As coronavirus cases surge, hospitals are brought to the brink

By Jay Greene

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Unprecedented surge in filings leads to flood of problems

By Chad Livengood

They’ve called. They’ve logged in. They’ve even faxed. But they still can’t break through. Even as more than 800,000 Michigan workers have claimed unemployment benefits, there are an untold number of jobless workers who have not been able to file after four weeks of business shutdowns due to the coronavirus pandemic that has swept across the state.

The state’s unemployment filing system is down, the phone system puts them on hold for hours on end or hangs up. Several jobless workers report spending their days quarantined at home and redialing the Unemployment Insurance Agency’s hotline number all day long.

Calling and getting ahold of anyone is absolutely next to impossible,” said Jessica Robertson, a wedding photographer from Northville whose line of work has been wiped out until September by a collapse of the in-person events business.

Focus: Women in skilled trades

From welders to carpenters to electricians, more women are joining the skilled trades, but their numbers are still low.

The Conversation

Mary Lynn Foster returned home to Michigan to lead the American Red Cross Michgan as regional CEO.

Chainsaws and Hope: Prison-to-work program starts to show results.
FOCUS | WOMEN IN SKILLED TRADES

Building a more inclusive workplace culture

Building Cooperatively | Gabrielle Knox, Alex Moore, Chloe Songalewski

BY ALLISON TORRES BURTKA | SPECIAL TO CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

Building Cooperatively is a co-op in Detroit that focuses on historic restoration and investing in the community. It includes seven co-owners — among them Gabrielle Knox, Alex Moore and Chloe Songalewski — and other members. The co-op grew out of several neighbors working on their houses. They attended a training program together, the Living Trades Academy, through the Michigan Historic Preservation Network. They built their skills, learned more about restoring old houses, loved it and decided to continue working together.

“I like working with my hands, and I like being busy,” Songalewski said. “I also love architecture and the beauty in 19th century houses — the craftsmanship and what they did back then is just so beautiful.” She added that even the plastering “is like a sculpture in itself.”

The group built trust in each other while spending 40 hours per week in class together, Knox said, and “there was already a lot of respect and relationship built based on being neighbors. So it was pretty easy to transfer that into a business.”

In the co-op they built, they share the work and support each other, both as workers and as people. The co-op has included a mix of gender identities, racial backgrounds, people who speak English as a second language and people who are LGBTQ — so it broadly includes people who are underrepresented in the larger world of the skilled trades.

“When we were developing what we wanted this to look like, we put into our bylaws the idea of holding that space for black and brown people, for the LGBTQ community, a lot of us — including myself — represent, as well as Detroiters who are residents,” Knox said. “As a company, we have done a really good job at operating in a way where there’s equal pay, and there’s equal work.”

Songalewski sees this kind of group as one way to change perceptions of who belongs in the industry. She said that sometimes male subcontractors ignore her and talk to her male counterparts instead. “They don’t really take me seriously because, for one, I am female. Two, I’m queer. Also, I’m like five feet. I look like I am an 18-year-old, but I’m actually 36,” she recalled. “When that happens, Knox said, “Great artistry of painting, for example.”

“Your perception of things might differ,” said Moore. “And the way that you move. And I just like to re/flect our culture, because our workspaces are going to reflect our culture, because humans who were raised in this culture create them.”

Moore pointed out that attitudes about women in the skilled trades are "an entire cultural thing — not just the way the trades are set up," she said. "Our workspaces are going to reflect our culture, because humans who were raised in this culture create them."

And Building Cooperatively’s work spaces reflect the culture that the group has built.