

Onondaga Citizens League

Study Session #2 October 13, 2016

“How CNY Works: Examining the Diversity of Our Economic Base – Past, Present and Future”

12:00-1:30 p.m. The Erie Canal Museum, Liverpool, NY

Panelists:

Juanita Perez Williams, Esq. Governor Andrew Cuomo’s Regional Representative for Central New York

Jeanette Zoeckler, MPH Project Manager, The Low-Wage Workers’ Health Project led by Upstate’s CNY Occupational Health Clinical Centers

John Bergemann, Director of Human Resources, Crouse Hospital

Christopher Miller, Ed.D., Chief Human Resources Officer, Syracuse City School District

Bridget Scholl, Associate Vice President, Human Resources, SUNY Onondaga Community College

Julian Galimo, Corporate and Social Outreach Specialist, VNA Healthcare

The second study session of “CNY Works” examined our region’s current economic base, and explored what trends can tell us about work in Central New York in the future.

Juanita Perez Williams began the session. She began with an overview of studying the economy.

Williams explained that when the economy is looked at as a whole, trying to determine if it is strong or weak – what is being examined is how many people are working, and who isn’t working. She discussed what jobs are available and who is working in those jobs. While there are job openings, oftentimes there are not enough skilled people to fill them.

Researchers also look at the number of hours people work and how that compares with productivity. What is the output?

Williams reports that, for the past 10 years, nation-wide, the hours employees work have stayed basically the same. But the output is almost 60 percent more. Williams said, “When people say, ‘I feel like I am doing the work of five people’ – there is truth to that.” People are doing more. There are fewer people in the office. This is being seen on a national level.

At this time in 2015, the unemployment rate in Central New York was approximately 5.2 percent, which translates into about 20,000 people unemployed.

In 2016, the unemployment rate is about 4.2 percent, which translates into about 16,000 people unemployed.

Currently, there are about 6,000 available jobs in this region. There is opportunity – but there seems to be a disconnect. Why are people saying, “I can’t find a job.”

Jeanette Zoeckler, MPH Project Manager, The Low-Wage Workers’ Health Project led by Upstate’s CNY Occupational Health Clinical Centers, spoke about her work studying low-wage workers.

Zoeckler spoke about the complexity of examining numbers for people who are unemployed. Some people may not be counted as “unemployed” because they have become discouraged and stopped looking for work. Sometimes, there are positive reasons – a person has gone back to school, or has decided to retire.

A meeting attendee asked a question: “Is it possible to break down the number of unemployed people by race, gender?” Zoeckler and Williams agreed that this was possible and something that could be collected for our study.

While it is possible to study only employment/unemployment, Zoeckler said her work entails looking closely at the low-wage worker today. She has interviewed 560 low-wage workers in the past three years. “The quality of jobs is something we are very concerned about,” she said.

Some questions Zoeckler brought up to consider:

What does it mean to be a low-wage earner in our society today? How exhausted are people who are working low-wage jobs? Do people have to work two jobs?

She pointed out the precariousness of jobs for low-wage earners. “There is a great deal of uncertainty,” she said. Low-wage earners who begin a new job may not expect to be in the same job in the next six months, or in two years.

This uncertainty is not the case for workers in mid-wage or high-wage jobs.

She referred to the MIT living wage calculator (a copy of which was made available to meeting attendees).

The living wage for workers in the Syracuse area is approximately \$13 per hour. A person making a living wage means they are able to get by without going on social services.

“A lot of these people are going without things that most of us think they should not have to go without,” Zoeckler said.

Study Co-Chair Mel Menon asked the question of the panel:

“Eds and Meds – Is this the basis of our economy?”

Williams said that historically, Eds and Meds are the anchor institutions in our community. This is true in many other cities as well. While other industries leave, the hospitals and education institutions are permanent.

Overall, particularly in the last year, the total number of jobs in hospitals and educational institutions is decreasing. However, particular jobs -- physician assistants, medical data base workers, medical tech assistants -- are increasing.

A critical issue is industries not investing in their employees, or providing on-the-job training. An industry can often save money by hiring someone who has already had training.

An additional issue, raised by Zoeckler, was that institutions are affected by federal funding – Medicaid, Medicare. If the institution relies heavily on this funding, and the funding decreases or stays the same despite increased need and cost, this has a negative effect on hiring.

In terms of unions, Williams said being a part of the union is helpful for the person who is actually hired, in terms of wages and safety.

John Bergemann spoke about employment at Crouse Hospital. There are approximately 2,800 employees, from housekeepers to physicians. Labor Union 1199 United Healthcare Workers East represents 80 percent of Crouse employees.

Crouse pays into the union training fund, Bergemann said, and the money is available to all employees. Currently a housekeeping job pays \$11. per hour, but Crouse is striving to increase that to \$15. per hour. “We need to do that to help retain good employees,” he said. He stressed that each job is important at the hospital. For example, housekeepers who change beds need to understand infection control, which is critical for patients’ safety.

