

Reimagining Diversity and Inclusion, Prioritizing Workforce Equity

In June, the New Castle County Chamber of Commerce in partnership with Wilmington Alliance and Delaware Manufacturing Extension Partnership, hosted the "Cutting-Edge Series: Industry 4.0 + The Green Economy". One of the sessions facilitated by the Alliance's Director of Economic Development & Inclusion, Dr. Hara Wright-Smith, focused on the benefits of hiring justice involved individuals. A member of the panel, a returning citizen and HR Generalist and Recruiter, shared his best advice for employers considering hiring individuals with criminal backgrounds. His advice: "Humanity goes a long way!"

According to Indeed (the August 2022 US Labor Market Update), "despite some cooling, the US labor market remains hot as demand is still elevated and joblessness is low." Indeed reports that Delaware job postings through September 2022 are 56.8% above the pre-pandemic baseline. In essence, there are more jobs than applicants. Simultaneously, thousands of Delawareans with criminal records do not qualify for many of the available jobs, while other marginalized individuals struggle in the current workforce environment.

How do we begin closing this gap? How do we reimagine diversity and inclusion in our hiring and retention practices? What does it mean to prioritize workforce equity, when creating employment opportunities?

These are some of the questions Wilmington Alliance and its partners in the Second Chance Employment Collaborative, with anchor funding from JPMorgan Chase, have been grappling with since launching in March 2021. The Collaborative focuses on establishing a successful training and employment pipeline for justice involved job seekers entering financial services, technology, and healthcare industries. We have learned of many systemic barriers that cannot be solved by free workforce training programs alone. These barriers include the lack of needed supports and wrap around services that address the basic and human needs of job seekers as well as employer policies and hiring practices that disqualify many justice involved applicants.

Wilmington Alliance has conducted two workshops with members of the New Castle County Chamber of Commerce, focused on employer hiring practices. At the request of the NCC Chamber and the Delaware Black Chamber of Commerce, the Alliance and Project New Start are coordinating a third session, to take place in November.

During the first workshops, quality housing, access to transportation and affordable quality childcare were the most common needs identified for job seekers. The Delaware Workforce Development Board recently released survey findings of Delaware's businesses which further informs issues in workforce hiring. The survey found that lack of experience, lack of motivation/initiative, a gap in salary expectations, scheduling issues, and insufficient training were additional needs and concerns in the current workforce landscape.

Inspired by these findings and seeking possible solutions, Wilmington Alliance is focusing this year's Yes, Wilmington! annual event on that very exploration: "Reimagining Diversity and Inclusion, Prioritizing Workforce Equity." On October 28th, our event will feature keynote speaker, Michael O'Bryan, the founder of Humanature and a distinguished resident fellow at the Lindy Institute for Urban Innovation. He is also a recent recipient of the Philadelphia Business Journal's Diversity in Business 2022 Award. At Humanature, Michael works with nonprofits, businesses, leaders, and government agencies on transforming how they understand and support human development, interaction, and performance. From Humanature: "Our mission is both simple and complex: we support organizations, leaders, and initiatives to center humanity in the context of their work. Right now, many are forced to center funders, outputs, outcomes, procedures, and bureaucracy...but not the humans impacted by the systems and issues complicating their ability to survive, let alone thrive."

Additional speakers include Saad Soliman- Executive Vice President of Government Affairs and Criminal Justice at Patient Sortal and Hollie Marston Network Director - National Fund for Workforce Solutions and panel moderator, Jennifer Thompkins – the President & CEO of the Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League. We are looking forward to an engaging conversation on this increasingly crucial topic in

workforce development. Prioritizing workforce equity around human needs will ensure a positive outcome for all. "Humanity goes a long way!"

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