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Symposium to address employment crisis

The critical need for employees in the healthcare sector of our region has prompted the BASICS Committee of the Blair County Chamber to create a two-day event that will bring together key stakeholders to discuss ways to address current employment shortfalls as well as strengthening career options for local students.

"This is a topic that's been on our radar for quite some time," acknowledged Chris Farrell of Pennsylvania Highlands Community College, who co-chairs the BASICS Steering Committee, along with Neil Hollander of Altoona Pipe & Steel. "We recognize that other industry sectors face similar challenges and we're prepared to address those as well. But healthcare poses challenges that can be far-reaching and can impact quality of life to a frightening extent."

The Healthcare Employment Symposium will be held on November 2nd and 3rd from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. at the Devorris Center for Business Development. Each day, three focus groups of 8-9 people each will answer a series of

questions and will make suggestions to help identify possible strategies to alleviate a crisis that threatens the region's ability to care for its people.

Each focus group will have representation from critical care facilities, long-term care, healthcare agencies, employment professionals, school district administrators and higher education.

"The focus groups will be challenged to find plausible ways to move forward," Hollander pointed out. "Right now, each employment sector is trying to figure-out solutions based on what they know within their own frame of reference. This Symposium should clarify the opportunities by getting more of the facts out on the table."

The facts, for sure, are close to overwhelming. Hospitals are facing nursing shortages that compromise patient care and which create staff burnout. Nursing homes have a growing number of empty beds, not because there's a shortage of people seeking long term care but because it's become difficult for facilities to maintain even minimum



Sarah Hughes, Assistant Community Director at The Winds at Mattern Orchard, interviews a job seeker at the recent Job Fair.

staffing levels. "This is not about the inability to access products. It's about impacting the well-being of people who require some level of care," admits Blair County Chamber President Joe Hurd. "The clock is ticking for so many of these people and the fact that we're in the throes of a pandemic only makes it worse. Something

needs to be done and we're convinced that the Chamber is in the best position to at least create the dialogue that will lead to results."

What happens after the Symposium is hard to say. "If all goes according to plan, we'll have a wealth of information to evaluate and then create a strategy," Farrell disclosed. "We understand that we need to do

what we can in the short-term. But we also know that we need to create a sense of awareness for young people who are considering careers and are looking for ones with opportunities to make a difference close to home. This problem requires long-term solutions as well."

The Healthcare Employment Symposium is sponsored by Ace fix-it Hardware.

Chamber Forum group observes two decades of working together



The longest-running Presidents' Forum group of the Blair County Chamber is comprised of (left to right): Greg Knisely, Steve Seltzer, Randy Green, Ed Dobson, Beverly Green and Eric Wolf. Absent was Patricia Savage.

In 2001, the Blair County Chamber created a program it called the Presidents' Forum.

"We felt that the upper-management level of business was rather underserved," remembers Chamber President Joe Hurd. "We needed something to address the ongoing need of professional development for those people."

It happened that Philip Devorris of Blair Companies, who was serving as president of the Chamber Board at the time, was a member of a Young Presidents' Organization (YPO) Forum Group in Pittsburgh. He felt that a similar program would work in Blair County. The Chamber decided to give it a shot.

Five Forum Groups of eight CEO-level people were created. While the Presidents' Forum program currently boasts eight

Groups, only one of the original Groups remains.

"Primarily it's been a case of Forum members moving away, accepting other positions or retiring," Devorris pointed out. "Twenty years is a significant amount of time to keep a Group together. I tip my hat to our original Group that's still functioning effectively. They've obviously found something special."

There's no doubt about it, believes Forum member Steve Seltzer.

"We continue to meet monthly. We do an overnight retreat annually. We're there for each other when needed. We're friends. I wouldn't hesitate to reach out to any of my Forum members to share information, get feedback, ideas, empathy and understanding."

Forum member Beverly

Green agrees.

"Our success has to do with the individuals in this Group," she admitted. "We respect our differences, appreciate our similarities and have embraced what each of us brings to the Group. That's essential to staying together."

To member Ed Dobson, it's been mostly about priorities.

