

# GAP: Many graduates leaving tri-state area

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population over the next decade, from 166,610 in 2022 to 158,705 in 2032.

While notable, the projection represents a less substantial drop than the organization's 2021 skills gap analysis, which predicted the working-age population would fall by more than 11,000 from 2021 to 2031, to 154,081 in the latter year.

GDDC Director of Workforce Programming Nic Hockenberry attributed the difference to more updated population projections from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey and called it a mark of the community's efforts to attract new residents.

"I wouldn't say that our population is replacing itself or growing from within as fast as it has in years past," he said. "This is really a mark of the opportunity to draw people to our region."

The report notes that in each of the region's top six industries — advanced manufacturing; health care and social assistance; professional, scientific and technical services; educational services; transportation and warehousing; and finance and insurance — local colleges are producing graduates, but many choose not to stay in the tri-state area.

Hockenberry said GDDC has established several initiatives to help local college students feel more connected to the area. The measures include the Talent Dubuque program for summer interns and a planned "Community of Colleges" event to take place in 2023.

"We get two to four years to try and explain why this region is where (students) should call home, or at least give them a positive experience so if they do go back from whence they came, when the right opportunity arises, they'll give us consideration," he said.

## PROJECTED NEEDS

Of the six categories, the industry expected to grow the most in Dubuque County over the next 10 years is health care and social assistance, which the report projects will increase by 11.6%.

Jenny Bockenstedt, director of human resources for Grand River Medical Group in Dubuque, said the health care provider has seen "a broader gap" in staff availability for positions such as nurses and medical assistants since the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

She said Grand River representatives have partnered with local colleges to speak with students in technical courses and implement scholarships for certain areas of highest need, such as lab technicians.

"(Lab technician) is a very high-demand career that pays very well, but there's probably not a lot of people that know about it because it's a very behind-the-scenes position," she said.

Educational services in Dubuque County are projected to grow by 11.4% over the next decade.

Teaching positions are not expected to have a substantial skills gap — indeed, the number of local students graduating with degrees in secondary education in areas other than career/technical and special education outnumbers the projected openings by more than 200. However, entry-level positions such as teaching assistants and cooks are projected to have skills gaps of more than 100 workers.

Dan Butler, superintendent of Western Dubuque Community

## Top 10 projected skills gaps

The following employment categories are expected to have the highest skills gaps in the tri-state area in 2032.

1. Heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers: Projected skills gap of 291 workers
2. Laborers and freight, stock and material movers: 264 workers
3. General office clerks: 230 workers
4. Home health and personal care aides: 181 workers
5. Teaching assistants (except postsecondary): 176 workers.
6. Miscellaneous assemblers and fabricators: 166 workers
7. Secretaries and administrative assistants (except legal, medical and executive): 125 workers
8. Institution and cafeteria cooks: 109 workers
9. Light truck drivers: 80 workers
10. Bookkeeping, accounting and auditing clerks: 75 workers

School District, said the district currently has "several" vacant positions in noncertified roles such as paraeducators. He said he is not surprised to see those types of roles rank high on the projected skills gap list.

He acknowledged that lower compensation and lack of certain insurance benefits can make it difficult for districts to fill noncertified positions, although he noted that Western Dubuque has worked with its bargaining groups and has had "significant bumps" in compensation for several employee groups.

According to a fall 2022 wage and earnings report from Greater Dubuque Development Corp., teaching assistants in Dubuque County earn an average of \$13.66 per hour. Institution and cafeteria cooks fare slightly better, at a median hourly wage of \$14.24.

"We feel good about the compensation being offered," Butler said. "It's never going to be enough, honestly, but we just have to do what we can for the district and make sure we're still being fiscally responsible while balancing creating attractive positions."

## FILLING THE GAPS

Tucker Freight Lines, which also has locations in Burlington, Iowa; Milan, Ill.; and Edgerton, Kan., currently employs about 260 truck drivers.

McClain said company officials plan to pursue a new State of Iowa program announced in December by Gov. Kim Reynolds, which will provide \$6 million to support employers or organizations who sponsor or partner on training programs to prepare drivers for commercial driver's license tests. Tucker Freight Lines does not have an in-house CDL training school, so McClain said officials hope to potentially collaborate with Northeast Iowa Community College on a program that would meet state criteria for reimbursement.

"(Trucking) is a growing industry, but there are some legal constraints that make it a little more difficult, and we just have to figure out the best way that fits our business model while also trying to be as flexible in the hiring as we can," he said.

# CALL: Vacancies occur

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incidents," said Scheller, who joined the department in June, filling a vacancy created by the March retirement of Rick Steines.

To accommodate the increasing needs for emergency medical services, City Council members last year approved spending \$582,000 to establish a third full-time ambulance crew at Dubuque Fire Station 2 on John F. Kennedy Road in order to lower response times in the West End.

However, the fire department also faced roster vacancies throughout the year and has struggled to fill those positions.

Scheller said she hopes to have the department's roster filled in 2023. The 10 current vacancies will be filled by newly hired employees by the end of January, but Scheller noted that those new firefighters won't be fully trained for another six months.

