

Working for a living



Contributed photos

FROM LEFT: Connor Kearns (left) and Mason Rossey work for Vogt Heating & Cooling, Mariah Rubaker works on a generator, Mackenzie Beck works for RE Johnson Electric in Saegertown, and Isaac McCauley works for Conneaut Lake-based Ferguson Construction Co., as part of the Construction Industry Workforce Program, a cooperative effort of Crawford County, Crawford Tech and a group of private employers.

Program seeks to add, retain skilled trade workers

By Mike Crowley

MEADVILLE TRIBUNE

With six weeks remaining before she graduates, Crawford Tech senior Mariah Rubaker already knows what she'll be doing after she graduates.

In fact, she's already doing it — and has been

for months now.

After her weekday morning classes at Maplewood Junior-Senior High, Rubaker heads to the Saegertown headquarters of RE Johnson Electric or to the day's job site. Once there, she stays busy maintaining, repairing and installing generators. She'll

be even busier working for RE Johnson after graduation and into the future, she told an audience of state and local officials, school administrators and area employers Thursday during a presentation at Crawford Tech.

"It's been a very good experience getting out into

the workforce," Rubaker said. "I've learned a lot this year that will help me later in the future."

The occasion was an hour-long presentation celebrating the successes of the Construction Industry Workforce Program, which currently has nine high school students placed

with in-demand labor positions in the Meadville area. But it was also a pitch designed to win support for an expanded version of the program — one that would go beyond construction in hopes of increasing the local pool of skilled labor in

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key industries by as many as 250 people per year for the next 10 years.

The impetus behind the workforce program was two-fold, according to Caleb Thayer, the Crawford County Planning Office housing coordinator who helps operate it. In accepting \$1.1 million from the state's Whole Home Repairs Program, the county agreed to spend \$251,000 on workforce development. The choice about how to spend those funds was clear given the county's population decline and shrinking pool of workers in their 20s and 30s, especially among the trades, Thayer told the group assembled at Crawford Tech.

"The data shows we don't have the younger workforce in Crawford County and we need to do something — and we need to do it soon — now," he said, recounting how the plan evolved. "We simply said we're just going to piggyback off of what's already working. We have sponsoring employers here today who are desperate for workers. We have a technical school in Crawford Tech that offers programs in construction trades. Why not just give

them a boost?"

The boost is a significant one, but also one that officials involved feel is well worth the expense if it works — and Crawford County Planning Director Zachary Norwood said it is working already.

"We decided early on that we were going to invest in people, rather than products or places," Norwood said. "We were investing in the people that we wanted to retain here in the county and that will show if we were successful or not."

Of the nine participants, four have committed to staying in their positions after graduation. Two others will continue their education and one isn't yet sure regarding post-grad plans. Two juniors in the program plan to continue with it after graduation as well, Norwood said.

Polls of high school juniors and seniors not participating in the program show lower rates of people planning to remain in the area after graduation, according to Norwood.

"So something's working," he said.

The appeal is easy to understand.

As students, the program funds an hourly wage of \$16 per hour and provides \$225 for tool purchases. After graduation, if the students continue with their em-

ployers, the program will fund half of their salary for six months at \$20 per hour.

The wage is designed to make staying in Crawford County as appealing as possible so that students working in in-demand trades cultivate connections that make them more likely to stay for the long term. Put more simply, the goal is to pay them enough that they won't want to move to Pittsburgh, Erie or even Cleveland.

With training and experience subsidized by state funding, will these newly skilled workers take their talents to metropolitan areas in the region? It's a possibility, but as Norwood pointed out, people their age are already leaving Crawford County.

The county's population of people in prime working age has plummeted from 49,000 in 2000 to 38,000 in 2020, he said, a drop of more than 22 percent. By 2040, the number is expected to be 32,000.

Thayer acknowledged that the nine-person program is a small one.

"It does not sound like a large number," he told the audience, "but in regards to how many people are actually walking into the construction trades — it's a lot higher than zero."

The hope is that by framing the

Construction Industry Workforce Program as a one-time pilot program, officials can set the stage for investment in a sustainable and significantly larger program that they called the Local Industry Fundamental Training program.

"We want to blow it up to be wider than just construction," Norwood said. "We would like to include life sciences, manufacturing, digital technology and construction — the whole gamut. But what we need to do first is to identify and secure funding streams that make sense and not just another one-time funding stream."

Norwood pitched a plan in which state or federal funding could support a nonprofit agency dedicated to operating the program. Employers would donate to the nonprofit as well and receive both tax credits and an enlarged labor pool in what Norwood compared to getting "three birds with one stone."

The plan is likely to work only if those involved can drum up additional support.

"The governor has a new economic strategy and this program and this county — we're teed up to succeed in that program," Norwood said. "We need everyone in this room to be a cheerleader. We need you to share the message of the great things that are happening

here in Crawford Tech and the great things that are happening here in Crawford County."

Several business owners involved in the program were ready to do their fair share of cheering.

When the owner of a growing business looks at his workforce and sees an average age in the 50s, it can be scary, according to Matt Vogt of Vogt Heating & Cooling. The addition of two Crawford Tech students to the group has been exciting. Signing up with the program also induced some anxiety.

"Dealing with a government program is usually a bit of a calamity," Vogt said, drawing laughter from the audience. That has not been the case this time, he added.

"The program has been fantastic. The students that we've had have been great," Vogt said. "I can tell you very confidently that the students we've had, who are juniors a little over halfway through the program, are more qualified than anybody I have ever hired out of a normal trade school program who has \$40,000 worth of debt and nowhere near the training, nowhere near the experience."

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