Murphy Brothers Contracting is always on the hunt for enthusiastic young people who want to pursue a career in the construction industry. "We need people who can think on their feet," says Michael Murphy, who oversees business development for the Mamaroneck-based homebuilder.

But it’s not always easy to find individuals with the right skills to work on a job site. To that end, Murphy Brothers partners with organizations such as the Guidance Center of Westchester, a nonprofit that provides support to people facing poverty, homelessness, and other challenges. The Guidance Center, located in Mount Vernon, provides certification for people who want to pursue a construction or other trades career through its FutureWorks program.

Murphy Brothers is one of many local construction firms contending with a shortage of local talent. One reason is young people don’t realize how many potential career opportunities are in the construction industry, he says. "They could work in high-rise buildings, run their own remodeling business, have a painting business, or be a subcontractor and do sheetrocking," Murphy says.

Rapid development in the county’s major cities is exacerbating the challenge of filling jobs, says Tara Seeley, senior program officer at the Westchester Community Foundation (WCF). "If you took a tour, you would be astonished at the level of construction, especially multi-family housing," she says. "This ramp-up has converged with fewer people going into training, and there is a bottleneck for employers."

The New York State Department of Labor projects that jobs for construction trades workers will grow by 12.7% from 2016 to 2026. The construction industry jobs seeing the most growth are security and fire alarm system installers, with 23.6% growth projected in the state from 2016 to 2026; plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters (20.5% growth) and helpers in the construction trades (16.1% growth).

All of these careers pay middle-class wages. The mean annual wage for security and fire alarm system installers in the U.S. is $50,210, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. For plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters, the median pay is $55,160. Helpers in the construction trades earn median pay of $36,000 per year.

TRAINING THE TALENT EMPLOYERS NEED

To address the shortage, some organizations have invested in workforce development. The WCF, for example, has provided support to Westhab, a comprehensive community development organization based in Yonkers that aims to break the cycle of poverty, with other partners in...
the Westchester Workforce Funders Collaborative, which the WCF created and leads. Westhab enrolled 90 people in a program that kicked off in July 2020, to train for construction careers; 70 have already completed it. Once participants get jobs, they have the opportunity to earn industry certifications and get advanced training.

One key part of Westhab’s construction program is the participation of employers who need talent. Its two initial partners were L&M Development Partners, a real estate development firm that has its main office in Larchmont, and Queen City Recycling & FDL Management, a construction company based in New Rochelle. Now that the program is a year old, the list of employers has expanded to include others, such as LRC, a construction company in White Plains. These employers have helped to keep trainers informed about what preparation they need applicants to receive, so the training is relevant.

The WCF has found its dollars go further in job training programs that partner with employers looking for talent. “That’s a role philanthropy can play,” says Laura Rossi, the WCF’s executive director. “These are best practices at a national level.”

In the meantime, in Armonk, the Building and Realty Institute (BRI), a trade association that includes Westchester and Hudson Valley businesses in fields such as home building, remodeling, and mixed-use development, has been doing matchmaking between companies that need to fill jobs and organizations that are developing a pipeline of talent.

“A lot of our approach has been educational for our members,” says Tim Foley, executive director of the BRI. “We are figuring out where there are opportunities for them to sponsor and partner with organizations that are trying to solve the pretty severe labor shortage we’ve been seeing in the construction industry since at least the Great Recession.”

Its members have partnered with the Guidance Center of Westchester and Soulful Synergy, a consulting firm with a focus on community and workforce development, in the area of clean energy. “Our members are finding that the folks coming through are so good, they end up offering full-time jobs,” says Foley. Hiring local residents helps members pursue government grants that require that a percentage of hires come from the local community, he says. “The more we tap into these existing programs, the better off our members will be,” says Foley.

‘THIS IS A GREAT PATHWAY FOR PEOPLE’

Another organization that is active in workforce development is the Construction Industry Council (CIC) of Westchester and Hudson Valley, Inc., a regional association that represents major heavy construction general contractors, subcontractors, suppliers, and service professionals in the seven-county region of the lower Hudson Valley. The group works closely with the Building Contractors Association of Westchester & the Mid-Hudson Region, Inc., and the more than 30 labor unions in the Building & Construction Trades Councils in the area.

With many skilled tradespeople close to retirement age, the CIC devotes a lot of time and attention to attracting young people to the field. “This is a great pathway for people,” says CIC Executive Director John Cooney, Jr.

The CIC attracts young people to the industry in two ways: scholarships to encourage high school graduates to pursue a STEM education, and outreach around pre-apprenticeship trade programs and other opportunities where they can learn to be carpenters, electricians, plumbers, truck drivers, or tradespeople in other fields. “There’s been such a push on college careers that the trades have been forgotten,” says Cooney.

Since 2009, the group’s Louis G. Nappi Construction Labor-Management Scholarship Fund for undergraduate studies in STEM subjects has provided scholarships to attract new talent to the industry. The fund was established by Louis G. Nappi, a former chairman emeritus of the CIC who passed away in 2014. “He believed the U.S. was falling behind and we needed to encourage people in STEM studies,” says Cooney. “The idea was hopefully we would retain many of them in our industry.”

In 2020, the CIC awarded 17 scholarships through the program. Through another program, the Building Contractors Association Construction Advancement Institute Scholarship, the association awarded another 10 scholarships. Since it was founded, the CIC has contributed more than $1 million in scholarships to the two programs, with $135,000 last year alone, says Cooney.

The CIC is also involved in the annual Hudson Valley Construction Career Day, where students from across the Hudson Valley can learn from trade-industry experts about diverse careers in the construction and building trades as well as the advantages of apprenticeship training.

As the field becomes more tech-driven, it will be important to attract engineers and others with the skills to help the industry advance, according to Cooney. Community colleges have started to adapt their programs to take this into account, he says. “There are still shovels, rakes, and nails in our business, but technology is modernizing it and making it more efficient,” says Cooney.

“[People] could work in high-rise buildings, run their own remodeling business, have a painting business, or be a subcontractor and do sheetrocking.”

—Michael Murphy

Director of New Project Development, Murphy Brothers Contracting

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