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JUNE / JULY 2024

Northwest Indiana Business Magazine

*Serving greater Northwest
and North Central Indiana
and surrounding counties*

2024 Best of Business

*Best of Northwest Indiana Business
and Best of Michiana Business Awards*

*Kari Marich
Chief financial officer
Staff Source*



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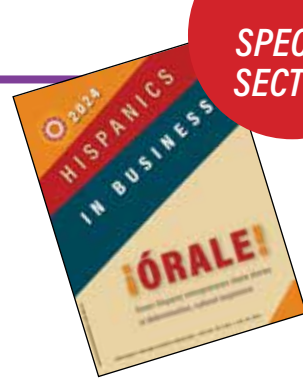


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2024 Best of Business

Our readers voted for their favorite businesses in Northwest Indiana and Michiana. Congratulations winners!



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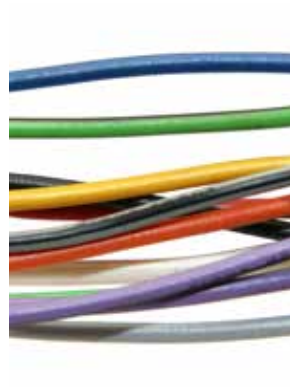


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AT THE FOREFRONT

**UChicago
Medicine**

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- + **Hands-on internships**
- + **Practicum experience**
- + **Rotations at the University of Chicago Medical Center, UChicago Medicine's flagship campus**

These educational opportunities will directly impact NWI, developing experienced practitioners dedicated to serving our local communities through cutting-edge research, hands-on care, and healthcare innovation. **Through a spirit of humble leadership and compassionate service, Valpo and UChicago Medicine will transform today's health and healthcare landscape.**



[VALPO.EDU/CONHP](https://valpo.edu/conhp)

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► Read on your phone



NEW BOARD MEMBERS

Northwest Indiana Business Magazine recently named several new executive editorial and advisory board members.



► Read on your phone

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Bridging digital divide

How to reach millions locked out of modern life with high-speed internet

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JUN-JUL 2024

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GOOD BIT

↑ 12.5%

The percent increase in enrollment from fall 2022 to fall 2023 at Ivy Tech Community College's Lake County campus. ► **PAGE 34**

IN THIS ISSUE

Hard work does pay off. And this issue is proof that the Region's business community is committed to helping all companies and organizations succeed. Many business leaders and experts, and their employees, took time out to vote for their favorite vendors, companies and support organizations in our 2024 Best of Business survey. So many in fact that we had more votes than last year. Thank you for voting!

The results of our 19th annual survey feature some new companies and past winners readers always count on. We are happy to announce them in this issue.

Besides congratulating our award winners, this issue also features stories that show the Region's dedication to creating opportunities for economic development and career success.

Our law story focuses on several recent graduates who have landed in the Region to start their careers. Companies also are making special efforts to recruit and retain the next generation of lawyers.

Northwest and North Central Indiana's institutions of higher learning also are making strides in attracting new students and offering more opportunities to gain degrees that lead to fulfilling employment.

However, without high-speed internet, working and learning can cause financial and educational disparities. Many internet companies are working hard to close the digital divide in the Region and make sure everyone has access to the global economy.

That brings us back to students who need to learn how to manage the money they will make. Many politicians, educators and business leaders are figuring out the best ways to do just that. Schools and businesses are reaching out to youth to teach them how to build wealth for good and bad times.

La Porte also is preparing for a bright future. With population growth projections trending up, the city has big plans for infrastructure improvements and new amenities that will attract homeowners and businesses. And then, there's always "Living the Lake Life."

We profile the Lake County Corn Dogs and Purdue University Northwest's new Chancellor Chris Holford, who is eager to partner with the business community.

Finally, we have a special section that features seven Hispanics in Business who believe working hard will help them realize their financial dreams. Enjoy this issue!

— Heather Pfundstein, publisher/editor

PICTURE PERFECT



Members of Pulse Technology's President's Club earned a trip to Hawaii in February. Top-performing employees from Indiana who attended include Pat Allendorf, Joelle Christie, Greg Fox, Matt Jessen, Jen Kirka, Nancy Mathena, Sandy Weiland and Dan Zimmerman. President Chip Miceli and his wife, Terry, accompanied them.

Photo provided by Pulse Technology

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Professional advancement



Businesses, organizations share news about new hires, promotions, accolades

HEATHER PFUNDSTEIN AND KERRY SAPET

Accounting

Michigan City-based **CLH, CPAs & Consultants** hired **Ryan Womack** to its administrative team. She is a student at Indiana Wesleyan University.

Architecture

Steve Carlisle was named Benton Harbor, Michigan-based **Wightman's** new president during a board meeting April 9. **Tom McKercher** will lead its Kalamazoo, Michigan, office. The consulting firm has offices in Plymouth, South Bend and Portage.

Midwest-based **Shive-Hattery** acquired Tacoma, Washington-based **Helix Design Group**.

Banking

Jana Ledbetter is a new mortgage loan originator at **Horizon Bank's** Valparaiso – Lincolnway location. **Cindy Kirkham** was promoted to assistant vice president, community development operations officer. **Ted Roknich** was hired as an enterprise risk management manager.

First Financial Bank expanded into Chicago, opening its first headquarters there.

Merrillville-based **Centier Bank** opened a new banking center in Cedar Lake. **Bryan Olund** was promoted to

vice president, small business banking. **Dakita Jones** was promoted to vice president of community relations. **Lupita Nuñez** was named small business banker for the bank's downtown Valparaiso office. **Peter Wilson** was promoted to bank officer and small business portfolio manager. **Michel Alvarez** was promoted to bank officer and is the branch manager in Goshen. **Stephanie Kuziela** of Chesterton and **Heather Hunter** of Hebron won **Billinero's** monthly \$1,000 prize in February and March.

Benjamin Brown, Chris Chatfield and **William Berdine** are part of **1st Source Bank's** expansion into Northwest Indiana. Brown is located in Lake County in a new loan production office in Crown Point. Chatfield is based in La Porte County, and Berdine will focus on small business development throughout the Region.

Dwayne Powell Jr. was named community development manager and vice president for the Northern Indiana and Michigan regions of **Old National Bank**.

Jessica Denton joined Goshen-based **Interra Credit Union** as assistant vice president and manager of mortgage sales – originator.

Michiana native **Eric Gerhold** is **Notre Dame Federal Credit Union's** new chief financial officer.

