

Ten Years Later: Job development efforts paying off for greater Cincinnati

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• By: Tom McKee

CINCINNATI - The average work day for De'Angela Jackson finds her covered head-to-toe in a white protective suit, blue booties on her shoes, gloves on each hand and a respirator over her mouth and nose.

On this Thursday she's in the second floor bedroom of a Norwood home adding insulation to help lower the family's utility bills.

Jackson works quickly and effortlessly moving the nozzle of a hose into a series of pre-drilled holes in the wall. Each cavity between the inside and outside walls is filled with cellulose material.

The hose snakes its way out the bedroom window, onto a porch roof, down to the ground and into a truck parked in the driveway. There, other workers load insulation into a hopper, where a blower forces the material up to the second floor.

This mother of two young children is a crew leader for Cincinnati/Hamilton County Community Action Agency's weatherization program.

"I was the first female weatherization technician and now I'm the first female crew leader," she pointed out with obvious pride. "I've done that within two years time."

Jackson's accomplishment took a decade of personal determination and a community-wide initiative to improve the region's employment outlook.

She was born and raised in Cincinnati, but moved to Columbus in 2001 because she couldn't find a steady job. "Up there, I found a couple of nice jobs," she said. "It was a different atmosphere."

By 2009 Jackson had two children and chose to move back to the Queen City to be closer to her family. However, she found the economic climate tougher than when she left. "I came back without a job. I came back without a home. All I had was me and my children," she said. "Yet, I had a mindset that I was going to make it better than I had seen in my past."

She found her way to the Community Action Agency and enrolled in the "Blueprint For Success" program that prepares people to work in construction.

That connection changed her life.

"Beginning working here was like opening a totally different story," Jackson said. "I found adequate housing for me and my children." advertisement

That's one of many success stories in Greater Cincinnati's efforts to create jobs and economic opportunity and provide potential employees with the skills employers need. It has not been an easy task.

Greater Cincinnati and the rest of the United States changed a great deal from 2000 to 2010 due to two recessions, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, two wars and an increase in the poverty rate.

The city's unemployment level was 5.3 percent in 2000 and nearly doubled to 10.0 percent by the end of 2010, according to the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

UNEMPLOYMENT RATES 2000 - 20210

(Source: Ohio Labor Market Information)

CINCINNATI HAMILTON COUNTY

2000	-5.3%	3.7%
2001	-5.8%	4.0%
2002	-7.8%	5.4%
2003	-6.1%	5.4%
2004	-6.2%	5.5%
2005	-6.1%	5.5%

2006 - 5.5% 5.0%
2007 -5.6% 5.0%
2008 -6.1% 5.6%
2009 -9.2% 8.8%
2010 -10.0% 9.4%

At the same time, the number of families and individuals considered to be living in poverty rose, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The city's population for 2010 is estimated to be 297,000, but poverty statistics have not been released.

CINCINNATI POVERTY LEVELS

(Source: U.S. Census Bureau and American Community Survey)

2000 2009 CHANGE

Population 331,385 332,572 + 1,187

Families 18.2% 20.5% + 2.3%

Individuals 21.9% 25.3% + 3.4%

There were many efforts in place in 2000 to change those statistics, but there was little coordination, according to Ross Meyer of the Greater Cincinnati Workforce Network.

"We had many efforts going on – many good organizations doing good work – but it was very fragmented," he said. "It was difficult for people to find help."

Nancy Spivey, Chief Operating Officer of the Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce and Senior Vice-President of Workforce Talent Solutions, agreed with that assessment. "I would say it was kind of hit or miss," she said. "We'd hear from employers that they needed talent and we'd struggle to come up with a contact."

The unrest of 2001 changed that.

"I think it woke all of us up," Spivey said. "We learned the importance of making sure we're responsive, making sure that we recognize we are a region and competing with other regions across the United States."

Meyer called it a "galvanizing moment" for the community. "We certainly realized that we needed to do much more to connect people to employment, especially African-Americans and those with less education," he said. "We needed to work together to better figure out how we could respond."

The CAN (Cincinnati Action Now) Commission brought resources together in 2003 to start the process. Collaborative efforts created GO Cincinnati, Agenda 360, Vision 2015 and Better Together Cincinnati. Collectively, those organizations launched the Greater Cincinnati Workforce Network in 2008.

