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Reservoir of Talent

Education to Employment Program Closes Gaps in Many Ways

By Joseph Bednar

Seth Bordeau had no plans to become a paramedic, but a chance elective at Ware High School last year — “Introduction to Fire Science,” taught by Ware Fire Department Deputy Chief Edward Wloch — led him down an unexpected path.

“I was less than enthusiastic, but slightly interested in the fire-science class,” Bordeau

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said. “But after every class, I found myself more and more excited for the next. The subject of emergency services was fascinating, and as the year-long course was coming to an end and graduation grew closer, I knew I’d miss this class

the most. I also knew that I wanted to pursue this career.”

Fortunately, the elective led to an opportunity to take an EMT class at the Holyoke Community College satellite located at the Education to Employment (E2E) site on Main Street in Ware. He and fellow Ware High students who finished the high-school elective are now contemplating a career in fire science and emergency medicine. Baystate Wing Hospital Corp., one of the E2E’s local business partners, provided a matching grant that covered half the tuition and textbooks for the EMT course for each of the students.

“I signed up for the EMT course almost immediately and didn’t think twice about my decision,” said Bordeau. “The EMT course ran from June to August, the whole summer, and looking



Ware High School graduates, from left, Felicity Dineen, Jordan Trzpit, Valentina Towne, Joe Gagnon, Morgan Orszulak, and Seth Bourdeau with Michael Moran (right), president of Baystate Health’s Eastern Region, which helped fund tuition and textbooks for the students’ EMT training at Holyoke Community College’s satellite in Ware.

back, I wouldn't have wanted the summer to be any different. I have completed the practical exam and passed, and I am now onto taking my written exam. Once that is completed, I've been offered a position as an EMT for the town of West Brookfield. I hope to further my career by looking into paramedic school."

This career pipeline between Ware High School and HCC's satellite in Ware is just one example of how E2E — initially forged as a partnership between the Quaboag Valley Community Development Corp. (QVDC) and HCC — is building connections between higher education, local businesses, economic-development leaders, and the community to meet workforce needs, said Jeff Hayden, vice president of Business and Community Services at HCC.

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ly looking to provide hands-on training activities for students who maybe aren't sure what they want to do, or aren't as book-motivated as some students might be. The hands-on training is giving them experience in an actual occupation," said Hayden, noting that Ware High School added a criminal-justice elective to its roster of project-based, career-focused learning in 2018, and will introduce a certified nursing assistant (CNA) course in the fall of 2019.

Those efforts are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to E2E programming, which features a range of resources for employers looking for talent and individuals seeking jobs (and the skills needed to procure them), and even a transportation service, the Quaboag Connector, that helps people access these services across these lightly populated towns in West-Central Mass.

"E2E is really a unique and innovative facility to help meet the needs of folks in our rural, former mill-town communities," said Sheila Cuddy,

executive director of the QVDC. Several years ago, she explained, her organization was looking at strategic planning in the 15 communities it serves.

"We had been meeting with educators and small-business people and larger employers about the disconnect in our unemployment rates in this region, which tend to be 1% to 2% above the state average," Cuddy told *BusinessWest*. "At the same time, we had employers who had difficulty hiring qualified workers. When we took a step back and took a broader look, we realized there was a hole in the region — there really weren't any institutions of higher learning past high school, very little if any public transportation, and a lack of resources for people looking for jobs and employers looking for qualified workers."

After HCC came on board as the QVDC's higher-ed partner in E2E, Country Bank stepped up with class-A office space in downtown Ware it no longer needed, and a mix of business funders (including Monson Savings Bank), grants, and tax credits began to take shape. "Since then, it has mushroomed," Cuddy said. For this issue's focus on education, *BusinessWest* takes a look at how Education to Employment has brought new levels of collaboration and creativity to bear on the persistent problem of matching job seekers with jobs — often jobs, as in Bordeau's case, they had no idea they'd want.

Key Connections

In one sense, Hayden noted, the E2E center was created to provide a place where individuals could connect with the college, because a 45-minute commute could be an obstacle — in both time and money — to enrolling in college. "So if you had a place where you could get information, resources, and a study place, with technology there, that might be advantageous."