Commercial real estate

Chicago-based **StorSafe** acquired a Cedar Lake location.

Construction

Alisha Berglund, director of client services at Chicago-based **Berglund Construction**, was appointed to the board of directors of the **Northwest Indiana Forum**. Berglund has a location in Chesterton.

Anthony Lara was promoted to estimating manager at La Porte-based **Larson-Danielson Construction**.

Economic development

Trisan Gaston is the new special projects coordinator at the **Economic Development Corp. Michigan City**.

Morgan Bruns was hired as the marketing and events coordinator at the Portage-based **Northwest Indiana Forum**.

Marty Mechtenberg of the **South Bend – Elkhart Regional Partnership** landed a spot in the inaugural cohort of the Make Startups Executive Fellowship Program.

The **Michigan City Chamber of Commerce** selected **Cara Jones** its Ambassador of the Quarter for the first quarter of 2024. Jones is a small business banker for Centier Bank.

The **Lakeshore Chamber of Commerce** named **Kim Olesker**,



ARCHITECTURE
Steve Carlisle



BANKING
Cindy Kirkham



BANKING
Bryan Olund



BANKING
Dakita Jones



BANKING
Dwayne Powell Jr

former leader of the United Way Porter County, its new leader.

Valparaiso-based **Regional Development Co.** hired **Emma Hutchinson** as a social media intern. Hutchinson is a journalism major at Columbia College Chicago.

Education

The **Purdue University Northwest** board of trustees announced five promotions for faculty members, effective Aug. 12. Those becoming professors include **Ricardo Calix**, computer information technology; **Mohammed Errihani**, English; and **Meden Isaac-Lam**, chemistry. Those becoming associate professors include **Amanda Kratovil-Mailhiot**, nursing; and **Julia Rogers**, nursing.

Indiana University Northwest Chancellor **Ken Iwama** was named the next **Indiana University** vice president for regional campuses and online education, effective July 1. **Cali Topolski**, who graduated from Indiana University in 2020, was named the next head volleyball coach at **IU South Bend**. She takes



BANKING
Eric Gerhold

over from **Alison Derdzinski**, who left after last season.

Matthew Yee, senior at **Valparaiso University**, accepted a position with the **U.S. Coast Guard Band**.

Gifted Hands Academy opened in Hammond.

Paul Bohn, the Arthur J. Schmitt Professor of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering and professor of chemistry and biochemistry at the **University of Notre Dame**, was named the inaugural director of the new Bioengineering & Life Sciences Initiative. Five faculty members were part of the **American Association for the Advancement of Science's** 2023 class of fellows: **Elizabeth Archie**, professor in the department of biological sciences; **Peter Burns**, the Henry Massman Professor of Civil Engineering in the department of civil and environmental engineering and earth sciences and director of Notre Dame's Center for Sustainable Energy; **Nitesh Chawla**, the Frank M. Freimann Professor of Computer Science and Engineering and director of the Lucy Family Institute for Data and Society; **Patricia Culligan**,



CONSTRUCTION
Anthony Lara

the Matthew H. McCloskey Dean of Engineering and professor in the department of civil and environmental engineering and earth sciences; and **Nathan Swenson**, professor in the department of biological sciences and the Gillen Director of Notre Dame's Environmental Research Center.

Entrepreneurship

University of Notre Dame freshman **Arda Kurama** is **Startup South Bend - Elkhart's** new entrepreneurship empowerment intern for summer.

Health care

Justin Kats is the new chief financial officer for **Franciscan Health Crown Point** and **Franciscan Health Michigan City**. **Dr. Ryan Misek** is Franciscan Health Crown Point's new vice president of medical affairs. Women's health nurse practitioner **Brittany LePard** and family nurse practitioner **Richard Zimmerman** joined the **Franciscan Physician Network** at the **Rensselaer Medical Center**. **Kathy Tebo**, a family nurse



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Marty Mechtenberg



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Kim Olesker



EDUCATION
Paul Bohn



HEALTH CARE
Justin Kats



HEALTH CARE
Eric DeWald

AROUND THE REGION



HEALTH CARE
Simon Ratliff



HEALTH CARE
Ray Fraser



INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
Kouren Stepp



MANUFACTURING
Robert Lucas

practitioner, joined **Franciscan Brook Health Center**. Franciscan Physician Network welcomed surgeon **Thomas Magill** in La Porte.

Eric DeWald was named CEO of **Health Foundation of La Porte** following the announcement of **Maria Fruth's** retirement. **Erica Boyd, Jackie Dermody, Amanda Fowler, Stacey Garcelon, Abby Hinch, Bill Harmon, Steve Hobby, Harry Holtcamp, Julia Kanestrom, Erica Kanney, Emily**

Yiannias, Sally Riffer and **Tammy Rosebaum** graduated from the foundation's **Nonprofit Leadership Academy**.

Valparaiso-based **HealthLinc** received funding from the **Indiana Family and Social Services Administration - Division of Mental Health and Addiction** for a behavioral health residency program.

Interim CEO **Simon Ratliff** was named the new leader of **Northwest Health's La Porte and Starke County**

hospitals. Neurologist **Asia Filatov** joined the practice of Dr. Richard Strawsburg at **Northwest Medical Group - Neurology** in Valparaiso. **Andrea Back** is director of quality and patient experience champion, and **Jenica Sutherland** was named chief nursing officer at Northwest Health - La Porte and Northwest Health - Starke. **Gena DeMuth** is **Northwest Health - Porter's** chief nursing officer. **Justin Pendilla** earned a Daisy Award



PURDUE UNIVERSITY NORTHWEST

Designated as NWI's only Innovation and Economic Prosperity University

As one of only three public institutions in Indiana nationally recognized* as an Innovation and Economic Prosperity University, Purdue Northwest continues on a path of excellence as a metropolitan university committed to serving its surrounding communities.

At PNW, we strengthen the future workforce, engage in economic development and push the boundaries of innovation to best serve Northwest Indiana and the world at large. **That's Powering Onward.**

pnw.edu/innovation



*Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, 2023

for exceptional nursing at Northwest Health – La Porte.

Dr. **Aaron Ruter**, of **Lakeshore Bone and Joint Institute** based in Chesterton, participated in a panel discussion about surgical techniques for nerve surgery, repair and reconstruction at the **American College of Foot and Ankle Surgeons** conference in February.

