



August 24, 2008

Network's mission is to re-train workers

Ross Meyer has taken a really cool job helping other people find really cool jobs.

The 25-year-old Finneytown High School and Miami University graduate returned to Cincinnati in May after two years in Manhattan, where he earned a master's in public administration from New York University and worked on work-force development, among other things, for Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

After running the United Way's Financial Stability Summit this spring, he was hired as executive director of the Greater Cincinnati Workforce Network - a new group charged with the weighty task of "work force readiness" - economic development lingo for helping people learn the skills in demand for jobs in their region.

It's a tremendous challenge - coordinating the efforts in Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana, including four Workforce Investment Boards that channel federal money to worker training, technical colleges and universities and about 75 other stakeholders.

Fortunately, Meyer has a good support system. He reports to Kathy Merchant, president and CEO of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation. The foundation will play a key role in getting funding for the Workforce Network, recently making a proposal for money from the National Fund for Workforce Solutions.

The network is a three-year, \$2.25 million initiative, of which the National Fund would provide \$450,000. (The foundation will find out in a few weeks whether they got that money.) The foundation and United Way each provided \$300,000, leaving another \$1.2 million to be raised.

On Thursday, some folks from the National Fund visited Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, which has launched a pilot program to retrain low-wage workers for higher-level jobs.

Meyer says the group heard from a divorced mom who had been on welfare and is working as a patient care assistant at Children's. The hospital is helping her go to nursing school, and in 18 months she'll nearly double her salary and help ease the health care sector's nurse shortage.

The hospital's program will be a model for worker re-training programs in health care and other sectors where local worker skills don't match up with employer needs.

That need is where the political issues diverge from the real issues - helping people who would like to move up the job ladder but find the hurdles too high. It's the janitor and the administrative assistant and the mom on welfare.

And it's the small IT firm that can't find software developers and the hospital that can't find nurses.

The potential is tremendous as well.

Meyer says he's seen a huge change in the momentum of the region since he left in 2006. He wants to be a part of the progress.

"It's a real opportunity to work with the large number of efforts converging in the community on this issue," he says. "That opportunity here is unprecedented."

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