating turns out to be an attractive option for Tony Gomme, 53, of Or-

ington. He'd worked at the Bucksport mill since 1984, moving wood chips into the pulping process and as heavy equipment trainer.

He liked his job fine and would not have moved on if the mill hadn't closed. "I rode it 'til the wheels fell off the wagon," he said cheerfully, but he leapt at the opportunity to pursue his lifelong passion for cooking.

"I was always dabbling in it, even when I was working at the mill," he said. "I've always wanted a cooking degree."

Like Sibley, Gomme expects to graduate in 2017. He plans to move away from the long Maine winters — North Carolina, perhaps — and open a bed and breakfast, a longtime dream.

"I want to cook up a big

country breakfast that brings people together," he said. He may even make the move before finishing the program at EMCC, if his federal funding will transfer to another location.

He'll be leaving behind deep Maine roots and some important family members. "It's going to be rough to leave," he acknowledged. "But my rule of thumb is this: the only person in your life who can make you happy is yourself."

Gomme said older workers who enter retraining at the community colleges can

expect to find a lot of support from other students. "We were all really nervous about being the old fogeys in our classes," he said. "But EMCC is very laid back and easy-going, and the students are very friendly."

More importantly, for workers like Sibley and Gomme, this is a positive second act.

"There is life after the mill," Gomme said. "Of course, I'm sad I lost my job, but I'm still young enough to pursue the career I always wanted. This really kind of gave me my youth back."

Medicare

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insurance helps pay for the "gaps" in traditional Medicare coverage, such as copayments at a doctor's office and hospital costs not covered by Medicare Part A. There are 10 different supplemental plan options available; in Maine, the most popular option costs about \$190 per month.

3. Your prescription plan, Part D, may have changed. Prescription

plans are allowed to change the list of drugs they cover from one year to the next, along with their prices. There are 27 different drug plans available in Maine, each covering different drugs and requiring different copayments. The average cost of Plan D in Maine is about \$49 per month, but rates vary widely.

4. Your Medicare Advantage plan, Part C, may have changed. Medicare Advantage is a one-stop-shopping option that rolls hospital, medical, supplementary and drug coverage

into a single plan, managed by a private health insurer. Monthly premiums are generally lower, but out-of-pocket spending may run higher for services and medications. About 66,000 Mainers are enrolled in Medicare Advantage plans. Costs vary widely depending on coverage.

5. Your health status may have changed. Some plans are well-suited to people who are generally healthy and make little use of the health care system, while others offer better coverage for chronic disease management, ongoing pre-

scription use and frequent medical care.

Maine's Agencies on Aging offer both telephone and in-person consultation to help Mainers understand their choices; reach the closest agency by calling 877-353-3771. The Medicare program provides Open Enrollment support and information by phone at 800-MEDICARE or 800-633-4227 and online at Medicare.gov.



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