Vital View Technologies CEO **Ray Fraser** raised \$5.5 million last year to seek FDA clearance in 2025 for a congestive heart failure monitoring platform.

HealthLinc celebrated the grand opening of its new Michigan City health center April 2.

NorthShore Health Centers will expand to four new communities this year, including Gary, which opened in March; Crown Point, which was scheduled to open May 1; and Michigan City and East Chicago on June 28.

UChicago Medicine celebrated a ribbon cutting at its new Crown Point facility April 25.

Information technology

Dennis Trinkle, Indianapolis-based **TechPoint**'s senior vice president of talent, strategy and partnerships, received the Internet 2.0 Conference Outstanding Leadership Award in March at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas.

Members of **Pulse Technology**'s President's Club earned a trip to Hawaii in February. Top-performing employees from Indiana who attended include **Pat Allendorf**, **Joelle Christie**, **Greg Fox**, **Matt Jessen**, **Jen Kirka**, **Nancy Mathena**, **Sandy Weiand** and **Dan Zimmerman**. President **Chip Miceli** and his wife, **Terry**, accompanied them. **Kouren Stepp** was hired as an IT engineer. **Precious Bonner** was hired as a business development executive in the company's Merrillville headquarters.

Law

Several Region professionals were named to **Super Lawyers**' list of the top 50 lawyers in Indiana, including **Robert Dignam**, **O'Neill McFadden & Willett**, Schererville; **Steven Langer**, **Langer & Langer**, Valparaiso; and **Barry Rooth**, **Theodoras & Rooth**, Merrillville.

Logistics

Ports of Indiana hired **Doug Kowalski** as general counsel and promoted **Julie Petree** to director of project delivery.

Kevin Beasley was promoted to division director at **EQ United**'s logistics division, which has three locations in Elkhart.

Manufacturing

Corporate attorney **Robert Lucas** is **Hammond Group Inc.**'s next president

and CEO. He replaces **Terry Murphy**, who will continue his role on the board of directors. **Anir Chakraborty** was named director of sales for Asia-Pacific region, and **Ashley Tobin** is the new North American sales manager.

Nonprofit

Luc Zromkoski joined the team at **Opportunity Enterprises** as senior director of business operations; **Kate**

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AROUND THE REGION



NONPROFIT
Luc Zromkoski



TRANSPORTATION
Alex Dunlap III



TOURISM
Christine Livingston



UTILITIES
Vince Parisi

Ramirez was named the new vocational education director; and **Julie McKean** was promoted to chief compliance officer.

Bruce Lindner, executive director of **Porter County Aging and Community Services**, retired from the nonprofit after 17 years.

The Gary-based **Urban League of Northwest Indiana** received a \$1 million grant from the **Indiana Department of Education**.

The **Porter County Community Foundation** appointed six new board members: **Dean Cobble** with **GW Berkheimer**; **Jung Lee** with **Indiana Beverage**; **Lauren Kroeger** with **Hoepfner, Wagner & Evans**; **John Montgomery** with **Blox Digital**; **Rachel Stoner** with **East Porter**

County School District; and **Kari Zehner** with **Kittredge & Zehner CPA**.

Retail

Island Fusion Caribbean restaurant opened in downtown South Bend.

Katie Rose Boutique opened a second location in Crown Point.

Ruff Luxury Inn at the Dunes opened in Chesterton.

Strack & Van Til stores in Porter County will start selling **Do Goodies** gourmet popcorn, a mission of Valparaiso-based **Opportunity Enterprises**.

Transportation

Around the Clock Ambulance CEO **Alex Dunlap III** accepted an

invitation to join the 2024 Chicago cohort of the **Inner City Capital Connections** program.

South Bend International Airport Vice President of Operations **Patrick Mac Carthaigh** was awarded the distinction of Accredited Airport Executive by the **American Association of Airport Executives**.

Tourism

Christine Livingston was named president and CEO of **Indiana Dunes Tourism** after longtime executive director **Lorelei Weimer** left the organization.

Jason Taylor is the new superintendent of **Indiana Dunes National Park** in Porter.

Sarah Reed was named interim director of **Purdue Northwest's Gabis Arboretum** after **Stephanie Blackstock** stepped down.

The **La Porte County Symphony Orchestra** renewed Music Director **Carolyn Watson's** contract through the 2026-2027 season.

Utilities

Vince Parisi was named president and chief operating officer of **NIPSCO** after a few weeks as interim leader. He replaces **Mike Hooper**, who left for an opportunity at another Midwest utility.

John McAvoy was appointed to **NiSource's** board of directors after **Aristides Candris** stepped down. ■

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BEST OF BUSINESS AWARDS

2024

2024
Best of
Northwest
Indiana
Business

2024
Best of
Michiana
Business

BEST OF BUSINESS

Our 2024 Best of Business Awards winners faced significant obstacles last year, but continued to serve customers and clients with grace and tenacity.

Companies and organizations that thrived in 2023 embraced those challenges, and focused on their employees and customers.

"Working with our clients through current economic challenges was especially important in 2023," said Rita Bacevich, president of HDW Commercial Interiors.

Seth Spencer, owner of Sera Group, said staying proactive helped his company continue offering high-quality service.

"One of the most challenging obstacles we faced was navigating economic uncertainties and rising inflation," he said.

Our readers noticed hard work like this and rewarded winners with a Best of Business honor. Voting was up by 33% from 2023, due in part to a new website dedicated to our readers' survey.

"What makes this even more significant is that these votes come directly from the greater Northwest Indiana and Michiana community," IUN Chancellor Ken Iwama said.

Our 19th online awards honor winners in seven distinct categories in these two regions.

"Franciscan Health is honored to be recognized," said a statement from the health system. "... Knowing these awards are the result of online votes by the public at large is humbling."

Our winners excelled at providing many services and products to the more than 1.3 million people who call the Region home. They also are committed to their communities.

"Our team of advisers go beyond ordinary banking by exceeding our customer's expectations, and helping our community become a better place to live through volunteerism," said Steve Kring, regional president at Horizon Bank.

Centier Bank's CEO Mike Schrage also is committed to the Region's economic future.

"The most rewarding opportunity in 2023 was laying the foundation for continued investment and growth in Indiana," he said.

Part of that success will include hiring, training and retaining new talent.

"One of our highest priorities at BCC is nurturing the next generation of lawyers," said Tory Prasco, managing partner at Burke Costanza & Carberry LLP.

