

DEVELOPING THE POST-COVID WORKFORCE

County government, nonprofits, and employers are pulling together to match people to jobs

BY ELAINE POFELDT



Opposite page: Construction work on the Newburgh Beacon Bridge began last September and is expected to continue through 2022.

At Sacred Seeds, Jennifer Ann Safara Perry has built an avid following over the past 20 years selling body butters, coffee scrubs, and other products she whips up. But to grow the Yonkers-based business, the long-time solopreneur needed help. During the pandemic, she was able to ramp up the online portion of her business with the help of 12 people, as a result of grant funding from the Westchester-Putnam Workforce Development Board, which had received CARES Act stimulus money to assist employers in hiring or bringing back laid-off staff. Her team helped her with branding, marketing, web development, and grant writing. “It was a chance for a rebirth,” she says.

All eyes are on such workforce development in Westchester County, as leaders in just about every sector of the economy focus on getting back to business as we knew it before the crisis, to the extent that is possible. And with every business, organization, or institution depending on people to make that happen, leaders are doing all they can to train workers and connect people who need work with employers.

For Employers: The New Landscape

in February, notes Jason Chapin, director of workforce development for the Westchester County Association (WCA), an economic development and business advocacy organization with 250 members.

The WCA has been staying in close communication with employers, as well as colleges and vocational schools in the area, to help ensure that there is a pipeline of workers with the right credentials to fill the jobs that exist in the post-pandemic economy. They are graduating a lot of students who started their programs years ago, says Chapin. Some students started last spring. They may have had a job offer. Their job offer has been adjusted. They may not be working in the job or position they were hoping for. We have another group of seniors in college. They are scrambling to figure out what is available to them. A lot of colleges have told us they have alumni asking career services for help.

People in disadvantaged groups, such as older workers, veterans, people with disabilities, and immigrants, face additional challenges, Chapin says. So do women, who

were disproportionately affected by the transition to online and hybrid learning during the pandemic. They are a very large portion of some sectors of the workforce, says Chapin, pointing to industries such as education, office and administrative support, and healthcare, where women make up the majority of employees.

Chapin is hopeful that the \$175 million the state set aside in Governor Cuomo's Workforce Development Initiative in 2019 will start to flow soon to help address some of the challenges the county is facing. The funding was allocated for strategic regional efforts to meet short-term workforce needs, improve talent pipelines, enhance the flexibility and adaptability of local

Below: Air traffic slowdowns during the pandemic allowed an accelerated schedule for resurfacing work on runways at the Westchester County Airport.



workforce entities, expand apprenticeships, and address the long-term needs of growing industries. It can also be used to improve the economic security of women, youth, and other groups facing barriers to career advancement. “There is still about \$150 million left to be allocated,” Chapin says. “They haven’t been allocating a lot of funds since the pandemic hit. We’re hoping that changes.”

The WCA, in the interim, has also won some grants, such as two received last year from Entergy. One was a \$12,500 grant to help 25 students at Westchester County Community College complete a respiratory care program. “A lot of students have already been placed,” notes Chapin. “If you place 25 students making \$40,000 a year, that has a huge economic impact.”

The Westchester Community Foundation (WCF), a philanthropic organization, funds another program at Westchester Community College to recruit and train students for an 11-week boot camp for healthcare occupations, through the Westchester Workforce Funders Collaborative, where several charitable funders have pooled their resources. The program offers participants a chance to do a four-week externship/job shadowing experience at a Montefiore hospital or healthcare facility, and a chance to interview with its employer partners Burke Rehabilitation Hospital, Montefiore Medical Center, and Wartburg, a senior-living facility. Another nonprofit WCF funds through the collaborative is Westhab, a housing and social services organization.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

But there remain some obstacles to programs like these, such as access to transportation and affordable, high-quality childcare. Both the Westchester Community College program and Westhab have case management services to help problem-solve on these fronts, notes Tara Seeley, senior program officer at the WCF. “The programs had to demonstrate employer partnerships and their plans to address this,” says Seeley.

The high cost of housing is another issue that affects the local talent pool. The WCA has recommended in its 2020 Policy Playbook that the county work to ensure adequate housing for all workers. The Policy Playbook points to the Westchester County Housing Needs Assessment study, which determined that the county needs 11,000 new affordable housing units to accommodate all Westchester households, as well as people seeking homes in the county who cannot afford



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market-rate housing. As noted in the report, “Local businesses that require skilled workers and a stable workforce suffer when workers cannot afford to live where they work. A community may experience a depleted hiring pool if housing prices are too high, starving local businesses of workers or forcing these businesses to pay higher salaries to subsidize commuting costs. Communities also suffer when workers who serve the public interest, such as teachers, police, fire personnel and local government workers, look elsewhere for affordable housing and employment.”

As Michael Romita, president and CEO of the WCA puts it, “We want to create a system that works for everybody. That’s not only morally just. It’s good for business.”

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