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Opening doors with Open DOHR

If recent population predictions hold true, the state may need more people like Michael Buccilli to brace for the storm.

Buccilli is the coordinator of the Open DOHR program run through the Women & Families Center in Meriden, and a fulcrum for opportunity.

This year, Buccilli's office has answered 325 inquiries for service, processed 101 workers into the program and enrolled 60 students into nurse's aide, customer service/call center, bank teller, medical receptionist, and introduction to building trades certificates.

Open DOHR, which stands for Developing Opportunities Human Resources, can only help so many people, because grant money is short and reaches only small pockets within the city's low-income population.

But recent studies show that in a few short years, this is where the bulk of Connecticut's workforce will come from.

A population analysis released last week by the Connecticut State Data Center at the University of Connecticut projects that in the next two decades the state's workforce will come from its urban centers, such as Hartford, New Haven and Bridgeport, which are experiencing the highest birth rates and are home to the state's youngest people.

Suburban cities such as Wallingford, Southington and Cheshire are expected to see an increase of less than 3,000 people from 2010 to 2030, but the population of Meriden is predicted to grow by 6,500, the report stated.

"A potentially major consequence of this demographic shift is that an increasing percentage of Connecticut's future workforce will come from areas where educational outcomes have lagged," center manager Orlando Rodriguez stated in the report. "If this holds true, we expect the state's median real personal income to fall. This outcome will be averted only if education of the state's poorest residents improves and the state attracts higher paying jobs."

The study's grim findings only reinforced what William Villano has known for several years. Villano, the executive director of Workforce Alliance, knows that education and training is no longer feel-good Social spending, but necessary to keep and attract business

in the state. Workforce Alliance operates four CT Works One Stop centers, where workers register for jobs and learn about available programs, such as Open DOHR.

"We need to do a better job of helping small businesses upgrade the skills of their workers," Villano said. "We don't put a lot of resources toward it. Jobs follow the workforce."

Villano's efforts have led to some creative and unusual solutions - namely, the marriage between businesses and social service programs, primarily in Middlesex and New Haven counties.

The Quinnipiac Chamber of Commerce has an extensive job mentoring and shadowing program involving its members and schools.

In greater Meriden, a coalition has formed to identify, educate and train students and workers at all levels.

At the lowest income levels, Open DOHR is an employment and training program that partners with Middlesex Community College, Meriden's Adult Continuing Education Program, the Meriden Business and Learning Center and CT Works One Stop centers. It serves family members with dependent children on welfare, and low-income youth ages 18-21.

"My philosophy and mission is to end cross-generational poverty," Buccilli said. "We do it through employment and training and look at it as stepping stones. We do the recruitment."

Certification programs are about six to eight weeks long, and participants receive coaching in resume writing and interviewing skills at the center. They are also checked on a year later. If a graduate nurse's aide is ready, he or she is referred to agencies for free help with financial aid and entry into a licensed practical nurse program. In three years, Open DOHR has helped two certified nurse's aides get into a licensed practical nurse program, with another currently enrolled in a registered nurse program.

Buccilli and his staff identify jobs that lift trainees out of minimum wage and onto a career path, he said. Health care, construction, medical office, and call center jobs are busy sectors right now and the programs are evaluated as needed. The nurses' aide certification costs \$700 per student, if paid for privately and certificate programs are not eligible for federal financial aid programs.

Business and labor advocates say improving job skills is also necessary at middle-income levels. Mid State Medical Center recently received a grant to offer a Franklin Covey effective skills training program to its employees. The program helps hourly employees set goals and priorities, manage their time, and realize their potential.

"We're piloting this program because we think it's going to provide the foundation for them to find other opportunities," said Clara Riley, MidState's director of education services. "We've had three classes so far, and now there is a waiting list."

Ken Cesca, Mid State's vice president of human resources, is a member of the Workforce Alliance board of directors. Through the board, Cesca can partner with other alliance members for available funds for computer training and other programs.

Richard Muniz, the director of continuing education at Middlesex Community College, has a large role in the coalition. Middlesex has received grant money to run the Precision Manufacturing Institute in Meriden that teaches computerized manufacturing processes to low-income adults.

In addition to partnering with Open DOHR on the nurse's aide program, Middlesex is also looking into certification programs in medical coding, another in-demand career.

But grant money remains in short supply and it's in the business community's best interests to continually train workers, said Sean Moore, president of the Greater Meriden Chamber of Commerce.

"It's all about lifelong learning," Moore said.

Northeast Utilities is offering a program to train linemen, and Atlas Container has a regular schedule for teaching different processes. It also offers workers GED classes, and has a program called Atlas Math, said human resources director Sherri Renner. Some of the programs are paid for through state labor grants.

"This improves the current workers and trains the ones who are new," Renner said. "It improves the product and empowers the employees."

Villano and Moore agreed the region is ahead when it comes to partnering for grant money and programs. And they are both quick to challenge those who criticize social spending on job training programs.

"When I graduated high school in New Haven, you could walk six blocks to what was Winchester and make a living," Villano said. "You can't do that today."

Moore tells a similar story.

"My grandfather was a box cutter who made a living," Moore said. "Compare the skills of my grandfather with someone who needs computer skills. They need significantly different and more skills in any job today. We're living in different standards. The options are, fund their skills so they can make a living from their skills, or fund them for the rest of their life."

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Caption:

Record-Journal file photo<p></p>Joe Kardos shows a class how to operate a CNC machine at Precision Machining Institute in Meriden in this photo from June 2005.

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