Led by the United Way of Greater Cincinnati, the Workforce Network coordinated partnerships between philanthropic funders, local and state governments, chambers

of commerce, educational institutions, service providers and workforce investment board throughout the region."

The Greater Cincinnati Workforce Network had three goals...

--Prepare at least 1,500 low-skilled adults for better jobs and long-term careers in priority industries

--Improve at least 30 employers' abilities to recruit, train, retain and advance employees to mid-level skilled jobs to fill critical occupational shortages in priority industries

--Create and sustain a durable coordinating mechanism to improve and align the policies, strategies and resources of the Tri-State region's workforce development system.

Reaching those goals involved aligning workforce resources and strategies, closing skill gaps, building the capacity of the regional workforce system and advancing policy changes.

Meyer said the network's focus was directed toward three primary industries...

--HEALTH CARE – the region's largest source of private sector employment and generator of an annual economic impact of \$14 billion. However, employers struggle to find qualified employees to fill skilled positions

--ADVANCED MANUFACTURING – high-tech manufacturing will be a dominant source of employment and a key economic driver of the region for years to come. A skilled workforce will be needed for sub-sectors such as aerospace, biotechnology, alternative energy and chemical manufacturing

--CONSTRUCTION – offers a significant source of employment, strong wages and advancement opportunities plus high projected future growth. Emerging

areas of green construction and energy efficiency retrofitting will require new training programs

"Together, they represent about one in three jobs in our community," he said. "All have good jobs that pay well and have advancement opportunities for those who have the right training, but all who have employers who tell us they're having trouble finding qualified people."

"We're working, to close that gap and connect people with those job opportunities and those industries," Meyer added. SuperJobs Centers were set up in Cincinnati's Over-The-Rhine and Bond Hill neighborhoods to provide centralized locations for job seekers.

The Health Careers Collaborative of Greater Cincinnati was created by Cincinnati Children's Hospital, the Health Alliance, Great Oaks Institute of Technology & Career Development and Cincinnati State Technical and Community College to provide workers for hospitals and long-term care facilities.

There are two levels of training...

--LEVEL ONE – focuses on the unemployed and those in greatest financial need to train as a State-Tested Nursing Assistant (STNA) or Health Unit Coordinator (HUC). Training is completed in nine to 12 weeks for positions with a starting wage of \$10-\$13 per hour.

--LEVEL TWO – provides career advancement opportunities for low-wage, entry-level incumbent health care workers at Cincinnati Children's and the Health Alliance in associate degree programs of nursing, surgical technology, Respiratory care or multi-competency health

"These are jobs in health care that are not being filled," said Program Coordinator Carol Sheil. "There is a scarcity of good health care workers and further education helps each individual to grow and be able to fill that void."

Training is done at the Collaborative's facility in Corryville. Student learning includes medical terminology, how to take blood pressure readings and how to work with doctors and patients.

When Nija Herbert of Mount Airy was employed in a customer service job, she dreamed of getting into health care. Now, she's training to become a Patient Care Assistant (PCA).

"It's going to give me experience that employers are looking for," she said. "Hopefully, I'll be able to find a job quicker." Herbert has long-term goals as well.

"In five or 10 years I hope to have my bachelor's degree in radiation therapy," she said. "I just wouldn't be able to get my foot in the door without continuing education."

Shancel McComb was working as a home health care assistant when she found out about the program.

Now, the Clifton mother of four children wants to work her way to becoming a nurse. She said she knows it will be tough, but said she has the support of her children. "They are a real big motivation for me," she said with determination. "I'm going to do it."

Christie Conner started college years ago, but put that on hold when she began a family. Now, she's back with a job at West Chester Medical Center, a spot in the Collaborative program and a determination to work in radiology or become a respiratory therapist.

"This is a stepping stone for me to get into the medical field," the Loveland resident said. "This is a great start and it's teaching me the basic skills that I need."

Sheil said she sees that attitude in students all the time.

"I see our programs as changing lives," Sheil said. "They change lives for the individual students and they change lives in the health care community. Patients are getting better care because

of students being better trained and filling the niche that's out there."

At Cincinnati Children's, Roddale Smith is already working in the Convention Services Department, while attending Collaborative classes. The Avondale resident worked at Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport for many years, but wanted to get into a field where he could help people.

"I lucked out and got a position here," Smith said. "Then, I was introduced to the collaborative and I seized the opportunity." Smith said he now has focus and direction for his future. "I want to be a pediatric psych nurse," he stated. "Never give up. Explore your options. Always consider school and higher education. Just never give up."

