

Several nonprofits supported by The Heinz Endowments and other funders have been laboring for years to provide training and growth opportunities for under- and unemployed workers in the Pittsburgh region. In this post-pandemic era, employers' appreciation for these organizations has grown as has the task before them. By Jeffery Fraser

GOOD WORK

It's been called the "Great Resignation," a phenomenon that saddled the U.S. economy with a shrunken workforce in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak and left businesses desperate for workers long after early pandemic closings and workplace restrictions were lifted.

Southwestern Pennsylvania has not been immune. The region's workforce in April was still nearly 4 percent smaller than it was before COVID arrived in March 2020.

But the region's workforce woes predate the pandemic. The labor force in the seven-county Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area was nearly 10,000 workers smaller in February 2020 than it was in February 1990, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data. Such struggles have long inspired efforts to attract and retain working-aged people. The most extraordinarily desperate was Border Guard Bob, the fictional star of an aborted Pittsburgh Regional Alliance 1999 advertising campaign whose idea of retaining young adults who couldn't be persuaded to stay was to attach a bungee cord to the back bumper of their cars and proclaim, "They'll be back."

“The solutions often are about keeping more college graduates or how do we import talent from other places? There is almost never a real platform for enlisting under- and unemployed people already living here,” said Rob Stephany, senior program director for Community & Economic Development at The Heinz Endowments.

Several nonprofits in the region are quietly doing just that. With the support of the Endowments and others, they’re demonstrating the promise of strategies that pair job training with services addressing the barriers that diminish their clients’ chances of landing jobs with career potential.

“Maybe that means only 400 new workers or so a year. Maybe that’s ‘small ball.’ But it’s 400 more than existed a decade ago,” Mr. Stephany said. “Can they scale up? Can they provide the muscle for a real domestic workforce solution? Can the workforce development field learn some lessons? Those are the questions.”

The pandemic has heightened the value of these organizations’ work. Demand for the untapped pool of workers they train has soared. Several

report that employers are more aware of and willing to help address the challenges their clients face. At the same time, some report that the hardships incoming students are dealing with are more severe than in years past.

Here is a glimpse of what five workforce development nonprofits supported by the Endowments are experiencing as they work to help unemployed or marginally employed men and women gain a foothold in the post-pandemic regional economy.

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COMMUNITY KITCHEN PITTSBURGH



COVID-19 dealt a staggering blow to the food and service industries when businesses, schools, restaurants and other places of public gathering were closed to blunt the spread of the virus in the spring of 2020. Community Kitchen Pittsburgh has been navigating the repercussions ever since.

The nonprofit in Pittsburgh's Hazelwood neighborhood provides culinary training to open careers in the industry for people with barriers to employment, including those recently incarcerated. The job got more difficult after COVID-19 arrived.

Early in the pandemic, the nonprofit created 40 jobs so it could prepare 6,000 meals a day for needy families — three times its typical workload. But the classrooms, catering service and café critical to its students' training and experience were shut down with the rest of the industry.

When COVID-19 restrictions lifted, the food industry had changed. Workers were hard to find.

"One of our employer partners said it was like 2,000 people were sucked up by aliens," said Jennifer Flanagan, founder and executive director of Community Kitchen Pittsburgh. Hiring requirements were relaxed. More people with little or no training were being hired.

"What that has meant for us is that we are seeing people with similar barriers as in the past, but their needs are much greater," Ms. Flanagan said. "Before, someone might have unstable housing. Now they are homeless. They might have a special needs child at home. Now they can't get anyone to watch that child. Typically, we'd see people in addiction recovery. Now we're seeing people who are right on the line of being sober. They haven't been clean that long."

The nonprofit responded by doubling to four the number of staff who help students resolve such issues. It also began paying students after feedback warned that many couldn't afford to invest in unpaid education when jobs were plentiful. That required the nonprofit to limit enrollment. Now, for example, it expects to graduate 50 to 60 students a year from its culinary arts program. "Before, it was probably double that," Ms. Flanagan said.

But working conditions have steadily improved. Community Kitchen places 93 percent of its graduates in jobs within the industry. The average wage graduates can expect after six months has risen from less than \$14 an hour pre-COVID to more than \$16 an hour.

And, employers are more amenable to offering employees benefits, career paths that didn't previously exist, and more flexible scheduling, and to hiring former inmates, Ms. Flanagan said. "I want to see the industry come back, but in a way that feels like this is a legitimate career for people."

