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CAREER & WORKPLACE

'WE CARE ABOUT THE QUALITY'

Workforce Talent Hub eyeing 2025 for rollout of new initiatives



By [Jordyn Hronec](#) – Associate Editor, Pittsburgh Business Times
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Editor's Note: In May 2023, the Pittsburgh region was identified as one of five White House Workforce Talent Hubs by the current administration. Upon earning that designation, the City of Pittsburgh and key partners including local workforce development organization Partner4Work kicked off a flurry of activity, all meant to convene crucial stakeholders around ways to build up the region's workforce and capitalize on its historic strengths. In the months to follow, the hub has served as a platform for those stakeholders to establish the Pittsburgh Good Jobs Principles, a set of standards for the region's employers to adhere to in order to ensure the creation of good, high-paying jobs. It also has spurred convening around federal funding applications, and, recently, [the announcement of three new initiatives](#) that local leaders are looking to enact in 2025. On Tuesday, Dec. 10 at the Fairmont Pittsburgh downtown, the Pittsburgh Business Times will host a breakfast event and panel discussion about Pittsburgh's Workforce Hub, what has been done so far and what's to come. The panel will be moderated by Partner4Work CEO Robert Cherry and feature three panelists: [Alicia Booker, director of workforce development, Allegheny County Airport Authority](#); [Petra Mitchell, president and CEO, Catalyst Connection](#); and [Felicity Williams, deputy chief of staff, Office of the Mayor, City of Pittsburgh](#). For more details about the event or to register to attend, visit [the event webpage](#).

For 31-year-old Troy Buefort, a career in construction represented more than just a job.

It was life-changing.

Buefort, a Penn Hills native, said before he found the PIT2Work pre-apprenticeship construction training program at Pittsburgh International Airport,

the trajectory of his life was uncertain.

“I hadn’t really been doing anything positive in my life,” Buefort said. “I’ve been always wanting to have a good job or career, but it was hard for me to keep up with something that was low paying and stressful, and it had just been pretty tough trying to find a good-paying job. I (had) been doing a lot of other things that wasn’t going to have me get anywhere in life, other than for the moment. So I was just trying to do something better.”

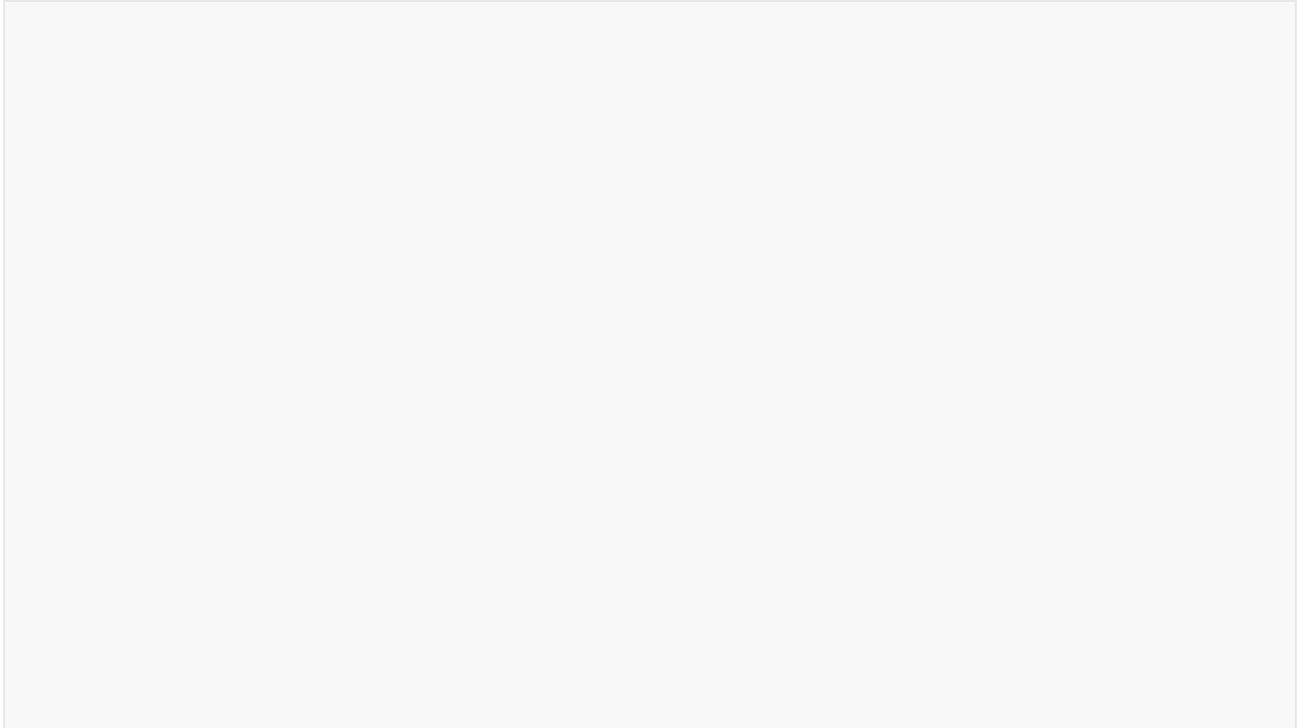
Buefort had no background or knowledge in construction. He said that he came to discover [the PIT2Work program](#), part of local organization Partner4Work’s 4Construction efforts in partnership with Pittsburgh Gateways Corp.’s Introduction to the Construction Trades, through a friend.



