

# Chukchansi's 'forgotten' people: workers left without jobs in wake of shutdown

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When Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino was forcibly closed in October, more than 1,000 employees lost jobs. Many still are looking for work.

Finding a job has taken on added urgency since their six months of unemployment benefits expired. For most, that came at the end of April. The benefit paid a maximum of \$450 per week.

Jose and Dolores Flores at their booth at the Clovis Farmers Market. They are former Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino employees. Now they sell at farmers markets and run a business in Oakhurst. | JOHN WALKER  
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Mary Burks, a former card dealer at Chukchansi Gold, has lost more than hope that the casino will open again soon. Since her unemployment benefits ended, she and her husband realize they are going to lose their house of 18 years.

Burks, 55, was laid off after the stunning shutdown. It was ordered by state and federal authorities the day after an Oct. 9 showdown between police forces representing rival tribal leadership factions.

"I think the focus has been on what happened to the casino and the tribe and we've kind of gotten lost, over 1,000 people," Burks says.

Tribal leaders continue to negotiate with federal and state officials to reopen the casino. The tribe also will need a green light from bondholders who bailed the casino and resort out three years ago with a restructured financing package valued at more than \$250 million.

For the employees, the layoff and wait for the casino to reopen has put them on a long glide down the economic ladder. They lost not only paychecks but health insurance, as well. Now, with unemployment benefits running out, they're left to apply for food stamps and public assistance while they seek new jobs.

About 500 laid-off employees are from Madera County, while Fresno County officials report around 400 employees living in their region.

Some of the workers, who were at the casino for a decade or longer, say they will go to work in farm fields or packinghouses.

We had really good jobs and had a really good workplace. We wanted to go back.

Mary Burks, laid-off card dealer

Many employees are seeking re-training or high school diplomas. In Madera County, between 100 and 150 have sought help through the [Madera County Workforce Investment Corp.](#), says Elaine Craig, the agency's executive director.

“They realize they are not going to make the same wages in a job without a high school diploma or formal training,” she says. “These folks desperately want to work.”

A few have managed to stay in the business. Black Oak Casino Resort in Tuolumne County recently had a job fair and hired 60 people, including a handful from Chukchansi. Table Mountain Casino has hired about 10 former Chukchansi workers since October.

## **Will the casino reopen?**

Chukchansi Tribal Chairman Reggie Lewis sees a possibility that the casino could reopen by the end of the year — three to six months.

Gaming commission officials in Washington, D.C., declined comment on time frames. A governor’s office spokesman also offered no hint about ongoing negotiations.

“We’re continuing to work with all parties to help facilitate a reopening when public safety concerns are met,” says Evan Westrup, a spokesman for Gov. Jerry Brown.

Lewis says progress is being made in talks with the [National Indian Gaming Commission](#). “We are also talking to the bondholders about getting the money to open the casino. We are doing everything we can to get it open as soon as we can.”

A sticking point could be the timing of an election that was supposed to occur earlier this month. Lewis says it was delayed until October so the council can keep the same people in place who started negotiations to reopen the casino.

Lewis says former employees will likely be rehired; workers who were part of a union must be offered their jobs back under contract guidelines.

He says he feels for the workers, who had insurance and good pay, but also tribe members, especially elders, who once received utility payments, groceries and meal cards to eat at the casino. Families, too, were given education money and clothing allowances and students received financial incentives for grades.

“Our tribal members got pretty used to getting tribal benefits and the tribe could provide services to tribal members, but now those are all gone,” Lewis says.

## **No more benefits**

Unemployment benefits were paid to any worker who participated in job training, says Craig with Madera County’s Workforce Investment Corp. Some found new work soon after the casino closed.

About 60 are enrolled in Madera Adult School to learn English and get a high school equivalency diploma. “They are coming to the realization that they had an amazing job with benefits and well-above minimum-wage salary and that they have to do some work now to get to that level of wage and stability,” Craig says.

I was treated well. Now, it’s very hard to get a job at 55.

Francisco Silva, who trained other resort workers

Of Fresno County’s 394 identified Chukchansi employees invited to an orientation, 44 showed up and 30 are receiving services, whether it’s job search assistance or training, says Tamico Thomas, a senior outplacement specialist with Fresno County’s Workforce Investment Board.

## **Lost house**

When Burks lost her \$48,000-a-year card dealer's job, she got unemployment. The \$450 per week allowed her and her husband, Don Burks, 77, a retired California Highway Patrol officer, to continue to make payments on their home of 18 years in Teaford Meadows.

Now, she has little hope the casino will reopen or that she can find a job that can pay the bills. Any training offerings, such as welding, didn't match her skills. So, she and her husband are moving to Tennessee to live with their daughter.

"Everything we had went into that home," she says. "We customized it, expanded it."