As for 2024, business leaders say they are embracing new technology and focused on becoming the best option for their customers.

CEO Andrea Short of 1st Source Bank said it best: "Thank you to everyone who voted for us!"

We also thank readers who voted this year!

— Heather Pfundstein, publisher/executive editor

Congratulations!



SCAN WITH YOUR PHONE

TO THE WINNERS OF:

BEST OF NORTHWEST INDIANA BUSINESS AND MICHIANA BUSINESS AWARDS

BANKING AND FINANCIAL

BEST BANK FOR BUSINESS

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Horizon Bank

MICHIANA

Winner

1st Source Bank

BEST BANK FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Horizon Bank

MICHIANA

Winner

1st Source Bank

BEST INSTITUTION FOR OBTAINING A BUSINESS LOAN

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Horizon Bank

MICHIANA

Winner

1st Source Bank

BEST CREDIT UNION

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Tech Credit Union

MICHIANA

Winner

Notre Dame Federal Credit Union



► Learn more about the Best of Business voting process by scanning this QR code with your phone.

BEST ACCOUNTING FIRM

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

McMahon & Associates CPAs P.C.

MICHIANA

Winner

Krugger Lawton CPAs

BEST WEALTH MANAGEMENT ADVISORY FIRM

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Horizon Bank

MICHIANA

Winner

1st Source Bank

BEST BUSINESS INVESTMENT FIRM

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Centier Bank

MICHIANA

Winner

Calder Capital

BUSINESS SERVICES

BEST PLACE TO PURCHASE OFFICE FURNITURE

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

HDW Commercial Interiors

MICHIANA

Winner

HDW Commercial Interiors



“Understanding the importance of giving back, we aimed to make a significant difference (during the first Horizon Day of Giving).”

— Steve Kring
Horizon Bank



“We have long since believed that if we don't obsolete our own equipment, our competitors will gladly do it for us.”

— Rick Urschel
Urschel Laboratories Inc.

BEST PLACE TO PURCHASE OFFICE EQUIPMENT/SUPPLIES

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Pulse Technology

MICHIANA

Winner

US Business Systems

BEST INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY CONSULTING FIRM

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Midwest Telecom of America

MICHIANA

Winner

US Business Systems



Photo by Rick Bella

Aaron McDermott is the co-founder and president of Crown Point-based Latitude Commercial. Readers voted his company Best Commercial Real Estate Firm in the 2024 Best of Business readers' survey.

BEST AD AGENCY OR MARKETING FIRM

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Sera Group

MICHIANA

Winner

Sera Group

BEST GRAPHIC OR WEB DESIGN FIRM

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Sera Group

MICHIANA

Winner

Sera Group

BEST COMMERCIAL PRINTER

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Miss Print

MICHIANA

Winner

Miss Print

BEST EMPLOYEE STAFFING FIRM

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Staff Source

MICHIANA

Winner

TalentSource

BEST TELECOMMUNICATIONS FIRM

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Midwest Telecom of America

MICHIANA

Winner

Surf Internet

BEST INTERNET PROVIDER

NORTHWEST INDIANA

Winner

Midwest Telecom of America

MICHIANA

Winner

Surf Internet

WINNING REMARKS



“Franciscan Health continues to embrace a regional approach to health care, which optimizes facilities and resources to improve the level of care for all of NWI.”
 — Dean Mazzone
 Franciscan Health



“In 2023, we found exceptional young attorneys and promising law school students who we are excited to be working at BCC.”
 — Tory Prasco
 Burke Costanza & Carberry



“We are grateful that our associates, clients and communities never wavered in their trust to us ... and their loyalty is something we take great pride in.”
 — Mike Schrage
 Centier Bank



“By being ahead of the curve in implementing AI technologies, we created efficiencies that offset rising costs.”
 — Seth Spencer
 Sera Group



“1st Source Bank responded to each challenge by focusing on our mission of helping our clients achieve security, build wealth and realize their dreams.”
 — Andrea Short
 1st Source Bank



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BEST OF BUSINESS AWARDS

COMMUNITY AND EDUCATION

BEST COMPANY TO WORK FOR

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Winner

Urschel Laboratories Inc.

MICHIANA
Winner

Centier Bank

BEST UNIVERSITY TO ATTAIN AN MBA

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Valparaiso University

MICHIANA
Winner

Indiana University Northwest

BEST UNIVERSITY FOR A TECHNOLOGY DEGREE

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Indiana University Northwest

MICHIANA
Winner

Indiana University Northwest

BEST UNIVERSITY ONLINE DEGREE PROGRAM

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Indiana University Northwest

MICHIANA
Winner

Indiana University Northwest

BEST MINORITY OWNED BUSINESS

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

18th Street Brewery

MICHIANA
Winner

Visions GPS Branding

BEST VETERAN OWNED BUSINESS

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Veterans' Cafe & Catering

MICHIANA
Winner

Cloudbusters

BEST WOMAN OWNED BUSINESS

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Staff Source

MICHIANA
Winner

HDW Commercial Interiors

CONSTRUCTION / REAL ESTATE

BEST COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE FIRM

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Latitude Commercial

MICHIANA
Winner

Commercial In-Sites

BEST COMMERCIAL CONSTRUCTION FIRM FOR NEW CONSTRUCTION

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Larson-Danielson Construction

MICHIANA
Winner

Larson-Danielson Construction

TO THE BEST
OF BUSINESS
VOTERS:



BEST COMMERCIAL CONSTRUCTION FIRM FOR REMODELING OR EXPANSION

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Michuda Construction

MICHIANA
Winner

Larson-Danielson Construction

BEST ENGINEERING FIRM

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Superior Engineering LLC

MICHIANA
Winner

Jones Petrie Rafinski

BEST COMMERCIAL ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN FIRM

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Facet Architecture

MICHIANA
Winner

Facet Architecture

BEST COMMERCIAL LANDSCAPING FIRM

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Dean's Pools & Landscaping

MICHIANA
Winner

Lakeshore Landscaping

BEST RESIDENTIAL REAL-ESTATE FIRM

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

McColly Real Estate

MICHIANA
Winner

Cressy & Everett Real Estate

WINNING REMARKS



“Our goal is to provide spaces that are functional and affordable while still hitting the mark with respect to deadlines and an overall look.”