Likewise, Timeka Young has finished the first level with the Collaborative and is employed at Cincinnati Children's as a Health Unit Coordinator. She found out about the program through the SuperJobs Center after the recession cost her a job with Convergys and she was unemployed.

"I would submit numerous amounts of applications, but I would never hear responses from employers," she said. "I just felt like there was no hope."

Now, she wants to climb the educational and workforce ladder toward becoming a social worker. "Without the program I think I'd still be

unemployed and collecting unemployment," she said.

Bill Lecher, Senior Clinical Director for Cincinnati Children's, said over 3,000 people have been trained by the Collaborative in the past seven years.

"Of the 3,000 that have been trained, over 90- percent have been placed in jobs," he said. "Of those placed in jobs 90 percent of those have benefits." Lecher said the Collaborative plays an important role in the community.

"If the Health Careers Collaborative wasn't in Cincinnati or the Greater Cincinnati Workforce Network wasn't an organized enterprise within our community, people would still be left with trying to figure it out on their own," he said. "Some people would still be successful, but many would be lost. Many would have interruptions that are hard to get restarted again."

While the program has been success, Lecher said he feels the future is bright, but challenging.

"The bright part is our history and our track record," he said. "The challenging part is how do you really scale this up on a regional level within the city and the city's neighborhoods? How do we scale this up within the Greater Cincinnati region, whether it's across the river or in Butler or Warren Counties?"

That's a challenge facing the Urban League of Greater Cincinnati as well. Numerous programs have been established to help match potential employees with employers...

--SOAR (Solid Opportunities for Advancement and Retention)

--ACE (Accelerated Call Center Education Program)

--Construction Connection

--GED (with Cincinnati Public Schools)

--REXO (reentry of Ex Offenders)

--YOAP (Youthful Offender Apprentice Program)

--Suit Yourself Gentlemen's Clothing Closet

SOAR is the Urban League's flagship workforce development program with a history of placing the unemployed and the underemployed in jobs. It's modeled after the STRIVE program in New York City.

The most recent class had 21 members who spent three weeks in classes from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. each day to simulate an actual job. Program components included self-exploration, financial literacy, understanding employer expectations, job search strategies, interviewing techniques, networking, resume writing and basic computer literacy for on-line applications.

Among the graduates last Thursday was Deborah Beatty, 53, of Madisonville. She was picked for the program after her employer eliminated her job of 16 years.

"When I came here I had lost my mojo," she told fellow students during their graduation ceremony. "I'm hoping to get it back."

Beatty said she had a lot of job interviews after being laid off, but couldn't find a position. She added being told "no" so many times made her depressed.

"Coming back here just reminded me that you're going to get a 'no' some times, but you're going to get a 'yes' one day and that you have the skills that somebody wants to put to use."

Data from the SOAR program points shows a good track record of pointing graduates toward jobs. For example, there were 366 people enrolled in 2010 with 315 graduating and 211 finding employment.

That's just a sampling of what's been done and the success stories from those efforts. However, a great deal of work remains. Meyer said the Workforce Network has helped 2,700 people in the past two years get connected to jobs in the key areas of health care, construction and advanced manufacturing.

That's helped push the number of people gainfully employed in the region to 83 or 84 percent, counting those who are unemployed or unemployed and have stopped looking for work.

"The United Way has set a bold goal for our region of 90 percent by 2020," Meyer stated. Experts say that's a huge challenge requiring a monumental effort.

"We need to keep working with employers

in additional industries than the ones we're working on," he added. "We need to work closely to keep connecting employers with education and training providers plus community groups and we need to do a much better job coordinating our efforts."

Spivey said it's going to take a regional approach if that goal is going to be reached. Borders between states, counties and cities have to be blurred.

"We're kind of in the same regional boat together, rather than it being an Ohio, Kentucky or Indiana thing," she said. Education, she added, is the key.

"I think the number one concern is just making sure people are educated and that they recognize the importance of life-long learning. You don't just graduate and go to work and then retire," she said. "It's definitely a system of training and the importance of continuing your education."

Meyer said the region has a plentiful work force and a number of people out of work.

"It's a matter of matching their skills and really retooling them for jobs of the future. We have the assets at our disposal. It's really about connecting those individuals with training that leads to good jobs."

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