

PCDA'S "PONCAWORKS" PROGRAMS SEEKS CONNECTS JOB SEEKERS WITH JOB OPENINGS

Whether it is the "Great Resignation" or a shortage of people to fill jobs, the workforce situation in the United States has resulted in a significant amount of public attention since the beginning of the pandemic. "We've been talking about it in Ponca City a lot longer than that," said Liz Leaming, the Director of the PoncaWorks program for the Ponca City Development Authority (PCDA). "PoncaWorks was originally developed to help our primary employers find the workers they needed to keep work in Ponca City. As the situation has changed, so too as PoncaWorks," she said.

Ponca Works was originally launched in 2012 by PCDA, the result of the organization's Business Retention and Expansion program. "Companies were telling us that they needed key people with certain skills so we set out to try and meet that need," said PCDA Executive Director David Myers. "Now they are just saying they need people."

According to Leaming, economic development is shifting from just business recruitment to workforce recruitment. "Economic development today is workforce development. There is not separation between the two." Leaming also said that her role is far more than simply trying to help companies find employees. "That's a big part of what I do but we're shaping what the future economy of Ponca City will be like and that starts yesterday."

The Ponca Works program is both a connector and a recruiting tool for local companies. Leaming utilizes digital tools including social media and a wide range of networks to try and connect companies with jobs to fill with people looking for new opportunities. "Even though we're at full employment today, we must position ourselves, our employers and our workforce for what is coming. If we have learned anything from the last two years its that you can't wait around for things to happen to you," she said.

In addition to the workforce recruitment part of the program, Ponca Works takes a very active role in shaping the workforce of tomorrow. "There are great opportunities in Ponca City,"

Leaming said. “We want our students and recent grads to be ready to stay here and build a life in this area.” These programs, which Myers referred to as “pipeline” programs include several that work with Ponca City Public Schools, Pioneer Technology Center and the University Center to make sure that students are aware of and trained for Ponca City opportunities.

This summer, PoncaWorks will once again hold the “Girl Power” camp in Ponca City. This program is intended to help seventh and eighth grade girls learn about career opportunities in fields that have been traditionally male dominated. The participants not only learn about local industries and opportunities, but they also visit and do hands-on training in areas including welding and fabrication. “Our local companies are really great with their willingness to open their facilities up and let the young ladies get hands on experience. It’s one thing to wait until you graduate to prepare, it’s quite another not to even consider what could be a good job right here at home because you’ve never even thought about it.”

The PoncaWorks Girl Power program has been recognized with an award for excellence in economic development by the International Economic Development Council (IEDC) the largest economic developed association in the world. “It’s great to get the awards, it’s even nicer to see the excitement on the girl’s faces when they complete a project,” Leaming added.

Ponca Works is also preparing for a new program that wis intended to attract remote workers as well as general population attraction. Leaming said that “When we grow our workforce, every business in Ponca City benefits and there are more opportunities for the graduates of area high schools.”

“We started PoncaWorks to help fill jobs, but it is moving to the center of the economic development universe,” said Myers. “It’s nice to be able to say that we have created the jobs we set out to create. The real reward is seeing the impact on Ponca Cities and watching the future take shape right in front of us.”