

Inside the Job Market – Berkshire Eagle 5/9/26

Jobs4Youth program provides opportunities for a new generation of workers

Marianthy Posadas-Nava



I started hustling young. When I was 6, my sister and I ran a papelería out of our home in Mexico City — buying stationery and reselling it to classmates.

When my family moved to Northern Virginia, I started babysitting, took a first aid class, and by 15 had written my first resume. When it was double-sided, packed with odd jobs and extracurriculars, I walked it into my neighborhood’s grocery store and asked for a shift. Each of those jobs built something in me — not just skills, but a sense of agency. The ability to move through different systems. To earn, adapt, and grow.

That foundation didn’t come from any single employer. It came from the accumulation of experiences, and from the handful of people along the way who decided to invest in me.

But I also learned something harder. At 16 I worked at my first restaurant where I discovered what it felt like to be just a body filling a shift. I wrote poems on my breaks trying to make sense of the gap between how management treated customers and how they treated us.

I didn’t leave because the work was hard. I left because I already knew how it felt to be supported, developed and seen. And once you know that it’s very hard to settle for less.

What I experienced then, the young people entering our workforce are experiencing now — and they are far less willing to wait it out.

The New Workforce Is Already Telling Us What It Needs

Romelo Holley is a student at Taconic High School and an intern with MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board's new Jobs4Youth — a new pilot program launched by MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board in partnership with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development to expand youth employment opportunities across specific regions throughout the state. When I asked him what he observes among his peers about work, he didn't hesitate.

“They just apply to as many places as possible until someone says yes,” he told me. “They take whatever’s available. It’s not really a first-pick environment. It’s just an environment that they’re given.”

But then he said something that stopped me: over 60 percent of juniors and seniors at his school are working while enrolled. And almost none of them talk about those jobs as places where they’re growing. They talk about them as something to get through.



Jacob Borowski, left, worked at The Porches in North Adams last summer as part of MassHire's Berkshire Workforce Board's Jobs4Youth program.

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The exception? Teachers and supervisors who create environments where they feel seen. When I asked him what makes young people show up, he said, “My theater teacher — so many theater people hang out in her class all day, every day. When they describe school, they only talk about spending time with her because she’s the reason why they show up. ... I think that reflects into work — who you work with, whether the people around you are showing up and invested, whether the environment makes you feel like your effort actually matters.”

Romelo himself is an outlier among his peers — he can be selective about where he works because his family supports his path. But he's clear-eyed about how rare that is. Most of his friends are working out of necessity, taking whatever opens first, with no room to ask whether the environment is right for them.

What he's describing isn't a character flaw in his generation. It's a mirror.

Our Biggest Hurdles Hold Our Greatest Solutions

In my research studying hospitality businesses and workforce systems, I have interviewed more than 100 businesses, and the same patterns surface: performance, retention, and growth are not produced by hiring alone. They emerge from the interaction of how people are developed, how work is structured, and how individuals experience the environment around them.

I hear employers surfacing the same challenge: turnover and disengagement in young workers who seem motivated by little beyond a paycheck. But we're misreading the signal. What this generation is showing us isn't indifference — it's a heightened sensitivity to the conditions they're stepping into.

They move faster than previous generations when something doesn't feel right. They are less willing to endure environments that feel extractive or thankless. The biggest challenges we face are holding our best solutions. The way forward is through them — by leaning on this generation to help surface what's not working and co-create something better.

They are pointing us toward exactly what needs to change. The businesses that pay attention will not only strengthen their teams today — they'll be shaping the workforce that sustains them tomorrow.

We are all mirrors to each other. Every place of business is a school, whether we design it that way or not. Learning happens through modeling, through repetition, through the small interactions that accumulate over time. We absorb each other's habits. Young workers carry forward the routines they witness, not the ones they're told to follow.

An Invitation to Build the Future Together

The Jobs4Youth pilot is an opportunity to build the future our region needs: one where workers are connected to their work, businesses have reliable talent, and the Berkshire identity is shaped by a community that wants to stay and invest.

Jobs4Youth connects Berkshire employers with young people ages 14-25 for paid summer employment. MassHire becomes the business's partner from recruitment and screening through preparation, equipping youth with the employability skills they need to succeed.

Many come through Taconic High School and McCann Technical School's career technical education programs, arriving with industry-recognized credentials and hands-on training already in place. Employers make final hiring decisions, pay wages directly, and gain a structured pathway to the reliable talent pipeline their future depends on.

Fourteen Berkshire employers already have signed on as part of the Jobs4Youth Employer Network, and what they are building goes beyond filling summer shifts. They are creating early connections with the people who will drive this region's businesses and organizations in the years ahead and intentionally becoming the kind of environments that invest in the people powering their growth.

When I sat down with Phil Cohen, the owner of Bagel & Brew in Lenox, to talk about this opportunity, he shared that the possibility of losing even one team member keeps him up at night. What began as a conversation about summer staffing turned into something larger. "I feel like I can dream again now," he told me.

Lynne and Michael Soldato, owners of Roasted Garlic, Zucchini's, and Mario's restaurants, also are part of the Jobs4Youth Employer Network, and they have built their businesses on the conviction that the environment you create determines the people you keep.

When Lynne and I first spoke, she returned to a simple truth: a business only goes as far as the people running it, and that belief shows up in the way work is carried across her restaurants. For example, Lynne noticed her bartender had been developing craft cocktails on her own, experimenting with house-made nectars and seasonal menus.

Lynne gave her the room to run with it. The cocktail program that followed showed up in the culture and in the revenue.

"I think that had a lot to do with raising the bar for us," she told me. Moments like that take hold in environments where people are trusted to contribute and where initiative is recognized and built upon.

That same environment carries beyond the work itself. Her team shows up for one another outside of their shifts, marking milestones, supporting each other through challenges, and building relationships that extend well past the floor.

Some have stayed with her for decades. Others are newer, stepping into a space where the expectation is not only that they will do the job, but that they will become part of something that is worth staying for. As she said to me, "You've got to care about your people... you want them to be happy when they walk in the door."

Phil's renewed sense of possibility and Lynne's decades of investment in her people point toward the same truth: when workers feel connected to their work and to each other, everyone moves forward. That is what Jobs4Youth is building here, a network of employers who understand that the workforce they need tomorrow is shaped by the environments they create today.

This work depends on a collective commitment to keep redesigning how we think about workforce pipelines, and to center the workers who ultimately activate the bottom line.

If we get this right, we will not just develop young talent. We will have created the conditions for a region where people thrive.

To learn more about Jobs4Youth or to bring your business into the network, contact MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board at programs@masshireberkshire.com.

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