

Walgreens cuts 63 Collier pharmacy technicians

By LIZ FREEMAN

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NAPLES — Sixty-three pharmacy technicians who worked for Walgreens stores in Collier County have joined the ranks of the unemployed, a result of operational changes where many prescriptions from Naples customers are sent to a central-fill site in Orlando.

“We were unable to move 63 pharmacy technicians in the Naples area to other positions within the company,” Walgreens spokeswoman Vivika Vergara said in an e-mail.

Before the layoffs Friday, Walgreens officials asked for voluntary resignations and offered technicians other positions within the company, she said.

“After those steps were taken, we still needed to eliminate 63 pharmacy technician positions. Now if openings come up within the company, they are still eligible to be rehired for the position.”

“They called it Black Friday,” Del Parrish, owner of the independent Sunshine Pharmacy with six store locations in Collier, said how some of the pharmacy technicians described the layoffs.

He is starting to get calls from some of the former Walgreens pharmacy technicians to inquire whether he has any job openings.

“We are getting calls left and right,” he said. “They had some good people. We have an application on our Web site that people can download and bring it in.”

Last year, Walgreens instituted a new program in parts of Florida and Arizona where prescriptions that customers don't need until the next day are sent to a central-fill site in Orlando. Walgreens officials at the time said the change was intended to give pharmacists more time to counsel patients, to cut costs and deal with prescription backlogs that come in during the day and get filled at night.

The central-fill program also meant some 24-hour pharmacy counters would be reduced to 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. hours, and some pharmacists would be moved to other locations and possibly to the central-fill site in Orlando. Walgreen's has 16 stores in Collier.

Vergara declined to comment whether layoffs would take place in Lee County or disclose how many job cuts have occurred throughout the state. Information was not made available about how large Walgreens workforce is in Collier.

“So far, we’ve created roughly 2,000 new jobs at Walgreens central fill locations in Orlando and Miami Lakes, where the employees are a mix of both store employees and new hires,” Vergara said in the e-mail. “As far as the number of layoffs in the state so far, we don’t have a number to share. That’s due to a number of factors like natural attrition and continued ability for employees to take other jobs in the company.”

Parrish said he expected the central-fill program to result in job cuts locally, and he expects that, in time, pharmacists will get replaced with technicians to save money on pharmacist salaries.

He heard from one Walgreens pharmacist that he is expected to work with just one technician and rely on the central-fill system to take care of what they can’t do.

The pharmacy industry uses a formula for how many technicians work side-by-side with pharmacists and it’s based on the number of prescriptions filled during a week, Parrish said. He hired a former Walgreens pharmacist after the central-fill program was launched in Orlando.

“She saw the writing on the wall,” he said. “It’s scary. It’s a scary market out there.”

