

## Job Fair gets Port Chester residents thinking about careers of the future

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Jesus Gonzalez, a Port Chester resident, accepts a packet of information from New York State Department of Labor Business Services Representative Genesis Retamozo at the Job Fair for an Emerging Economy at the Carver Center on Friday, Feb. 2. The literature will connect him to resources the agency offers. ([Sarah Wolpoff/Westmore News](#))

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As Christopher Velazquez perused the various booths set up around the Carver Center gymnasium, taking his time to have thorough and genuine conversations with all the representatives stationed, he couldn't help but think to himself: "These are jobs my mother would be proud of."

To him, in a sentiment likely relatable to most, that felt like a good sign.

"There's a lot of resources here, a lot of opportunity," said Velazquez, a 26-year-old lifelong Port Chester resident. "It seems like the opportunity is there and they're ready to give those opportunities out, or at least you can learn about these different fields and decide if it's a good fit for you. This place is really accessible, actually."

Attending the Job Fair for an Emerging Economy on Friday, Feb. 2, Velazquez's experience emulated what the organizers were aiming for. The event was geared around sustainability—the future of the job market—and bridging the gap of accessibility into those sectors by informing people how they can prepare while showing them what opportunities are available.

The Village of Port Chester and the Sustainable Port Chester Alliance hosted the event in collaboration with Soulful Synergy, a New-Rochelle based organization that educates and trains people for the climate-smart workforce while keeping an equitability lens in mind. Paul Presendieu, the firm's community engagement director, said the root of their mission is understanding opportunity gaps that are preventing marginalized communities from attaining "green collar work."



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ticipants in the Job Fair for an Emerging Economy check out various booths

representing job opportunities, community service organizations and labor unions. With a two-pronged mission, the event was meant to show visitors what kind of sustainable jobs are available and teach them how to attain such employment.

By Sarah Wolpoff

“This all started with a conversation we had with the deputy mayor during Latino Conservation Week,” Presendieu said, referring to a panel he was on with Port Chester Trustee Joan Grangenois-Thomas. “We talked about how can we help provide support services for the municipalities that may have residents that don’t know how to get involved. You see the jobs out there, but how can we demystify how they can become qualified for them.”

The job fair was meant to be movement toward that ambition by creating a cycle of education and opportunity.

With around 20 tables set up around the Carver Center gymnasium, the event featured representatives from a variety of fields—from clean energy companies and labor unions actively seeking recruits and offering guidance toward finding a path in their sectors, to elected officials sharing information about internship programs and the work their offices’ do for communities. Other local organizations, such as the Sustainable Port Chester Alliance and the Carver Center, had tables available to discuss the resources they offer and workers’ rights advocacy they support.

“At our table, we have information about trainings that are available now, like OSHA 30, construction site safety,” Presendieu said. “Basically, what you need to do is be qualified to be on the construction site, and then you have entities (here) hiring for specialty fields. And then we also have the State Department of Labor, which provides wrap around services so you can learn how to create a resume, a cover letter, and overall branding of yourself.”

“Hopefully, this is the beginning of a good ecosystem to be created so residents can know there are opportunities for them to access these services,” he continued.

Velazquez said he was initially inspired to stop by because he was looking for employment options that are more exciting, fulfilling, than the typical retail and food-industry job. He was delightfully surprised by the agencies he encountered.

“I walked over to the (Think Energy) booth, and it was an opportunity I wasn’t expecting. It’s an opportunity to sell people clean energy, and I wasn’t even aware that you’re able to have that so accessible to you,” he said. “It’s exciting, and it’s interesting. It’s a good way to push people toward saving the world, and it’s having a lasting impact on the world and a positive outlook without forcing it down their throat.”

As someone who feeds off positive energy, he was equally inspired by the enthusiasm of the folks he spoke with, particularly at Congressman Jamaal Bowman's table. Now, he's thinking about applying for an internship.

Jenna Dickerson, the Human Resource Manager at INF Associates, an energy service company that aims to improve facilities by specializing in efficiency and electric vehicle supply equipment, said she was thrilled about the event's turnout.

Because her company is growing, she came to the job fair with information on a plethora of open roles, from sales to electrical engineers. Within 90 minutes, she ran out of materials to pass out.

"People are interested, I came with a bunch of brochures," said Jes Parker in a similar sentiment, pointing to an empty spot on her table. "I think we're definitely a little different than a lot of the other groups, but once people saw us, they were interested."

Parker is the communications manager with Westchester Land Trust, a nonprofit based in Bedford Hills that's dedicated to preserving the land and protecting natural resources. They oversee 13 nature preserves that are open to the public and maintain other areas that act as natural sanctuaries across Westchester and Putnam counties.

"I came here today looking for conservation apprentices," Parker said. "It's a 9-week program that we started to help people get a foot in the door in the conservation world, because it can be a little intimidating, especially if you live in a city and you've never used a chainsaw or something before."

"We've been trying to connect with people who don't have a ton of nature exposure but are passionate about it and give them the tools they need to have a career in nature conservation," she continued. "Everybody likes nature, everybody deserves to have connections to nature, but everything is so built up around here so it's hard to have that experience and build those connections. So, we're trying to close that gap."

As a business agent of Local Union No. 21, the association for plumbers and steamfitters, John "Jack" McCrudden was also on site to tell attendees about their five-year apprenticeship program. It's a route toward a long-lasting career with good benefits, he said, adding that he was also offering advice about the best ways to get accepted.

While the only criteria for the program is to be at least 18 years old and have a high school diploma or GED certificate, he said it helps when prospective

employees have completed trade school courses or have work experience with a contractor under their belt.

“Those are different ways of getting in, but it’s a great opportunity and a great way to make a career. I’ve been doing it for 39 years now,” he said.

When Julian Martin arrived at the job fair last Friday, he was coming off a solid week of active employment searching.

A Port Chester resident, living around upper Westchester Avenue, he had recently been laid off from the law firm he was working at and decided to visit the Carver Center with no expectations.

“This seemed like a good place where you get to see people in person and really get a feel for what the job is like,” said Martin, a 25-year-old. “I’m just going to check everything out and see how it goes. I majored in business administration in college, and I’m good at customer service stuff. So, I’m going to get myself out there and see what’s going on.”

At that point, he had only visited two tables at the fair, but already felt encouraged when he realized what the theme was all about. Martin had always seen himself as someone who wanted to do good but didn’t realize those humble ambitions could be intertwined with his career.

“If I can make an impact through my work, that would be awesome,” he said. “My idea was always I could have a job and then do something to help the community afterwards. But if I could do something that helps with my job, that’s even better.”