Troy Buefort, right, participates in operator training as part of his time in PIT2Work’s third cohort.
COURTESY OF ALLEGHENY COUNTY AIRPORT AUTHORITY

“It was a funny circumstance; I noticed that he had construction clothes on,” Buefort said. “It made me feel like I can do it. He gave me the information, and it was a class at PIT2Work. And I was really excited about that because I really wanted to change.”

Buefort was accepted to be a part of the third cohort to go through PIT2Work, a five-week intensive training program where participants conduct hands-on work on the new terminal at the airport. He successfully graduated with his cohort, soon after landing a position as an apprentice with Laborers' Union Local 1058, where he now does a variety of jobs, mainly working on road construction.



Troy Buefort now works as an apprentice with Laborers' Union Local 1058.

JIM HARRIS/PBT

It's stories like Buefort's that are inspiring local efforts to ramp up these types of workforce development opportunities, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A few weeks ago, both local and federal leaders gathered at the Skyline Terrace community room in the Hill District to announce progress in doing just that.

The gathering on Oct. 31 was convened in order to share the latest news out of what has become an ongoing effort to build up the Pittsburgh region's workforce via its designation as a White House Workforce Talent Hub, first announced in May 2023. At the event, leaders involved with the Workforce Hub's efforts reported the progress the hub has seen since its creation.

The Workforce Hub's main output has been the creation of the Pittsburgh Good Jobs Principles, a set of standards for the region's employers to adhere to for job

creation and growth that also ensure high job quality. Thus far, over 50 employers have signed on to those principles.

Other accomplishments produced by the hub include the creation of various “tables” focused on philanthropy, advanced manufacturing, clean energy and more. Via applications supported by the work of the tables, federal grant monies have been allocated to various organizations and initiatives, including the Pittsburgh Conservation Corps and Catalyst Connection.

Building upon that work, the Workforce Hub now is launching three new initiatives, all focused on improving job quality and reaching those in historically underserved communities.

“We don’t just care about the number of jobs; we care about the quality of those jobs,” Julie Su, acting secretary of the United States Department of Labor, said at the October event. “We know that a job is the way that somebody gets to live a decent life, gets to come home at the end of the day and breathe a sigh of relief, have some security, put their keys down, take off their shoes and know that they did a good day’s work, that they’re building a secure life, and know that that job is not only good for them, it not only lifts up their family, it builds up their entire community.”

Expanding the PIT2Work concept

The first of the three new initiatives is one where Partner4Work will be bringing its 4Construction efforts to another major construction site: The Lower Hill District where Live Nation and contractor PJ Dick are building a new concert and events venue. Expected to kick off in spring 2025, the Live Nation 4Construction pre-apprenticeship program will follow the model used at PIT2Work.

“The (4Construction) model itself is to wrap services and pre-apprenticeship opportunities to construction projects throughout the city,” said Rob Cherry, CEO of Partner4Work, Allegheny County’s dedicated workforce development

organization and the anchor for the hub. “As we see projects come up, we try to get to project owners soon and make sure that there’s an opportunity or a pathway for folks to get into the construction trades with a focus on equity. With the construction project in the Hill, we did that, and the public owners were willing. PJ Dick was willing. They’re all great partners.”

Chaquita Barnett is executive program director of Introduction to the Construction Trades at Pittsburgh Gateways, which is the organization that provides the day-to-day programming and instructors for PIT2Work, as well as conducts recruitment, interviews and more.

She cited the unique vision of Allegheny County Airport Authority CEO Christina Cassotis as being a driver behind how the PIT2Work model operates, where participants are exposed to not only the construction trades at the new Terminal Modernization Program, but also other unionized positions at the airport.

