

The Berkshire Eagle



Heather Boulger, the executive director of MassHire's Berkshire Workforce Board.
THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

Executive Spotlight: Heather Boulger, executive director of MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board

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MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board

Location: 66 Allen St., Pittsfield

Contact information: 413-442-7177; masshireberkshire.com.

Founded: In 1983 by federal mandate; became Berkshire County Regional Employment Board in 1995; rebranded under MassHire name in 2018.

Employees: 6

Function: Serves as the oversight and policy making body for federally funded training and employment services in Berkshire County.

MassHire Berkshire Career Center

Location: 160 North St., Pittsfield

Contact information: 413-499-2200; masshireberkshirecc.com.

Founded: Roots date back to 1970s; incorporated as career center in 1995; rebranded under MassHire name in 2018.

Employees: 22

Function: Chartered by the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board, the career center is a partnership between the Berkshire Training & Employment Program and the Massachusetts Division of Career Services to provide programs, and services to employers, job seekers and community partners in all 32 Berkshire County municipalities.

By Tony Dobrowolski, The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — Heather Boulger was the first member of her family to graduate from college. The North Adams native originally wanted to be a teacher, but gravitated toward workforce development through a summer job she had while attending college. She's been the executive director of what is now called the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Development Board for 22 years (the Berkshire County Regional Employment Board was rebranded under the MassHire name last year).

Education is still a major focus in Boulger's life. Besides overseeing the workforce board's training programs, Boulger has been a member of the North Adams School Committee for 22 years, and the McCann Technical School's committee for eight.

We met with Boulger to talk about her lifelong interest in education, how she became involved in workforce development and ways her agency is trying to narrow the nagging skills gap in the Berkshire workforce.

Q: Were you the first member of your family to attend college?

A: No. I have an older brother who went to college then he went into the Navy. He now has a master's degree like I do, but I was the first one to actually graduate with a bachelor's degree (a double major in psychology and management from Hartwick College).

Q: Where did your interest in education come from?

A: My father was a mechanic. My mother worked in a bank and was a teacher's assistant in the schools. They always instilled in my brother and me the importance of reading and an education. They would always squirrel away money to make sure we had a college education. They taught us a very strong work ethic and attitude and also to give back to the community. It's really important to be embedded in the community. So they encouraged us to get a college degree and since then I've got two master's (an MBA from Lesley University and a master's in education from MCLA) and I have a business certificate from Harvard Business School in negotiations. ... You can't be the workforce board director and not promote lifelong learning. I'm constantly going back to school and taking different workshops and different professional development opportunities.

Q: How did you get involved in workforce development?

A: I wanted to be a teacher, so I went to Hartwick and they didn't have education. ... (But) when I first started college I was working summers at the Berkshire Training and Employment Program. ... I had the psychology/management double major and that kind of led me into the Jobs for Baystate (program). During my junior year I did an internship with Jobs for Baystate, ... then I taught there for three years. They made me program coordinator for Western Massachusetts in 1991. ... The workforce board hired me in 1992. When the school/work coordinator went out on maternity leave I became the interim director in 1996, and the permanent director in 1997.

Q: Is that a long time to hold the same position?

A: Crazy, hey? But it's funny. When you're passionate about something it doesn't feel like work, mostly. We do a lot of behind-the-scenes things, but you really see the difference you make in people's lives. Especially with the summer youth program.

Q: What makes you passionate about workforce development?

A: The two main things we do are help companies access training dollars so they can upgrade the skills of their workforce, so we see the result of people moving up in their careers, getting pay increases and getting people jobs. Then, with the youth side, we oversee the college and career training program that connects young people in the K-12 system to internships and career readiness activities. ... Eventually, hopefully, everyone will have a career. We're putting the spark into these young people.

Q: So in a sense, you're still teaching?

A: I don't love public speaking and I'm not a great storyteller so I probably would have made a lousy teacher. But I'm doing it in a roundabout way. We're pulling in the people who can make a difference. We don't do anything alone at the workforce board.

Q: How has workforce training changed in the Berkshires since 1997?

A: I think what's happening now is there's a new energy, a new resurgence. I think a lot of leaders throughout Berkshire County are learning to diversify our economy and not be so single-minded. The GE days are long gone. Big companies are never going to come back here. We have to work on the 300 companies that have 50 employees, the small employers, as we go.

Q: Why is there such a persistent skills gap in the Berkshire workforce?

A: I'm not so convinced that it's 100 percent a skills-gap issue. I think a lot of it is a population issue. We've been losing our working age populations; they've been migrating out of the region. That's part of the problem. ... Because we are a rural region it's challenging to develop training programs specifically for companies because we have to have a large number of people participating in the training to make it worthwhile. We have great educational training providers in the Berkshires, but it costs money to develop programs and there are limited resources across the state to develop new programming. ... I think the community college and vocational schools, in particular, do a great job with limited resources and responding proactively to companies.

Q: How are you trying to narrow the skills gap?

A: We work a lot with our economic development partners, who have initiatives underway for building middle management leaders like the Berkshire Leadership program. ... I know Berkshire does a lot of marketing outside the region to get people to move to the region. How we do it in the workforce world is through these college and career readiness programs. We expose our young people to internships within the region, then encourage them to continue college either here or outside the region. So they can say, "gee, I did an internship at Interprint and there's a wonderful job opportunity waiting for me when I graduate." ... We also helped to ignite the Lever (business incubator) business internship program. ... We're working with our elder services organizations because people are living longer and they want to keep on contributing.

Q: Is the internship program working?

A: We were finding that kids who went off to college every summer would be calling us and saying, "I want to do a summer internship program," and we didn't have the staffing to make those connections in addition to our high school (internships).

Now, we're trying to figure out what to do. Over 400 kids applied for those internships (in Lever's program this year), but we only granted 45. What do we with the others? We're trying to create a strategy to see if we can make those matches happen.