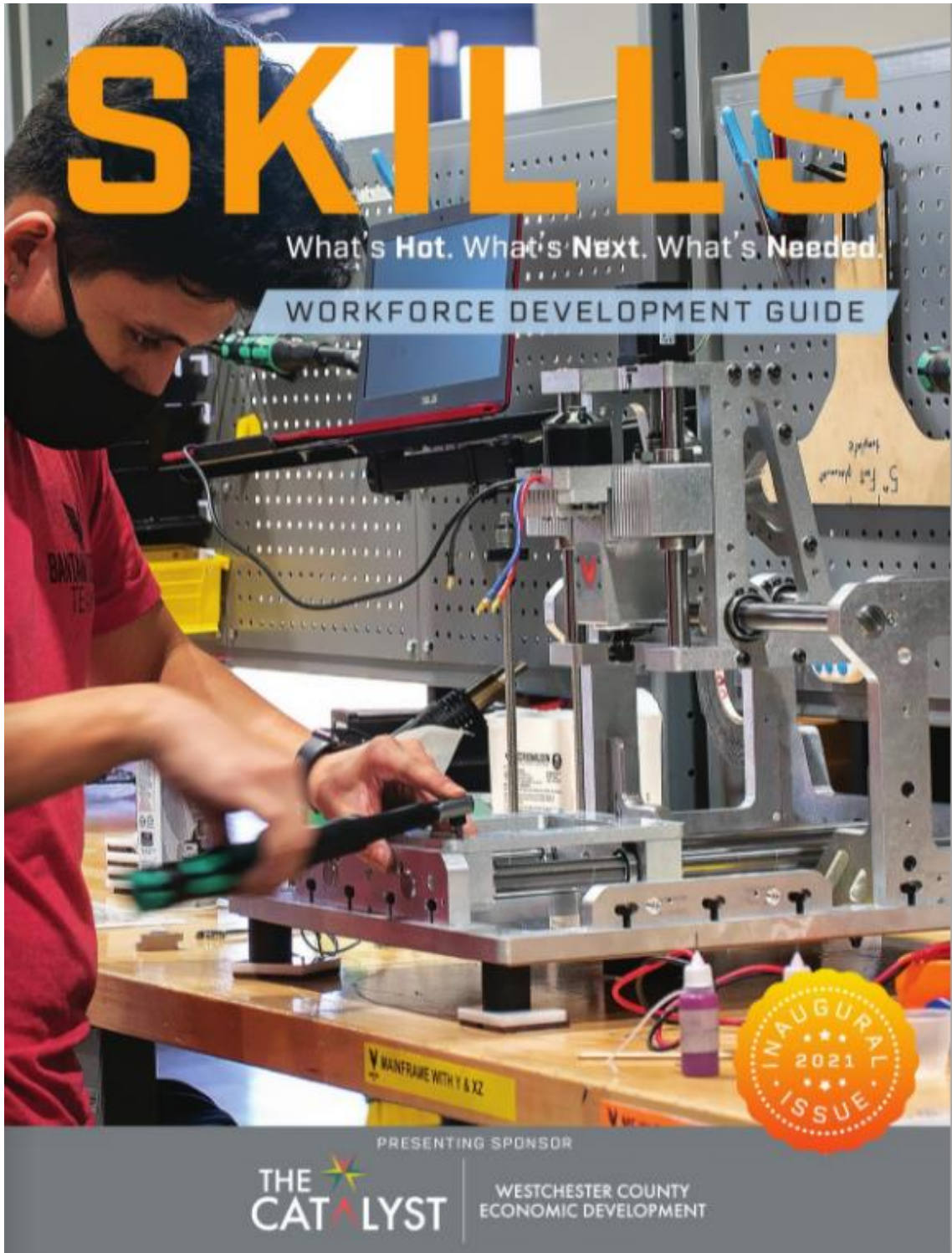




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» For Employers: The New Landscape

DEVELOPING THE POST-COVID WORKFORCE

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

BY ELAINE POFELOT



Opposite page: Construction work on the Newburgh Deacon 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.



