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Strategies being developed to keep workers in area

By WES SWIETEK wswietek@bgdailynews.com Jun 14, 2019

A multiyear effort to keep more non-native residents of Warren County working closer to home has entered the next phase.

New Americans – immigrants and refugees – have higher employment rates than native Americans, and with thousands of job openings in Warren County, the city of Bowling Green has been spearheading an effort to try and keep more of that population from traveling outside the region to work.

The city in recent years has gotten a series of grants for the Gateways for Growth program offered through the New American Economy and Welcoming America organizations. The grants have paid for a study that showed the local opportunities, as well as for the current phase of the effort – developing strategies.

That involves “really starting the conversation of how we maintain the workforce here to continue to grow the local economy,” said Brent Childers, director of the city’s Neighborhood and Community Services department.

With the help of a Cincinnati-based consulting firm, a first strategic planning session was held this week and a steering committee was formed.

The steering committee includes representatives from local industries, the Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce, the South Central Workforce Development Board, Western Kentucky University and representatives of the city’s non-native populations.

“We think workforce development is all about partnerships, and we’ve identified several initiatives (to meet) strategic goals,” such as Gateways for Growth, said Robert Boone, director of the South Central Workforce Development Board. “Bowling Green is a hub for migration and secondary migrations of individuals.”

But many of those individuals go outside the region to work. According to the grant-funded study released last year, immigrants and refugees contributed more than \$564 million to Warren County’s GDP in 2016; accounted for 9.3 percent of the county’s total population but 10.3 percent of the employed labor force. The study also showed almost 26 percent of employed Warren County new Americans worked outside the county.

More steering committee planning meetings are slated in the coming months to formulate strategies to retain those workers locally.

“It could be as simple as outreach,” to specific communities, Childers said. That could take the form of better informing non-native residents of local job openings and touting the benefits of working locally.

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Boone said the steering committee will also look at “barriers to employment.”

The sectors being specifically targeted are the construction, health care and manufacturing industries.

“We feel there are a lot of opportunities in those sectors,” Childers said.

Implementation may require more funding, which the city would try to secure, but Childers said he believes some of the efforts could be done with existing resources.

The city received a Gateways for Growth grant of \$12,500 with a matching \$12,500 from the city for the current phase of the effort.

– Follow News Director Wes Swietek on Twitter @BGDNgovtbeat or visit bgdailynews.com.

Wes Swietek

Wes Swietek is the Bowling Green Daily News News Director.

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