— Rita Bacevich
HDW Commercial
Interiors



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— Ken Iwama
IU Northwest



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— Dr. Daniel
McCormick
Franciscan Health
Crown Point



“Our remodeled flagship office in Crown Point has provided a more efficient and comfortable space in which our members can conduct business.”

— Gene Novello
Tech Credit Union



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— Niclas Erhardt
College of Business
Valparaiso University

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Winner

Homes of Distinction

MICHIANA
Winner

Clayton Hoover and Sons

BEST RESIDENTIAL HOME REMODELING CONSTRUCTION FIRM

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Affordable Remodelers

MICHIANA
Winner

Andree Builders Inc

EVENTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

BEST RESTAURANT FOR BUSINESS ENTERTAINING

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Gamba Ristorante

MICHIANA
Winner

Cafe Navarre

BEST MEETING SITE FOR LARGE GROUPS

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Avalon Manor Banquet Center

MICHIANA
Winner

Blue Chip Casino, Hotel & Spa

BEST MEETING SITE FOR SMALL GROUPS

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Teibel's Restaurant

MICHIANA
Winner

Howard Park

BEST CATERER FOR EVENTS

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Avalon Manor Banquet Center

MICHIANA
Winner

Scoops & Smiles

BEST GOLF COURSE FOR CHARITABLE OR BUSINESS EVENTS

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Innsbrook Country Club

MICHIANA
Winner

Blackthorn Golf Club

BEST PHOTOGRAPHER FOR EVENTS

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Bella Photography & Design

MICHIANA
Winner

Peter Ringenberg Photography

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

BEST HOSPITAL OR HOSPITAL GROUP

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Franciscan Health

MICHIANA
Winner

Franciscan Health

BEST HEALTHCARE FACILITY FOR CARDIOLOGY

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Franciscan Health

MICHIANA
Winner

Franciscan Health

BEST HEALTH CARE FACILITY FOR CANCER TREATMENTS

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Franciscan Health

MICHIANA
Winner

Franciscan Health

BEST HEALTHCARE FACILITY FOR ORTHOPEDICS

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Franciscan Health

MICHIANA
Winner

Franciscan Health

BEST HEALTHCARE FACILITY FOR MENTAL HEALTH

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Franciscan Health

MICHIANA
Winner

Franciscan Health

BEST HEALTH CARE FACILITY FOR URGENT OR IMMEDIATE CARE

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Franciscan Health

MICHIANA
Winner

Franciscan Health

BEST HEALTH CARE FACILITY FOR PHYSICAL OR OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

Franciscan Health

MICHIANA
Winner

Franciscan Health

BEST FITNESS OR WELLNESS FACILITY

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

**Franciscan Health
Fitness Centers**

MICHIANA
Winner

**Franciscan Health
Fitness Centers**

LEGAL AND INSURANCE

BEST LAW FIRM FOR CORPORATE LAW

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

**Burke Costanza &
Carberry LLP**

MICHIANA
Winner

THK Law, LLP

BEST LAW FIRM FOR BUSINESS ACQUISITIONS AND MERGERS

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

**Burke Costanza &
Carberry LLP**

MICHIANA
Winner

THK Law, LLP

BEST LAW FIRM FOR LITIGATION

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

**Burke Costanza &
Carberry LLP**

MICHIANA
Winner

THK Law, LLP

BEST LAW FIRM FOR ESTATE-PLANNING

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

**Burke Costanza &
Carberry LLP**

MICHIANA
Winner

Resolution Law

BEST INSURANCE AGENCY FOR BUSINESS PROPERTY AND LIABILITY COVERAGE

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

1st Source Insurance

MICHIANA
Winner

1st Source Insurance

BEST INSURANCE AGENCY FOR BUSINESS HEALTH AND LIFE COVERAGE

NORTHWEST INDIANA
Winner

1st Source Insurance

MICHIANA
Winner

1st Source Insurance

WINNING REMARKS



“One of the biggest challenges we faced in 2023 was dealing with a high demand for construction services — a positive (one).”

— Nick Larson
Larson-Danielson
Construction



“This award validates our commitment to assisting buyers and sellers of businesses within the Michiana region and positively impacting the local economy and community.”

— Max Friar
Calder Capital

Editor's note: The 2024 Best of Business Awards were voted on by our readers in Northwest Indiana and Michiana. Our winners excel at providing many services and products to the more than 1.3 million people who call the Region home.



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READY TO LITIGATE

NEXT GENERATION OF LAWYERS FIND REGION PERFECT PLACE TO START CAREERS



Martin Pritikin, dean of Purdue Global Law School, said many students choose their online-only platform because they are in a midlife career pivot and cannot attend a brick-and-mortar school.

Provided by Purdue Global Law School

BILL DOLAN

The newest Region lawyers have navigated the academic demands of law school in the face of a pandemic, landed work at area legal firms and are litigating in our courts.

They arrive as the number of Indiana attorneys is shrinking, and technology threatens to disrupt their professional pursuits.

But, they've also won the admiration of seasoned litigators.

"You have some very talented women lawyers and more of them now, and they do a great job," said Roy Dominguez, who has practiced criminal and civil law for more than four decades. He is based in Merrillville.

Shontrai Irving, president of the Lake County Bar Association and a business law professor at Purdue University Northwest, said he is impressed by the next generation of lawyers.

"I find them eager, hungry and excited about the profession," he said. "Their technical skills are much stronger. They have ways of working and interacting with clients in ways we didn't have. The ability to work productively in many places gives them an edge."

James Old, a Valparaiso University adviser to prelaw undergraduate students, said in spite of today's challenges, students are still drawn to the legal profession.

"The law is still attractive because they see it as a prestigious career where they can make a good income," he said.

New class of attorneys

Nicholas Assise joined O'Neill, McFadden and Willett LLP of Schererville as an attorney in 2022 and defends health care providers accused of medical malpractice.

The Tinley Park, Illinois, native first took an interest in law during a summer when he shadowed a cousin's work as a public defender. His respect for her civil rights advocacy prompted him to attend Notre Dame Law School.