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In recent months, the county has been ushering in a sector-based strategy for workforce development, emphasizing advanced manufacturing, biosciences, financial technology, and clean energy, says Bridget Gibbons, director of economic development for the county. This approach was outlined in the Westchester County Economic Development Strategy, Recovery and Implementation Plan, released by Westchester County Executive George Latimer last summer. For each one, a task force made up of employers, civic organizations, and higher-education institutions will provide guidance. Each sector will also have a “desk” at the county that employers can call for information on relocating to Westchester or connecting with resources in the sector. The task forces will focus on workforce needs in each of these sectors, says Gibbons. “The central question we are asking is: ‘How do we get a pipeline of talent going to the businesses of Westchester County?’” says Gibbons. “One of our top priorities is to get them talent so they can grow.”

The county has also been holding quarterly events on WebEx to feature businesses that moved to the county. In interviewing the business owners, the presentations have showcased the quality of the local workforce, which includes many college graduates. “Westchester is an ideal location for businesses that need an educated workforce,” says Gibbons.

But there have been many shifts in what skills employers need since the pandemic. To help displaced workers, the county introduced Launch 1000, a program to help workers turn a skill or hobby into an income stream, and began taking applications in November.

The county is also looking into fostering more apprenticeships, with an eye on positioning those who accept these positions for full-time jobs. “I think apprenticeships and internships will be part of the solution,” says Gibbons.

EMBRACING APPRENTICESHIPS

In the current environment, more people are looking at skilled trades as potential careers, says Harold King, president of the Council of Industry, an association based in Newburgh. “We’re getting back to where we were in the 1950s, respecting these trades and the apprenticeships that go with them,” says King. The Council is encouraging its members to consider offering apprenticeships to gain a competitive edge in recruiting.

To introduce young people to jobs that they may not have considered, the Workforce Development Institute, a statewide nonprofit in Albany, started piloting a career exploration program focused on general work readiness with the City of White Plains Youth Bureau in January. Focused on at-risk young people ages 18 to 24, it offers four to six weeks of occupational and life-skills training in paid internships at local businesses, including those in the trades. “If it works, we might try it elsewhere in the state,” says Dan Cullen, director of field services for the institute.

Programs like this are important for addressing the “silver tsunami,” says Cullen. “A lot of people are leaving the skilled trades. There are not a lot of people ready to fill that vacuum.”

There are also efforts afoot in the county to encourage young people to consider entering fields such as healthcare, where local employers posted more than 500 ads looking for help in the last 60 days, says Cullen. “We have had a spike recently,” he notes. Once someone gets a credential to be a certified nursing assistant, they could conceivably be encouraged to move on to become a nurse, a higher-paid position, through an organized program, he points out. “We’d love to see where we could help pilot it,” he says.

SYNCING TRAINING WITH EMPLOYERS’ NEEDS

Many business leaders in the county recognize that successfully matching employers in need of talent with workers who have the right qualifications will be essential to rebuilding the economy post-COVID. With some sectors, such as hospitality and restaurants, still hurting and a number of small businesses in the county now permanently closed, there has been substantial displacement due to the pandemic. The county still had 22,000 individuals collecting unemployment



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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.





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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 Weillburg, 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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—Michael Romita, President and CEO, Westchester County Association



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For Job Seekers: Healthcare Outlook

A BURGEONING FIELD BEYOND SCRUBS AND WHITE COATS

BY STACEY PFEFFER

Now more than ever, COVID has put a spotlight on the need for affordable and accessible healthcare for all Westchester residents. And the good news for job seekers hoping to join the healthcare industry is that people are choosing to obtain healthcare closer to home.

Nationally, healthcare occupations are projected to add more jobs than any other occupational groups, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Regionally, the healthcare sector contributes more than \$18 billion in economic impact and employs well over 70,000 people, notes the Westchester County Association, a leading economic development and business advocacy organization in the region. With an increased demand for world-class healthcare locally, the current outlook for the industry in the county is certainly optimistic. Jobs can be found in various settings from hospitals, labs, rehabilitation and long-term care facilities to physicians' offices and at-home care. If you are considering a healthcare job but aren't sure if medical/nursing school is for you, read on, as there are a plethora of jobs available and some require only short certification courses or community college credits.

Administrative positions, for example, run the gamut. These jobs have titles such as medical receptionist, patient registration representative, billing representative, or surgery scheduler.

Westmed Medical Group, a multispecialty medical practice with 13 offices in Westchester County and nearby Fairfield County, believes these positions are essential to the daily operations of their organization and cannot be done remotely despite the increasing trend of telemedicine. "Most of our non-clinical positions do not require certain licensure or certification, or a college degree. For us, the candidates that will be most successful in these positions have other essential skills, such as demonstrated exceptional customer service and strong technological skills. These roles are often the first point of contact for patients during their visit and play a critical role in the overall patient experience," explains Lindsey Garito, director of human capital management and total awards in HR operations at Westmed.