Ben Buchanan, far left, a butchery instructor and founder and CEO of Unified Fields, shows Community Kitchen Pittsburgh students how to break down different meats into cuts that will be sold retail while the leftovers will be made into patties and sausages. Unified Fields is a Pittsburgh-based collective of artisan butchers that offers training, consulting, mobile slaughter and meat processing. Community Kitchen Pittsburgh recently launched a butchery program to train the next generation of meat cutters. All students take a 16-hour butchery course to learn about the different equipment used — from knives to bandsaws — and the different cuts of meat.



TRADE INSTITUTE OF PITTSBURGH

Ten years ago, the Trade Institute of Pittsburgh began teaching masonry and carpentry skills to young men whose time behind bars kept them from finding meaningful work even after putting their troubled pasts behind them. Today, demand for the skilled workers it graduates is greater than what the nonprofit can supply, despite having achieved record-setting job placement rates.

“People who show up, show up on time and are teachable are in high demand right now,” said Donta Green, executive director of the Trade Institute of Pittsburgh. “I’m not sure why that’s happening, but we have more jobs available than we have students.”

The nonprofit, whose classrooms are in Pittsburgh’s Homewood neighborhood, has increased the number of students it can train in its 10-week courses from a pre-pandemic high of 18 to 34. Still, the nonprofit has a steady waiting list of 20 to 35 students wanting to enroll.

Last year, 75 of the 77 people who graduated from the nonprofit’s training program were placed in jobs. “That’s the highest we’ve done in the organization’s history,” Mr. Green said.

Graduates are also benefiting from rising wages. The average starting wage of a Trade Institute graduate hit \$19.15 an hour last year, a nearly 8 percent increase from the pay the year before.

In addition, the Trade Institute has seen a shift in the characteristics of students who apply. Since 2020, the share of students with a criminal background has fallen from 85 percent to 65 percent, Mr. Green said.

“Our services are for anyone with a barrier to employment, whether it’s a criminal background, education, transportation, lack of a driver’s license or something else,” he explained. “The numbers of people coming out of high school and of people looking for a career change have increased.”

The nonprofit offers services to help students succeed in addition to job training, including a life coach, case management, drug and alcohol counseling, and classes in anger management and math. That aspect led 47-year-old David Pharr on a soul search when he enrolled in the Trade Institute after serving seven months in federal prison for mail fraud.

“I’d never dealt internally with what my absence would do to my household, my two sons,” said Mr. Pharr, who graduated last year from the carpentry program and rose to foreman at a construction company after less than a year on the job. “That piece about introspection, working on who you are as a person to your family and community is something profound. It changed my life forever. I think this is exactly what the inner cities need to do to instill hope so people stop killing one another.”

The approach and the relationships the Trade Institute has built with employers and trade unions are the chief reasons placing students in jobs with career potential has become an easier sell, Mr. Green said.

“Employers understand the work, resources and time that is put into each student. I think they value that. They’d rather come to us than hire someone off the street because we can tell them a lot about our students, and getting through our program isn’t easy. It’s as if employers know our students, are battle-tested when they come from our program.”

Masonry skills, such as those shown at left, are taught as part of the Trade Institute of Pittsburgh’s 10-week intensive apprentice in training program, which is designed to prepare students for employment that provides a livable wage. Carpentry classes also are available along with support services and programming that includes a life coach, case management, drug and alcohol counseling, and classes in anger management and math.

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Monica Mattis enrolled in the Bidwell Training Center with a resume listing the more than one dozen jobs she's held since joining the workforce to help her widowed mother support a household of five children. It was her recent experience working sales-related jobs at several fragile technology companies that brought her to Bidwell's doorstep, she said.

"I found myself being laid off, whether it was workforce downsizing or company restructuring. I just got tired of that pattern," said Ms. Mattis, 55, of McKeesport, a city about 15 miles southeast of Pittsburgh. "A friend of mine said, 'Do you think this is God's way of telling you to stop what you're doing and look for something else.'"

Ms. Mattis graduated from Bidwell's medical coding and billing program in May, the first step toward a new career in health care.

Enrollment has increased 58 percent to 165 students since the pre-COVID 2018-19 school year at the Bidwell Training Center, a 55-year-old nonprofit in Pittsburgh's Manchester neighborhood that prepares students for jobs in the technology, food service, horticulture and health care fields. Courses in the culinary arts are filled, as are those in horticulture, a program that's so popular that students might spend a full year waiting to get in.

Other courses include training as chemical lab technicians, medical assistants and pharmacy technicians with curricula informed by conversations with regional employers about the skills, values and attitudes they value.