"My first week at school, a presenter told us, 'You didn't quite know where

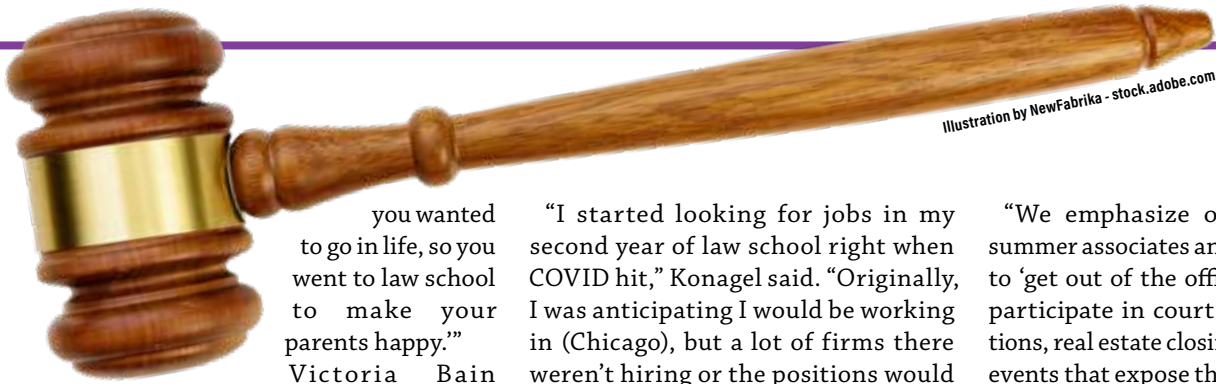


Illustration by NewFabrika - stock.adobe.com



SCAN WITH YOUR PHONE

you wanted to go in life, so you went to law school to make your parents happy.”

Victoria Bain joined Merrillville’s Weiss, Schmidgall and Hires PC last year and already has a civil defamation trial under her belt.

“I was interested in human rights, so if you really want to change things, you read and understand the law and become politically active,” Bain said.

After growing up in Burns Harbor, she was in the second year of her undergraduate studies at Valparaiso University when its law school closed.

“I reached out to a couple of law schools but didn’t want to take the risk of moving far away (COVID had just broken out), so I chose University of Illinois Chicago (formerly John Marshall Law School) because I could commute to it easily.” She found work here on a job search website.

Rishi Asija began civil litigation this February as an associate for Crown Point’s Crist, Sears and Zic LLP. He grew up in suburban Detroit.

“I didn’t know what I really wanted to do,” Asija said. “I took my family’s advice to follow my passion. I wanted to do something meaningful and help people in some capacity, so going to law school was a no-brainer.”

Lauren Konagel, now at Merrillville’s Burke Costanza & Carberry LLP, was born and raised in Spring Grove, Illinois.

“In college I was planning to be a clinical psychologist and decided to double major in criminal justice and psychology,” she said. “I took some law classes and realized I was much more interested in the law, so on a wing and a prayer, I applied to some law schools.”

She earned her law degree in 2022 from Chicago-Kent College of Law.

Region’s firms ‘real’ them in

Finding a job in Chicago during the pandemic proved difficult for some, so practicing in Northwest Indiana was an easier fit.

“I started looking for jobs in my second year of law school right when COVID hit,” Konagel said. “Originally, I was anticipating I would be working in (Chicago), but a lot of firms there weren’t hiring or the positions would be fully remote.”

Many of her law school lectures met via Zoom.

“In-person was really attractive to me,” she said. “I was hoping to get as much experience and exposure to real hearings and trials, and Burke, Costanza & Carberry offered that.”

Northern Indiana law firms compete annually for graduates with the rest of the country with promises of hands-on job training and all Northern Indiana can offer a young person.

Joshua Hague, a partner at Krieg DeVault, with offices in Merrillville and South Bend, works with the firm’s new talent.

“I see close to 600 resumes a year — where there has been a determination to practice in Northwest Indiana and Chicago in a level of collegiality in our bar you may not see in larger legal environments,” Hague said.

“We believe it’s part of our job to teach them to be great lawyers by exposing them to all areas in which we practice, so they get to see, live-and-in-person, what it’s like to be a litigator.”

Jon Schmaltz, a partner at Merrillville’s Burke Costanza & Carberry, said with Chicago so close, the competition for top talent can be a challenge.

“Obviously, Chicago is a large market and, with its proximity to Northwest Indiana, creates a competitive atmosphere in lawyer recruiting,” he said.

BCC’s advantage, he said, is offering real-world learning experiences.

“We emphasize opportunities for summer associates and young attorneys to ‘get out of the office’ — attend and participate in court hearings, depositions, real estate closing, and a variety of events that expose them to the nuances of the professional practice,” he said.

Shelice and Michael Tolbert, husband and wife and partners of Gary’s Tolbert and Tolbert Attorneys at Law LLC, said their recruiting operates under the no-stone-untuned principle.

GRADUATE PERSPECTIVES

“I was interested in human rights, so if you really want to change things, you read and understand the law and become politically active.”

— Victoria Bain
Weiss, Schmidgall and Hires PC



“I started looking for jobs ... right when COVID hit. Originally, I was anticipating I would be working in (Chicago), but a lot of firms there weren’t hiring or the positions would be fully remote.”

— Lauren Konagel
Burke Costanza & Carberry LLP



“I took my family’s advice to follow my passion. I wanted to do something meaningful and help people in some capacity, so going to law school was a no-brainer.”

— Rishi Asija, Crist, Sears and Zic LLP



“We leverage our social media presence, and we’ve served in different sending organizations where we run into other lawyers,” Michael Tolbert said.

BY THE NUMBERS: According to a 2020 report by the American Bar Association, 40 of Indiana’s 92 counties had fewer than one lawyer per 1,000 residents. Only 3% of Indianapolis lawyers are people of color — the lowest number in the country.

256

The number of lawyers in Elkhart County in 2020

1,049

The number of lawyers in Lake County in 2020

136

The number of lawyers in La Porte County in 2020

358

The number of lawyers in Porter County in 2020

587

The number of lawyers in St. Joseph County in 2020

Source: Indiana Supreme Court / ABA Profile of the Legal Profession 2020

Tolbert said they hire younger recruits with the future in mind.

“We are trying to hire for the long run, trying to build a firm, a business, a community,” he said.

And students who accept their call will find no shortage of work.

“There are certain principles in the law that will never change — hard work and long hours,” Michael Tolbert said.

Shelice Tolbert said they like introducing new graduates to the nuances of the law.

“We expose them to research projects, summarizing, the kind of training you don’t get in the classroom,” she said.

The lawyer gap

The new class of lawyers joins a roll of attorneys across Lake, Porter, La Porte and St. Joseph counties, where the ranks have thinned out to just about 2,000.

Law schools have experienced a decade of smaller enrollments, which led in 2020 to the closure of the Valparaiso University Law School, which fed new talent to the area.