While the positions yield a wide range of candidates, the most likely ones to secure an interview have certain key words and skills on their resumes. "Candidates should

highlight the full extent of their work experience and skills and demonstrate how their skills meet the essential qualifications of the position," says Garito. Average salaries for these types of positions tend to be in the lower \$30,000 range, but experienced workers can expect to make above \$40,000.

MORE THAN JUST DOCTORS AND NURSES

There is a perception that hospitals employ only doctors, nurses, and other clinicians, "but hospitals are major employers in our region. Hospitals have so many other jobs, like transportation, food services, and security," notes Jason Chapin, director of workforce development at the Westchester County Association.

In an essential industry such as healthcare, personnel is always needed. Diane Woolley, the chief human resources officer at White Plains Hospital (WPH), notes that recruiting for some positions is always challenging, but the pandemic actually resulted in a hiring surge at their hospital. Many hospitality and restaurant workers were laid off, and the hospital needed workers in food and environmental services that had transferrable skills. "Restaurant pay during the pandemic was variable, and our positions offer regular pay plus benefits, so we hired a lot of people per diem from that industry and converted them to long-term employees," says Woolley.

Finding qualified security officers also remained a challenge during COVID, as some security workers preferred to work in a retail setting because of a perceived risk at the hospital. "You are actually more protected if you work in a hospital with PPE, and we follow the strictest CDC protocols," Woolley says.

While other industries in the region reported job losses, Woolley notes that "there is no reduction in work at a hospital. We are filled to the brim every day." Candidates who want to be fully and gainfully employed with a benefits package, time off, and the ability to make overtime, have ample opportunity at WPH, Woolley says, especially since the facility has expanded in recent years. Perhaps that is the reason the hospital has a 9% job-turnover rate, which is much lower than the industry standard of 14-17%.

Salaries for these auxiliary positions run the gamut. Averages for security officers are \$38,000, housekeeping supervisors can expect \$57,000, and food preparation

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workers receive a salary in the lower \$30,000 range. The positions are commensurate with experience, but many hospitals look at market data and pay competitively.

'A GROWTH SECTOR IN THE COUNTY'

City dwellers choosing to settle in Westchester due to COVID, plus an expanding aging population, has contributed to exponential growth in a variety of clinical positions in the hospital or private-practice setting. These positions have titles such as medical assistant, phlebotomist, patient care technician, inhalation therapist, and x-ray technician. Some of these jobs do not require an advanced degree, while others require special certifications that usually can be completed with a two- to six-month course of study.

"The perception is that the job market has crashed, but I'm on LinkedIn and Indeed all the time. Using Mount Kisco as a central point to search for jobs within a 25-mile radius, there are roughly 18,000 jobs available, with the vast majority in healthcare with multiple openings in positions such as medical assistant. As many Baby Boomers retire

"Hospitals in particular offer great training and great career pathways."

— Jason Chapin
 Director of Workforce Development, Westchester County Association

and more people are vaccinated, the health industry is a growth sector in the county," notes Chapin. "Hospitals in particular offer great training and great career pathways." Entry-level positions for medical and nursing assistants average \$30,000, while more specialized positions such as phlebotomists earn \$33,000 at the entry level and around \$50,000 with greater experience.

Then there's the wide field of healthcare IT, if you think those jobs are all about coding and hacker

prevention, it might be time to toss those assumptions aside. This is an ever-evolving area, with emerging technologies changing the healthcare landscape continuously. The rise of telemedicine has increased the need for talented IT professionals. The use of digital tools advanced more over the first six months of the pandemic than in the previous decade, according to the Healthcare Association of New York State. To create these tools and customizable apps, IT positions are in demand.

"A lot of our positions are contract to hire. A department may need to transition to a system, so we'll hire a project-based contractor, and then, if we like their abilities, we will convert them to full-time employment," says Woolley. Positions abound, including IT security, systems and network analysts, and desktop/PC support in various settings. Expect entry-level salaries around \$37,000, with experienced IT professionals making upwards of \$87,000.

The one thing in common is that those in this industry say their jobs are meaningful, and they are proud of the role they play in improving patients' lives.