Some programs are being revised to reflect changes in the post-COVID workplace environment.

"Some jobs have transitioned to fully remote positions," said Bidwell Training Center Executive Director Kimberly Rassau. "We've seen that in medical billing and coding. That requires students to have a higher level of technical proficiency so they can work on computers at home."

Training is held five days a week for seven to 12 months, depending on the program. Students are awarded a one-time grant to cover training costs as long as they meet attendance and academic requirements.

Prospects of landing a job are good for those who graduate. The nonprofit's leanest year was 2021, when it placed 75 percent of its graduates in jobs. Last year, Bidwell placed 78 percent of its graduates in jobs. And Ms. Rassau expects the number to rise.

"I've seen an increase in outreach from our employer partners wanting to discuss how we can partner to develop programs," she said. "To me, that's a litmus test for whether they're seeking assistance in developing their talent pool."

"Not enough of these organizations exist," said Stanley Thompson, The Heinz Endowments' former senior program director of education who retired in March.

The Endowments awarded Bidwell a \$1 million grant in 2022 to build out and renovate its kitchen, allowing for more students to enroll in culinary arts training.

Dr. Thompson noted that after seeing what the pandemic has done, more thought will need to go into how to "take advantage of institutions that have a track record of providing for the workforce—that are reaching populations that have traditionally been underserved when it comes to certain career pathways."

Horticulture technology is one of the Bidwell Training Center's most popular programs. Kristina Rettger, 22, right, and Adrian May, 19, far right, are pruning potted flowers in preparation for their campus planting.



With crews drawn from the ranks of the chronically unemployed, Landforce has cut trails in parks, turned vacant lots that blighted neighborhoods into playgrounds, and created rain gardens to control stormwater for clients ranging from the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and the Allegheny Land Trust to the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh over its eight-year history.

Three years after COVID-19 arrived in the region, demand for the nonprofit's work remains strong with contracts that total about \$230,000 a year. But recruiting crews is another story.

"Since COVID, it's harder for us to recruit the same numbers we recruited beforehand," said Landforce Executive Director Ilyssa Manspeizer. "People need jobs when they need jobs. They're not able to wait a few months for our training to start."

Landforce recruits up to 25 people a year. Not all complete training, which until recently was held once early in the year to prepare them for the season, which runs from May to November. The nonprofit reports that some 65 percent of recruits over the years have had a criminal record, half have had a mental health diagnosis, 31 percent came with a history of addiction and 27 percent were homeless.

The nonprofit trains them in skills necessary to do paid work for Landforce clients, assists them with overcoming employment barriers they've encountered, and helps them find jobs in fields such as tree care and public works.

"We want to get everyone trained and out working, give them as long of a runway as we can to experience work and dig deeply into figuring out who they are," Ms. Manspeizer said. "The longer the runway we have with them, the more successful they can be."

Recruiting difficulties and higher-than-usual attrition rates led the nonprofit to add a second session in order to fill out its crews. Ms. Manspeizer added that ways to accommodate workers with greater needs are also being explored.

