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RISE partnership aims to remove barriers to the workforce

BY ROBERT TOMKAVAGE STAFF WRITER

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SCRANTON — Four local organizations are working together on a new program to eliminate obstacles some people face when attempting to earn a life-sustaining wage.

Representatives from Johnson College, United Neighborhood Centers of Northeastern Pennsylvania, the Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development and the William G. McGowan Charitable Fund met at the college's Diesel Truck Technology Center Tuesday morning to unveil the RISE: Readiness In Skilled Employment program.

During the nine-month program, consisting of a 40-hour per week commitment, participants will take technical classes at Johnson College to obtain industry-specific credentials. Career opportunities include health care, information technology, diesel mechanics, building and property management, welding and industrial technology. Participants will also take part in employee readiness workshops related to workplace knowledge, professionalism and long-term success.

"We have created a unique partnership dedicated to lifting people up and into a career that moves them forward and addresses a critical workforce need," said Katie Leonard, Ed.D., president and CEO of Johnson College.

The program, which will begin at the start of the spring semester in January, is open to residents of Lackawanna and Luzerne counties who are living 250% below the federal poverty level. Leonard hopes to have 20 to 30 participants in the program during the first installment. She's hopeful the number will increase each semester.

Anyone interested in applying for the program should contact UNC Director of Community Education Terilynn Brechtel at 570-346-6203, ext. 103.

Participants will have access to a support system to help ensure success, including assistance with transportation, childcare, technology, tutoring, health services and housing.

"This is an opportunity to take care of the whole person so they can focus on the education and training needed to get a job," said Lisa Durkin, president and CEO of United Neighborhood Centers. "With Johnson's incredible relationship with area employers, it's a winning combination."

Gert McGowan, a trustee of the William G. McGowan Charitable Fund, which is providing the capital for the program, stressed the impact of the partnership is vital to economical sustainability in the area.

"Without a skilled workforce, employers bring people in from outside the region," she said. "That means people in Northeast Pennsylvania may be left behind as others come in and take the good, living wage jobs."

Teri Ooms, executive director at The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development, noted a pipeline of younger workers is needed because Northeast Pennsylvania has an aging population that is exiting the workforce.

"We need to look at solutions to train and educate individuals in our community who haven't had that opportunity," she said.