"Forum is not for everyone," he noted. "There's a level of commitment that makes it worthwhile. If you're not willing to participate at that level, it's not time well spent. We've made that commitment and Forum has been an incredible resource for us."

"Ultimately, it's about mutual respect, sincere honesty and strict confidentiality," emphasizes member Greg Knisely. "Our Group personifies those."

YP events provide way to build connections

The Young Professionals of Blair County are making inroads in building an effective network of business connections. The Chamber committee that oversees the YP program has successfully planned and executed networking events in September and October and is eagerly anticipating an upcoming event this Thursday.

"Our first two events (at U.S. Hotel in Hollidaysburg and Spring Dam Brewery in Roaring Spring) have created a lot of interest," admitted Committee Chair Jared Keller. "We see new people trying to get a sense of what we're doing and how they can benefit from it. That's really our intention."

Thursday's event will take place at Levity Brewing Company at 1411 Eleventh Avenue in Altoona. It begins at 5:30 p.m. and ends at 7:30. The cost to attend is \$10 for members of YP and \$15 for

all others. The cost includes appetizers. There will also be a cash bar.

The Young Professionals of Blair County offers a membership program, separate from the Chamber Membership. Chamber members between 21 and 39 can purchase a YP membership for just \$40/year. Non-members can join for \$50/year.

"It's a really good deal because it discounts our programs and events," Keller pointed out. "We're hoping that many employers will encourage their young professionals to get involved and even be willing to underwrite the membership cost."

To register for Thursday's event, go to www.blair-chamber.com.

Chamber Hawaii trip now set for September

The Blair County Chamber has changed its trip to the Hawaiian Islands from January to September. It has also scheduled an informational meeting on its Ireland Trip for November 17th at 6:00 p.m. at the Devorris Center for Business Development.

"There's been interest in the Hawaiian trip but still some trepidation due to the Covid-19 situation there," explained Chamber President Joe Hurd. "The feel-

ing is that by rescheduling to later in the year that people will have fewer restrictions and be generally more comfortable." The Hawaiian trip is being done as a partnership between the Chamber and Swinston Travel.

With no Chamber trip occurring in January, the first trip is now to Ireland in April. To register to attend the Ireland informational meeting, call Marilyn at (814) 943-8151.



Advice from inside the trunk

I read somewhere that the aging process can distort your ability to understand even the most logical circumstances. I might have read that in Popular Mechanics or Good Housekeeping or one of the other out-of-date periodicals that I flip through to kill time while waiting to have the oil changed in my car.



Joe Hurd

Automobiles have always frustrated me since they involve an abundance of plugs and wires and hoses and I have the technological acumen of a house plant. I have no difficulty conceding that whatever someone at an auto repair facility tells me I need to make my car operate effectively is not something I'm likely to ignore. To an old guy like me, that's logical.

Where logic breaks down is when I receive something in the mail that seems to make sense but comes with a rather unusual explanation. Just last week I received a Safety Recall Notice from Kia America. The notice indicated that my wife's Kia Forte had a potentially defective trunk latch. At high temperatures, a thermal crack can develop, making the latch inoperative.

So we needed a new latch. If I had stopped reading the notice at that point, all would have made sense. But I chose to read on. The next paragraph explained why the latch is so important.

"If a person is inside the trunk compartment at the same time the latch cracks, the person may not be able to get out of the trunk. The inability to get out of the trunk increases the risk of injury."

Then the clincher: "The trunk is a very dangerous location in the event of a crash."

My immediate question is: Who are these people who are spending time in the trunk of their Kia? My wife loves her Kia Forte but I've never heard her ask a group of people, "Who wants to ride in the trunk?" In my estimation, the trunk is for luggage, spare tires and the occasional kidnap victim. Just kidding there, although I can't imagine that a kidnap victim's primary thoughts would include, "Gee, I hope they got the trunk latch fixed!"

By now, you've evidently figured-out what all people who write regular newspaper columns already know: Sometimes the topic well runs dry and you have to hope for a piece of good luck. Thanks to Kia, I had something.

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