Indeed, the roughly 3,000-square-foot center located at 79 Main St. in Ware includes two classrooms, as well as private study areas and office



Staff Photo

Jeff Hayden said HCC meets a need in Ware and surrounding towns for students who might be burdened by a long commute to the nearest college campus.

space. Computer workstations are available for community members interested in enrolling in credit classes at HCC as online students. Meanwhile, the center has offered non-credit classes in hospitality and culinary arts, manufacturing, and health careers. Staffers are also on hand to help people with résumé writing, job-interview and application advice, and soft skills that all employers seek.

"They might need help with a résumé, or they might need additional classes, either for college credit or workforce-training classes to get certification for a new job. Or there might be questions about how to apply for financial aid," Cuddy said.

"We have several computers and robust broadband service," she added. "It really has become what we envisioned it to be — an education-to-employment center. We've had several ServSafe classes to help people step into the hospitality industry, which also helps local restaurants. We did some training with the Mass. Gam-

E2E

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ing Commission to prepare for casino jobs. We've also done manufacturing training with MassHire folks from the Franklin-Hampshire region."

In addition, local employers have come to E2E looking for skilled workers, and sometimes matches are made through job fairs, she said. "We also have a local veterans' group that meets there once a month. It really has become a vibrant and vital community resource and a respectful place for people to come to learn."

Hayden agreed, citing efforts like a business-led program aimed at instilling workforce training and soft skills in the 16-to-24 age group. "They've also done programs at the QVCDC where they help people save money to start businesses. They do computer classes, literacy classes, financial-literacy classes, and we've done some of that stuff as well out there. It has become very active."

It's all supplemented by the Quaboag Connector, a mini-bus system that brings people back and forth between Palmer, Ware, and the other Quaboag communities for jobs, classes, and other things, Hayden noted. "That's been extremely effective. Oftentimes, we think of the poverty in the urban core of Springfield, Holyoke, and Chicopee, and we don't necessarily think of the rural or suburban poor, especially in the communities out east, where



the challenges of transportation, day care, and elder care are the same as in urban communities. Getting to work on time is a challenge without buses and vans to make it work."

Baystate Health's Eastern Region, which includes Baystate Wing Hospital and Baystate Mary Lane, is one of the Quaboag Connector's partners, providing \$90,000 in funding to the transportation initiative.

"The consequences of the lack of transportation and unemployment elevate the importance to invest in these local initiatives. Both provide good options for our young people," said Mike Moran, Baystate's Eastern Region president. "Baystate Health is strongly committed to the many communities in our region and will continue to work

with our community partners to focus and grow programs and initiatives that promote wellness, education, and workforce development."

Natural Fit

Surveying the growing roster of programs run through E2E, Hayden said the partnerships forged among higher education, the business community, and other groups, all of whom are seeking similar outcomes when it comes to building a vibrant workforce, have come together naturally and organically.

"It doesn't feel forced at all; it feels like people really want to work together to make something happen," he told *BusinessWest*. "The challenge is always

Country Bank donated space on Main Street in Ware to the QVCDC for the E2E offices.

financial resources. None of us singly have enough resources to make it work, and even jointly, it would be difficult to make some of these initiatives work, but we've all been working together to find those resources."

The needs remain significant, Cuddy added.

"We have a number of manufacturers, small and large, based in our region that are facing the challenge of a workforce that's aging out. I know a company with more than 100 employees, and within five years, 50% of those employees will be approaching retirement age. I know everyone is having difficulty finding people who are certified to be CNAs, especially as the population ages, and other healthcare careers are having the same issues — the aging of the existing workforce and training newer folks needed to take up these careers."

That's why Education to Employment makes sense, and is needed, she went on.

"These community partnerships really speak to Western Mass., whether it be out of necessity or creativity or a general spirit of neighborliness. Especially in the smaller communities, there's a recognition that all of us working together accomplish a whole lot more than we could individually." ♦

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