"It's an ongoing challenge that we are working through," she said. "We are taking a proactive approach in trying to get ahead of resignations and retirements."

Scheller said last year's statistics for the fire department will play a role in initiatives the agency pursues in 2023.

For example, Scheller said she aims to increase community education efforts for bystander CPR. Last year, the fire department responded to 67 cardiac arrest cases. Eleven of those people survived, or 16%. In 2021, 14 people survived out of 75 cardiac arrest incidents, or 19%.

However, in 2021, 36% of those cardiac arrest cases featured bystanders performing CPR prior to emergency responders arriving, but only 19%

of cardiac arrest incidents in 2022 saw bystander CPR performed.

"We didn't get a lot of people to get engaged when people become unconscious or are pulseless," Scheller said. "What we need to do this year is get the word out there about how important it is for a layperson to get involved before we get to the scene."

Two other area departments contacted for this story reported decreases in calls in 2022.

East Dubuque, Ill., Fire Chief Joe Heim said his department responded to 368 calls for service last year, down from 397 in 2021. That equates to a decrease of 7%.

Heim added that a large majority of those calls were for emergency medical services.

"A lot of our calls are medical," he said. "We've had some fires and some assists on hazardous materials as well."

Lancaster, Wis., Fire Chief Steve Braun said his department fielded 99 calls for service in 2022, down slightly from the previous year. He added that an increasing percentage of the fire department's calls are to assist emergency medical personnel.

"We are seeing more and more medical-assist calls," Braun said. "That call volume is increasing quite a bit, so we are trying to help out."

Heim said the consistently high volume of calls stresses the rosters of volunteer fire departments like East Dubuque.

"It's a manpower issue all around," he said. "The more calls you have, the more time people are away from their families. What we're trying to do is keep that family balance there."

Repeated calls seeking comment for this story were not returned by the Platteville (Wis.) Fire Department.

# SHORTAGE: Turning to old medications could have dangerous effects

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over" for parents.

"Demand has definitely gone up, but there are also issues with manufacturing delays or sometimes availability of raw ingredients," he said. "If there are issues with availability, we work with the provider to find out if there are other brands of a treatment or other alternatives."

## SHORTAGE

Hartig Drug CEO Charlie Hartig said the shortage is partly a result of the convergence of COVID-19, influenza and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), which the nation has dealt with for several months.

"What's resulted is we dispensed some of those medications earlier in the end of the summer," he said. "So, over the last month or so, we have experienced some shortages."

Brosius and Hartig agree that the issues are hitting retail pharmacies worse than hospitals.

Hartig said his stores have kept medications so far, due to using its own wholesaler. But he said situations change quickly from store to store.

"If you get 10 sick kids who go to the Hartig on Central (Avenue) one afternoon, then that store can be short quickly," he said. "And sometimes, a mom comes in and hasn't been able to find Tylenol for a few days and has a sick kid, she might see four on a shelf and grab them all."

Smith, also a member of Dubuque County Board of Health, said local symptoms drive part of the shortage, but that the root causes are continuing global supply-chain issues related to the pandemic.

"We're at that time of year when a lot of kids are sick with bacterial infections and most kids need liquid medi-

cation," she said. "So, it's an increased need coupled with problems we can't control here."

Brosius said the shortages could be particularly worrisome for parents with specialized standards for the medicine they seek.

"If somebody is worried about a certain dye or something like that, that would be harder," he said. "Because we're limited by what the manufacturers put out, what gets here and where it is. If there are options out there, we do what we can, but you'll have fewer options."

## SOLUTIONS

Brosius and Hartig said pharmacies and providers will assist parents in making sure their children get needed medication, even with the shortages.

"We have the ability to compound those (liquid medications) with the pill or make a more appropriate dose

or find the medication in a different one of our stores," Hartig said. "It takes a little more time. We have also been looking at alternative suppliers."

Smith said the shortage also makes it all the more important that parents take their children to a provider when they are sick.

"The symptoms of bacterial infections and viral infections are similar — fever, cough, sore throat, congestion," she said. "So, it is really important that people go to a provider to get a correct diagnosis."

Brosius said pharmacies encourage providers then to be conservative in their diagnoses.

"Sometimes, a provider doesn't know for sure at first inspection what infection it is. RSV is one that is especially hard," he said. "A parent goes into an appointment with a sick kid and wants to leave with something, but just giving someone a prescription

for something to try is making things worse."

Smith said the last thing people should do is turn to old antibiotics or other medications they have at home.

"For liquid medications for pediatric patients, those are usually mixed at the pharmacy when a patient picks them up and are only effective, or maintain their potency, for 10 days to two weeks," she said. "If we take the wrong antibiotics, there are side effects and drug interactions that are possible."

While the shortages and respiratory illness season last, Hartig recommended that parents pick up one bottle of children's pain reliever if they see one on the shelf, so they have it on hand. But he stressed not to hoard.

"I wouldn't recommend stocking up because then we get to a COVID-19 toilet paper situation," he said.

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