An entry-level job at the hospital, from a clinical perspective, would be a phlebotomist, patient transporter.

Nurses who have completed Crouse's two-year nursing program generally start at \$23. per hour. The hourly wage is higher for nurses who are working nights or weekends.

Medical Technicians, who have four-year degrees, make over \$20. per hour. Office jobs, billing, admitting, clerical jobs, etc., generally pay \$13. to \$15. per hour.

Julian Galimo spoke about VNA Healthcare, which serves Central New York and provides a social day program and care in a person's home. The institution has 500 employees. The services range from home health care to skilled medical care.

A person can come to VNA Healthcare with no experience and receive training (and be paid for training hours). There is a tuition assistance program for employees who want to learn new skills. There is a high turnover rate, largely due to the difficulty of the work. Employees are in the healthcare union.

Home Health Aide is one of the fastest growing low-wage jobs in the Central New York region, according to the New York State Labor Department.

A meeting attendee, who is a lawyer and works with individuals looking to enter the workforce, brought up the issue of a question that is on applications asking applicants if they have a criminal record. She said this turns into a blanket denial and can prevent a person from getting a job, even if an arrest was many years prior, or there was no conviction.

Galimo said VNA and other similar organizations are required to abide by New York State regulations and Department of Health regulations in regard to the application and inquiring about a criminal record.

Bergemann said this is an issue with hiring at Crouse, as well. He said when potential employees are untruthful and say they have no criminal record, and then a background check reveals there *is* a criminal record – this means the person cannot be hired. A potential employee who is honest and can explain the circumstances to a human resources person has a better chance of being hired. He said Crouse has hired people with a criminal history. If it is something that is not related to an attempt to harm someone or related to a theft (keeping in mind employees are in hospital rooms where patients have private possessions) a person with a criminal history could be hired, if he/she is honest about what happened.

Bridget Scholl spoke about employment at SUNY Onondaga Community College. OCC employs 2,000 people over the course of the year, half of whom are part-time employees, such as adjunct professors and tutors. Only about 200 of the full-time employees are faculty. Support staff and employees in administrative positions are CSEA, and most have taken and passed the Civil Service Exam. Faculty and administrators are also unionized.

Full-time employees can take classes and receive their associate's degree, with tuition covered by OCC.

Some work at OCC is outsourced – for example the bookstore is a Barnes and Noble, the cafeteria is outsourced.

In returning to a previous point, Scholl said that OCC (as well as SUNY) has “banned the box” (box containing question about criminal record) for students.

Christopher Miller spoke about employment with the Syracuse City School District. There are 12 distinct labor groups within the district. There are 4,400 employees; 42 percent of who live in the city.

The school district employs 2,000 teachers. “We have to be very strategic and innovative to recruit and retain our employees,” Miller said.

Miller said there is an abundance of applicants in some positions, a shortage in others. In terms of a shortage -- ESL teachers, math teachers, special education teachers.

A starting salary for a teacher with no experience, no master's degree is \$47,500, which Miller said is competitive in the area. (Teachers are required to eventually earn a master's degree)

The district employs 700 teaching assistants and attendants, such as school monitors.

It is, at times, difficult to find principals. Principal salaries range from \$80,000 to \$115,000.

Generally, food service employees earn \$11. an hour, custodians \$14.-\$25. per hour. Teaching assistants earn approximately \$20,000 a year, school nurses earn \$45,000 a year.

Bergemann, Miller, Galimo, and Scholl all addressed the fact that federal funding has a huge impact on hiring and employing people.

Both Miller and Scholl said they are forced to pursue more grants, and rely on the grant money. The grant money has to be used for a specific purpose, and sometimes that purpose is not the highest priority for the institution.

A meeting attendee brought up the idea of a “strikeforce” which is an initiative out of the Department of Labor targeting high unemployment areas in the state. There is a strikeforce in Buffalo. The focus is on removing barriers to employment and connecting job seekers with employers.

Mel Menon asked a final question about how the employers on the panel find employees.

At Crouse, Bergemann said, human resources use syracuse.com, job boards, and there is a referral bonus for employees who refer a new employee who is hired and successful. Crouse has just established a new position, diversity recruiter, to tap into an under-utilized market.

Miller said the school district travels throughout the state to recruit new teachers. The school district is particularly interested in teachers of color – the school district goes to historically Black colleges to find teachers. For non-teaching jobs, the school district works with Jubilee Homes and other organizations.

At OCC, Scholl said some positions are advertised on syracuse.com in the newspaper, some are national searches.

Galimo with VNA advertises online, through social media, and also brings a tablet computer to job fairs so that potential employees can apply in real time.

The meeting was adjourned.

