

Meeting to focus on help for P&G job shift victims

By Bill Kirk

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LAWRENCE — A local social services group will meet with representatives of Procter & Gamble on Sept. 10 to discuss what, if any, benefits will be available to hundreds of workers from Lawrence whose jobs will be lost when the company moves some of its operations to Mexico and Poland.

When P&G announced earlier this month that it was closing its Gillette products packaging plant in Devens, it meant that nearly 1,200 employees of two temporary staffing companies would lose their jobs at the plant. Many of those workers are from Lawrence.

Annia Lemberg, president of the Merrimack Valley Project, said that during a Sept. 10 meeting with company executives, she hopes to learn what benefits P&G plans to offer the displaced workers. The location of the meeting hasn't been established.

"We asked them to give us in writing information about health insurance and the severance package they promised the workers," she said.

Executives from P&G could not be reached for comment.

The jobs are being eliminated because P&G is moving much of its production and packaging facilities for older Gillette products to Mexico and Poland. For years, hundreds of workers from Lawrence had boarded vans to work three different shifts at a packaging plant run by a company called Sonoco.

Sonoco has a contract with Gillette to package many of its razor products at Devens for shipment throughout the United States and overseas. About 350 employees of Sonoco work at Devens.

Sonoco uses a company called Debbie's Staffing, which provides jobs for upward of 900 temporary employees in the packaging center. About 50 employees from both of those companies would retain their jobs, working at Gillette's facility in Andover. The rest would be laid off. The changes take effect in 2010.

Lembert said her organization, which has worked closely in the past with Debbie's Staffing and Sonoco employees on job-training and English as a second language programs, did not expect the P&G announcement that it was moving the jobs out of the country.

She said the jobs were good for new immigrants and that the employees made around \$8 an hour.

Procter & Gamble and Debbie's Staffing managers did not return calls. Robin Montgomery, a spokesman for Sonoco, said a representative from that company will attend the meeting.