“The (2008-2013) Great Recession hit the legal career a lot harder than other professions,” James Old at Valparaiso University said.

“There were stories in the national media about law students graduating with \$200,000 in debt and unable to get jobs,” Old said. “So, the number of students going into law schools dropped, and smaller schools, like ours, had a hard time competing for students.”

Indiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Loretta Rush said in April that, “Indiana faces a critical shortage of attorneys ... and the gap is especially acute in Indiana rural and most socioeconomically disadvantaged communities.”

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Less than 1 percent of Lake County's practicing attorneys have offices in the city of Gary, Michael Tolbert said.

Lake County Prosecutor Bernard Carter said the now-defunct Valparaiso University Law School once "served in-state students and those who graduated there, many of them came back to our Region.

"It's definitely hurt our office and every prosecuting office in the state," he said.

He has had to reach out and hire more seasoned lawyers to help prosecute the more than 8,000 felonies and misdemeanors charged annually in Lake County.

The Indiana Supreme Court responded in February by opening the door to Purdue Global Law School graduates. They previously were denied access to the bar exam because their online-only education has yet to win approval of the American Bar Association.

Martin Pritikin, dean of Purdue Global Law School, said many of their students choose their online-only platform because they are in a midlife,

"I find (the next generation of lawyers) eager, hungry and excited about the profession. Their technical skills are much stronger. ... The ability to work productively in many places gives them an edge."

— Shontrai Irving, Lake County Bar Association and Purdue University Northwest



career pivot, and cannot attend a brick-and-mortar school.

"We provide for people who cannot fit the traditional law school experience into their current lives," Pritikin said.

Many of these students work, have a family and don't live within commuting distance.

"Nationally, the average brick-and-mortar program is just under \$150,000 for all three years," he said. "Our total program — with no fixed campus to maintain and small staff to pay — is just under \$50,000."

He said Purdue's law curriculum is just as good, if not better than traditional

programs, giving its students more time to absorb abstract legal principles by rewatching online lectures if necessary and snap quizzes to ensure students are keeping up with the pace of instruction.

New technology

Shelice Tolbert said the difference between now and when they entered the legal field 24 years ago is the grasp of new technology by new lawyers.

"No one is taking hand-written notes like we used to," she said. Her husband also said that students "understand the importance of using technology to deliver services a lot easier."



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LAW

Asija, a 2022 graduate of the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, said he regularly used his internet browser, word processor and a personal information manager to organize his calendar.

“There are probably courses in law school about those, but I think they primarily are life skills,” he said.

There are concerns generative artificial intelligence might create risks in the areas of client privacy and someday even take legal reasoning away from flesh-and-blood lawyers.

The Indiana Supreme Court just created a blue-ribbon committee of academics, judges and legislators to work this summer to set ethical standards for AI.

Pritikin said Purdue Global Law has just launched an artificial intelligence law course, which looks at this new technology still in its infancy.

“Technology hasn’t replaced lawyers; it made them more efficient,” he said. “And I think, AI will do the same thing, eliminating the need for repetitive work, but not analytical thinking and judgment.”

THE EXPERTS



BERNARD CARTER

LAKE COUNTY PROSECUTOR

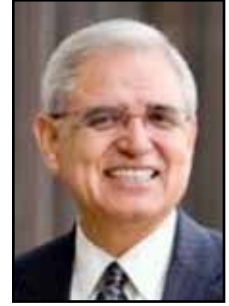
Closure of Valparaiso University Law School has made it more difficult to find help.



JAMES OLD

VALPARAISO UNIVERSITY

“The (2008-2013) Great Recession hit the legal career a lot harder than other professions.”



ROY DOMINGUEZ

MERRILLVILLE LAWYER

“You have some very talented women lawyers and more of them now, and they do a great job.”

But Old said the new technology will do more than that.

“I think large law firms will be looking at AI as a tool that can write briefs faster and more efficiently, so maybe they will have fewer first year associate lawyers doing that,” he said.

As for the future, Old can’t say for sure how AI will change his profession — even five years from now.

“This AI thing is so new we are still trying to figure it out, but it’s a safe bet that AI is going to change everything, every career, every field,” Old said. ■



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2024

HISPANICS

IN BUSINESS

¡ÓRALE!

Seven Hispanic entrepreneurs share stories
of determination, cultural inspiration



LIVING THE BETTER

HISPANIC ENTREPRENEURS DRIVE BUSINESS GROWTH BY FOL

MICHAEL PUENTE

Yoloxochitl “Yolo” Lopez DeMarco is one of the many Hispanics in the Region who is taking her financial future into her own hands.

As the world began shutting down at the start of the pandemic in March 2020, she decided to start her own business.

“I saw an opportunity to help local organizations and businesses communicate more effectively about the pandemic,” said the 33-year-old Lopez DeMarco, a native of Guadalajara, Mexico. “I started providing translation services, from English to Spanish.”

Her company is among the 5 million Latino/Hispanic-owned businesses nationwide generating more than \$800 billion in annual revenue, according to a report by the U.S. Department of the Treasury.

The report shows that nearly 25 percent of entrepreneurs in 2021 were Latino/Hispanic. The U.S. Census Bureau, meanwhile, shows the number of Hispanic small businesses increased by more than 8 percent between 2020 and 2021.

In Indiana, Hispanics own 4 percent of businesses, according to the U.S. Small Business Administration’s 2022 Small Business Profile. A 2023 report by Purdue University shows Latinos increasing in population throughout the state, especially in northern and central Indiana.

In 2000, Lake County led the way among Indiana’s 92 counties with



Symphony Raudry, coordinator of graduate programs of the School of Business and Economics; Jennifer Rines, director of Assessment and Transition Programs for Academic Success; and Susana Batres, admissions counselor and international student liaison, show T-shirts touting Indiana University Northwest’s designation as a Hispanic-Serving Institution during a strategic planning meeting in October in Gary.

the most Hispanics at 59,128 and by percentage of the total population at 12.2 percent.

Lake County, home to East Chicago, Hammond and Gary, has historically attracted Latinos since the early 1900s, first with Mexicans during the Mexican Revolution, then in the 1950s with waves of Puerto Ricans, all looking to fill positions in manufacturing.

In 2000, Marion County, which includes Indianapolis, had 33,000 Hispanics, comprising 3.9 percent of the county’s total population.