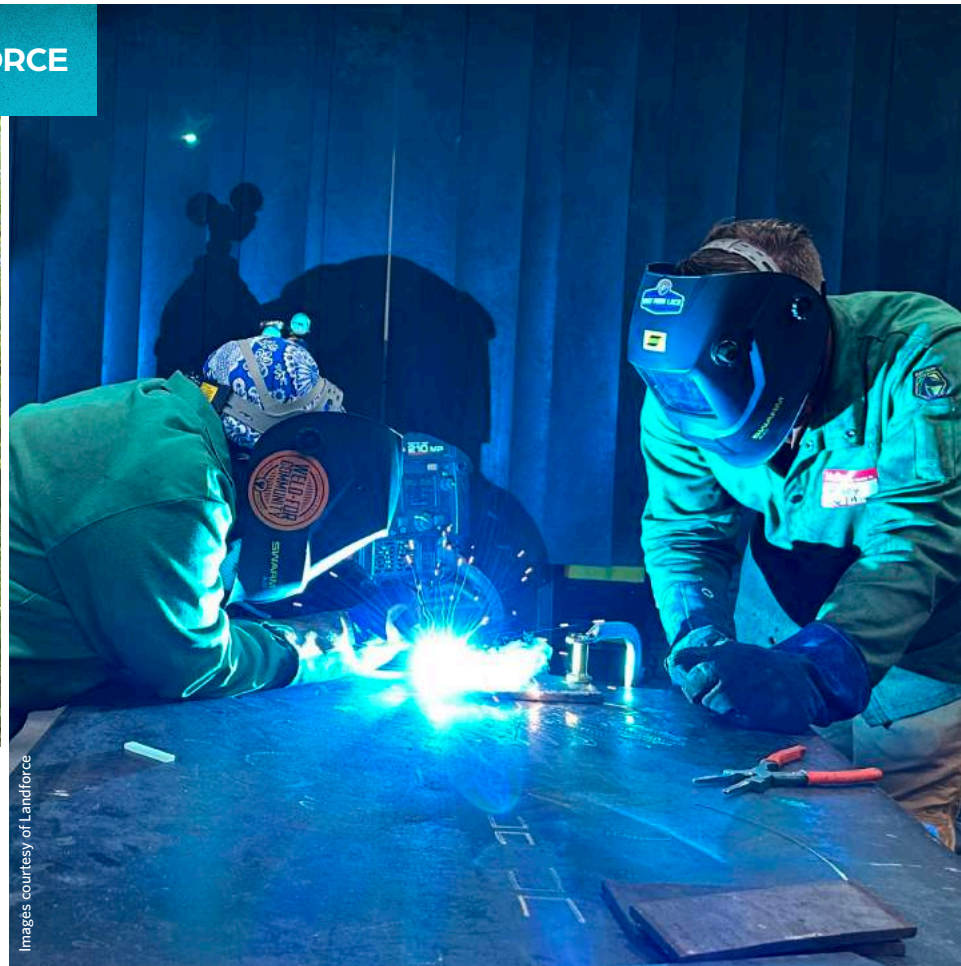
"Our crews work very hard in the face of tremendous odds against their success," she said. "It's always been the case that a lot in their lives is stacked against them. Now it seems the challenges are a little deeper and wider."

The good news is that the nonprofit's high job placement rates have held. Last year, 10 of the 11 workers who completed the season walked into jobs afterward.

"There are a lot of people who'd like to work and deserve to work," she said. "But strategies for encouraging and helping them succeed might have to be tweaked by those of us doing this work."



LANDFORCE



Images courtesy of Landforce

Landforce training can take participants outdoors and indoors, depending on the task at hand. Above, Landforce crew member Rakeem Collins is cutting timber that will be used for check steps at a nature preserve, which will help prevent erosion and reduce instability for hikers when the ground is muddy. Check steps are usually made of rock or timber and placed along a trail to divert water or serve as steps for hikers. At the Industrial Arts Workshop in Pittsburgh's Hazelwood neighborhood, student instructor assistant Riley Egger, far right, demonstrates welding techniques with Jasimine Cooper, Landforce's director of workforce development, as part of a welding training exercise for Landforce students during a visit to the IAW.



ENERGY INNOVATION CENTER INSTITUTE

Guiding people who've struggled to find a place in the region's workforce toward stable career paths is a key part of the Energy Innovation Center Institute's mission. The nonprofit has been busy of late.

As with most schools, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted much of the nonprofit's training program, which prepares students for working in fields ranging from energy to health care. It proved to be only a temporary distraction.

"After about a year, all of the training was back," said Robert Meeder, founding president of the Pittsburgh Gateways Corp. and the Energy Innovation Center. "Now, the companies we serve are more desperate for workers than they've ever been."

EICI is the training arm of the Energy Innovation Center, which opened in 2016 in the renovated home of the former Connelley Trade School in Pittsburgh's Hill District as a place to foster technological innovation, incubate companies, and align workforce development and education in the region. EICI works with company partners to offer under-represented populations job training tailored to workforce trends. Programs include training for jobs as environmental service techs and nursing assistants in the health care fields, bank tellers and other positions.

Demand for workers in certain fields skyrocketed during the pandemic.

"The first thing to emerge was UPMC needed case workers," Mr. Meeder said about the health care network. "They had a more intense need to manage caseloads and patient logistics." And demand for hospital environmental service techs to control infections and mold was greater than the 120 students that EICI graduates with those skills in a year, he said.

The nonprofit also tries to anticipate future labor demands, following the development of new technologies and working with energy companies and government partners to design entry-level training to equip students with the skills that working with those technologies will require.

In its first six years, EICI has trained more than 3,100 people, 89 percent of whom were people of color, and placed 86 percent of the nearly 2,600 students who graduated from its programs in jobs.

"We deploy the model of concentrated, corporate-led training," Mr. Meeder said. "And it has been working for us." **h**

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