She said her organization, which works specifically to connect those from disadvantaged backgrounds with jobs in the trades, also will be providing the same services it does at PIT2Work at future 4Construction expansions and via the classes it offers at the Energy Innovation Center.

“Pittsburgh Gateways is an eligible training provider, and (Introduction to the Construction Trades is) a registered pre-apprentice training program,” Barnett said. “And those certifications make residents eligible from all over the state, so we are not just for Allegheny County, but we also work with Beaver County, Greene County, Washington County, Westmoreland County and Fayette County.”

In addition to providing pre-apprenticeship training, the PIT2Work model is unique in that it also offers comprehensive support services for participants including child care, shuttle services to the site, daily stipend payments and more. Cherry noted that unlike the PIT2Work program, the Live Nation venue site will not have a day care onsite for participants, but he said that as Partner4Work is looking to expand 4Construction, it understands that the wraparound services it can offer will vary.

“I think every iteration of 4Construction will look a little bit different based on project size, proximity to other services, but the core components are pre-apprenticeship training, stipend, access to the construction site and commitments from the project owner to train and hire folks who graduated out of the program,” Cherry said.

‘Government works for everyone’

The other two initiatives announced by officials involved in the Workforce Hub include the Regional Workforce Equity Agreement and the Pittsburgh Prosperity Project.

The Regional Workforce Equity Agreement, which the Office of Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey reached with the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh and the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh, is an effort that will look to ensure that there is “diverse business participation and diverse workforce participation” in various upcoming projects around the city, including the planned \$740 million Esplanade development on the North Side and various projects announced as part of the \$600 million downtown revitalization plan.

According to Felicity Williams, Gainey’s deputy chief of staff, the agreement includes terms such as implementing equity contracting program requirements for job quality and diverse workforce participation standards on construction projects; requiring prevailing wage rates, fringe benefits and worker protections for workers on those construction projects; requiring apprenticeship utilization on those construction projects and more.

Williams said the agreement is in the process of being finalized and is subject to approval from the Housing Authority and URA boards and Pittsburgh City Council. It’s anticipated to be implemented in the spring 2025 construction season.

“It is our responsibility and our duty to ensure that government works for everyone, and that starts with who and how we do business,” Williams said. “The Regional Workforce Equity Agreement is a testament to our values of economic

opportunity and an example of how we are taking the steps to ensure there is equity in our region's workforce. It is no longer sufficient to just build the things.”

Local partners also are working to launch what they're calling the Pittsburgh Prosperity Project, a coordinated support network to help those from underserved communities overcome barriers to entering the workforce. Those barriers could include access to child care, transportation, housing, clothing and more. The effort stands to benefit from \$275,000 in local funding from the Heinz Endowments, McAuley Ministries and Partner4Work. It will be piloted in spring 2025 before being scaled up to serve the entire region.

“This is a city-led initiative, along with Partner4Work and other partners who have come together, to really not only provide services to people with extreme barriers to employment, but to really map out the processes that need to happen to make sure that they have access to those services,” Cherry said. “This particular program is doing a deep reach into individuals who may have significant barriers, who come from extreme and high-need neighborhoods, to really reach into communities and give them opportunity to get to the middle class.”

Continuing upon the foundation that has been built

Notably, the announcements of the hub's new efforts were made a little less than a week before the 2024 election. According to Cherry, a new administration may pose some still-unforeseen challenges, but the new initiatives will go on.

“There won't be a continuation of Workforce Hubs from the vantage point of it being a White House initiative because a new administration is coming in, and regardless of which candidate was coming in, there could have been some type of potential changing of that anyway because it was very personal to the Biden administration, in particular, President (Joe) Biden, but what that means for our initiatives here is absolutely nothing,” Cherry said.

He said that, from the beginning, local partners have operated under the belief that the Workforce Hub designation would be temporary, but that the local

coalition largely remains on the same page and ready to continue upon the foundation that has been built.

It's a foundation that is poised to provide many, like Buefort, with a chance to succeed. Barnett said Buefort is just one of many success stories that have been turned out so far from these regional efforts.

"The opportunities are endless," said Buefort, who hopes that his newfound career path can serve as inspiration to his 10-year-old son. "I'm observing and I'm learning, and I'm still trying to figure out what I think is going to be the best route and the end goal for construction. But I do like the industry, and I don't plan on leaving anytime soon. I am super, super gracious and thankful for the opportunity to get into this."