

Dept. of Workforce Development: Announces first recipients of new Workforce Equity Grants

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MADISON - The Department of Workforce Development (DWD) is helping two southeastern Wisconsin businesses fund workforce training and skill development, targeting traditionally underserved communities. E.C. Styberg Engineering Company in Racine and Stowell Associates, LLC based in Milwaukee are the first two recipients of DWD's new Workforce Equity Grants, made possible by a donation from the IKEA U.S. Community Foundation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Foundation donated \$947,000 to DWD to address workforce needs in southeastern Wisconsin with a focus on improving racial equity in employment. The Foundation's donation reflects the amount of money IKEA Retail U.S. employees collected in Wisconsin unemployment insurance benefits when the company closed stores and furloughed employees during the start of the pandemic.

"Wisconsin's economy depends on a strong workforce and these investments will be critical to expanding pathways and training opportunities for Wisconsin workers," said Gov. Tony Evers. "In order for our state and our economy to bounce back from this pandemic, we have to make sure every community recovers and especially those that have been hardest hit and historically underserved."

"These Workforce Equity Grants will help Wisconsin fight racial disparity and the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on our state's underserved communities," DWD Secretary-designee Amy Pechacek said. "The pandemic has disproportionately affected communities of color, so it is crucial that these communities are connected to economic recovery efforts."

“We are appreciative of the support from the state of Wisconsin, including the unemployment funds paid to our co-workers who were furloughed in the early weeks of the pandemic,” said Javier Quiñones, IKEA Retail U.S. president. “People are the heart of our business, and the state unemployment benefits helped IKEA US co-workers during a difficult time. We now have a better understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on our business, and we’ve decided to “pay it forward” to support our local communities.”

E.C. Styberg Engineering, which manufactures metal components, has been awarded \$306,190 to implement an occupational training program in partnership with Gateway Technical College. The company plans to provide training to 14 current and 10 new employees in technical fields such as applied mathematics, CNC machining and mechanical maintenance. A full-time case manager will also provide work-readiness support, mentoring, and on-the-job coaching. Program graduates receive several industry-recognized certifications and wages in excess of \$15 per hour, plus benefits. Racine County Workforce Solutions, a division of Racine County Human Services and the Racine County Job Center, will help administering the grant and recruiting new hires from underserved populations.

Stowell Associates, LLC, provides caregiving services to elderly and disabled adults and their families in Milwaukee, Kenosha, Racine, Waukesha, and surrounding communities. Stowell’s \$63,460 grant award will help fund its Caregiver University, training 75 current and 25 new employees. The company will work with the Southeast Wisconsin Workforce Development Board (Kenosha) to recruit individuals from underserved populations.

Caregiver University gives trainees the opportunity to participate in a flexible and comprehensive training program for caregivers that uses a hybrid education model of asynchronous online learning modules, paired with in-person mentoring. The training teaches caregivers the skills needed to work with adults who are older or disabled in a variety of settings, such as senior living, home care, and memory care facilities. Stowell will provide upskilling opportunities for current caregivers, with a commitment to raise all caregiver wages to \$15 or more by the close of the grant. At the close of training, all trainees will be placed in caregiver positions with Stowell clients. In addition to an improved hourly wage, trainees will also receive paid vacation, sick leave, health care benefits and retirement benefits.

DWD will be accepting more applications for Workforce Equity Grants later this year.