

Interest in apprenticeships rising amid record participation, tight labor market

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Employer interest in Wisconsin apprenticeship programs is on the rise amid fierce competition for talent.

That's according to Liz Pusch, deputy director of Wisconsin Apprenticeship with the state Department of Workforce Development. She spoke yesterday at the Madison Region's Economic Development and Diversity Summit, hosted by the Madison Region Economic Partnership and the Urban League of Greater Madison.

She highlighted a post-pandemic surge in business engagement with DWD's apprenticeship offerings, as well as more students and even college-educated workers seeing the program as a pathway to better job opportunities.

"Our average age of a registered apprentice is 28 years old," Pusch said. "So people are starting in their career route, and then they're figuring out, 'This is not what I want to do.'"

Seth Lentz, executive director of the Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin, echoed her point about more employers seeing apprenticeships as a viable option. He added more businesses are seeing the long-term value of investing in their own workers' skills.

"Employers are starting to see some increased retention because you're making and building this bond with the workers," he said.

DWD last month announced a new record-high level of participation in the Youth Apprenticeship programs, with 8,357 high school juniors and seniors taking part in the 2022-23 school year. Two months earlier, state officials had touted a record of 15,900 apprentices participating in the Registered Apprenticeship program last year.

While registered apprenticeships train workers for a specific occupation, the youth program is designed to expose participants to a wide array of career options, Pusch explained. She noted some programs at the professional level are designed to help employees train for a more advanced position without having to leave the workforce.

Bridgett Willey, director of the Allied Health Education and Career Pathways Department for UW Health, said certain apprenticeships can lead to an academic degree along with professional credentials.

“That’s super important in health care, where a lot of the career advancement relies on you going to get your bachelor’s degree, or your master’s degree,” she said.

-By Alex Moe