Even with her husband's pension and Social Security, the Burks still couldn't pay for the 3,000-square-foot house. They have told the bank they are walking away from the home.

Burks started at the casino in 2004, a year after it opened. She says the [tribe's bickering](#) was a constant but workers did their best to ignore it. When customers brought it up, Burks says, she would change the subject.

She liked her job and the people she worked with. "We had really good jobs and had a really good workplace. We wanted to go back."

## **New business**

Jose and Dolores Flores are working to get back on their feet after Jose lost his groundskeeper job at the resort.

Dolores was a card dealer at Chukchansi but quit in 2010 because her daughter suffers from asthma and she smelled like smoke after she came home from work.

"I didn't have to stay in that job just for the money," she says.

But Jose had benefits through his job that are gone now. His unemployment insurance has also expired.

Now he is working with his wife at her Oakhurst store, Fine Native Handcrafts. The couple, parents of seven children, get products made by Indians from Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador and Mexico to sell at their store and at farmers markets and fairs throughout the region.

The Floreses say they're doing fine. Dolores says business is good, and she plans to open a natural foods store with fresh fruit and juice next door to the handcrafts shop. Working in the family business has been better for Jose personally.

"I think we do better this way," Dolores says. "He does the set-up; it's too much for me and my daughters."

They know they are better off than some of their friends who lost jobs. Jose says he knows many whose best opportunities are working in the fields again.

## **Still seeking work**

Francisco Silva, 55, of Madera, worked at Chukchansi for 10 years. His oldest son, Gerardo, lost his job at the casino, too. Before working there, Francisco Silva refinished antiques for more than 20 years. At Chukchansi, he earned \$20 an hour with full insurance. He trained new employees on heavy equipment and was government-certified to operate the pool at the resort.

I miss my coworkers, the work I did, the routine.

Efrain Amezcua, casino janitor

“It’s very sad,” Silva says. “I was treated well; Now, it’s very hard to get a job at 55.”

He is taking odd jobs wherever he can.

Elvia Cortez, 59, gets some state money for taking care of her 86-year-old mother at her home in Madera and has a little bit of unemployment money still coming in. But if she goes out looking for work or to her classes, she has to pay someone to watch her mother.

She appreciated the year-round employment the casino offered and says she loved working in the casino’s kitchen. Now, she is back in school. The last time she was in a classroom was 43 years ago when she left Mexico with a ninth-grade education.

Her job search isn’t going well. “I went to job fairs, put in applications and nobody called me.”

Now, she is considering packinghouses.

“All the work around here will be temporary,” she says. “It will be a couple weeks, a couple months and no guarantee of a job ... at this point, we’ll take anything we can.”

Efrain Amezcua, 47, and his wife, Hermila, worked at the resort since it opened. Efrain was a janitor making about \$12 an hour: “It was full-time, year-round and there was always stuff to do.” He’d like to find work in his profession, “but there is nothing like that.”

He says he tried other casinos without success. “I miss my coworkers, the work I did, the routine.”

Magdalena Figueroa, another of the casino’s first employees, is a single mother of two getting about \$60 in food stamps. Since her unemployment expired, she’s had to reapply for welfare.

She also is considering field work, possibly vineyard trimming, which she hasn’t done since before starting at Chukchansi Gold in 2003. She was earning \$14 an hour when the casino closed.

“I borrowed money and the little money I had put away I used to make the rent,” she says.

## **Casino work available**

Ron Patel, general manager of [Black Oak Casino Resort](#) in Tuolumne County, says there hasn’t been much interest from former Chukchansi employees: prior to a job fair this month, 16 applicants, four hired.

“We did think we’d get more response,” Patel says. “Our guess was people thought it would reopen soon.”

Distance may have been a factor. Black Oak is more than an hour’s drive each way from Madera and Fresno, where the bulk of Chukchansi employees live.

Black Oak has 880 employees and 148 rooms in its hotel, which is about three-quarters the size of Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino.

Closer to home, [Table Mountain Casino](#) in Friant added about 10 card dealers. Dan Casas, the tribe’s lawyer, says the casino doesn’t get much turnover and many new hires already have family members working there.

## **Frustrated supervisor**

Madera County Supervisor Tom Wheeler, who represents the Coarsegold and Oakhurst areas, says the employees are forgotten, and there is little he can do to help. State officials tell him there are no programs available to extend unemployment benefits.

He laments the loss of county revenue, both tax money generated by Chukchansi workers and the tribe's \$92,000 monthly payments that ended after the casino closed. Nonprofits also are hurting. Earlier this year, the tribe neglected to give local nonprofits \$1 million in contributions because of tribal infighting.

"It's just a shame that it has to be this way," Wheeler says. "It doesn't have to be if it wasn't for their greed and doing this to their own people."

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