As of 2020, Marion County was home to the highest number of Latinos

at 129,000, with Lake County at just under 100,000, according to the Purdue report. Lake County still has the highest percentage of Latinos at 20 percent of the total population, with Marion County ranking sixth statewide at 13 percent.

The counties of Elkhart, Porter, St. Joseph and La Porte have all seen significant gains in Latino population over the past 20 years, which is why there’s a need for businesses to not only cater to Latinos but understand the culture and language.

Noe Najera of Notre Dame Federal Credit Union moved to the Michiana area 22 years ago.



100,000

The number of Latinos in Lake County as of 2020, according to a 2023 report by Purdue University

4%

The percentage of Indiana businesses owned by Hispanics, according to a U.S. SBA 2022 report



Photo by Tome Trajkovski/Indiana University

“Our Hispanic population has grown phenomenally,” he said. “We are the fastest growing population in the state of Indiana, and we’re having an impact.”

His parents immigrated from Mexico.

“What’s really cool is that we don’t lose our culture,” Najera said. “I love keeping our culture alive, like our family history, the customs that we have that our parents taught us and that we bring over.”

Lopez DeMarco and Najera are two of the seven Hispanics in Business featured here who are leading the way in Northern Indiana. All are succeeding in business and in their communities. Here are their stories:

1 Yoloxochitl Lopez DeMarco Yolo Vox

Lopez DeMarco is the founder and owner of Goshen-based Yolo Vox, a Hispanic marketing and advertising company that helps companies tap into the Hispanic market.

“Most of my clients are large companies: Hospital systems, financial and educational institutions that want something beyond translated materials,” said Lopez DeMarco, a former TV and radio journalist and a graduate of Goshen College.

She said her company is unique because they help clients understand their potential customers.

“We don’t just translate something,” she said. “We really dive into making an impactful message with nuances and cultural awareness.”

The explosion of the Hispanic community in Goshen forced local governments to scramble to communicate with them, especially during the pandemic. Lopez DeMarco produced an outreach program for the Elkhart County Health Department to reach Spanish-speaking residents. But



it was more than just translating English into Spanish, she said. “It’s not always correct just to translate the American message into Spanish because the Hispanic community is very different, very warm, very emotional,” she said. “We created a marketing campaign in Spanish around protecting your family. That’s where the knowledge of our culture comes into play, and it’s important that companies consider a customized theme and not just say, ‘OK, it’s in Spanish; we’re good.’”

2 Noe Najera Notre Dame Federal Credit Union

Najera says he is “an accidental banker.” His first love was baseball.

He played minor league baseball with the Cleveland Guardians (formerly the Indians) organization.

“I went to school to study finance and economics because I thought



that one day I was going to make millions of dollars, and I wanted to not be like a lot of athletes that

waste their money,” said Najera, who grew up in southern California.

“Because we grew up very humble with immigrant parents, we wanted to make sure that with every nickel we learned to save,” Najera said. “I knew that I was going to be successful somewhere. I wanted to make sure I managed my money.”

When Najera’s playing days were over, he knew he wanted to stay in baseball somehow. He started working for a minor league baseball team owned by the San Diego Padres in Lake Elsinore, California.

“I used to run their marketing for them. I used to sell baseball to companies,” Najera said. “I would work with community banks, credit unions, factories, any manufacturing that would offer the whole packages of renting for your company picnic.”

After a year, the team was sold and then shut down. Najera became a free agent and marketed his talents to the clients he used to sell baseball to.

He then worked for a credit union in Riverside, California. The owner had ties to the South Bend area. Najera went to southwest Michigan to set up



RESOURCES

Many organizations in the Region focus on helping Hispanic entrepreneurs start and grow their businesses. They provide education, mentorship and opportunities for networking. Here is a short list:

Hispanic Alliance of Career Enhancement

Website: haceonline.org

Hispanic Association of Small Businesses

Website: www.hasb.org

Hispanic Retail Chamber of Commerce

Website: hispanicretailchamber.org

IUN's Small Business Institute

Website: northwest.iu.edu/business/business-community/index.html

Latin American Chamber of Commerce

Website: laccsjc.org

Latinas Think Big

Website: latinasthinkbig.com

Latino Business Support Network

Website: www.latinobusiness-supportnetwork.org

Minority Business Development Agency, DOC

Website: www.mbd.gov

NWI BizHub

Website: nwibizhub.com

NWI Small Business Development Center

Website: isbdc.org/locations/northwest-indiana-sbdc

PNW Office of Hispanic Serving Institution Initiatives

Website: www.pnw.edu/student-life/inclusive-and-welcoming-pnw/office-of-hispanic-serving-institution-initiatives/

U.S. Chamber of Commerce

Website: www.uschcc.com

a finance program at a credit union there but eventually made his way to Michigan City and then South Bend. That was 22 years ago.

"I had two children at the time," Najera said. "I did not want to live in a major metropolitan area. I wanted to be in a more rural, more family and community oriented. We ended up staying here."

Najera spent several years with Horizon Bank before joining Notre Dame Federal Credit Union in November 2023.

Najera said Notre Dame Federal Credit Union is the largest Catholic, faith-based financial institution in the country.

"We're proud of that. We don't shy away from the dome," Najera said.

Najera said the credit union does its best to assist Latino immigrants and migrant workers.

"I think that any immigrant that comes to this country, they want a better life," Najera said. "That's why my parents came here because they wanted an opportunity to provide for the children. I'm living proof of that."

3 Patricia Carrillo Blushy Behavior

Trish Carrillo said she was an entrepreneur before she became one.

Originally from Boston, the 50-year-old Puerto Rican businesswoman now calls St. John home. She's a maker of homemade candles, customized T-shirts and an independent hairstylist



whose culture plays a part in everything she does.

"I service a diverse number of clients, and I've been doing this for over 20 years," Carrillo said. She doesn't sell just one or two candles.

"I get a lot of people that want me to make 60 candles for a birthday party or candle molds for an anniversary party or a wedding," Carrillo said.

"My homemade candles smell better than anyone else's."

By making homemade candles, Carrillo said she controls what goes in them.

"They are freshly made. They are handmade, which means I get to control the actual fragrance. When you burn my candle, it's going to last longer, and it's going to have a very rich scent," Carrillo said. "I use wax that is not harmful to the environment or harmful to you. It's better than anything else you're going to buy in the store."

Customizing her products is an expression of her creativity.

"I get to put my little flair on it," she said. "... And sometimes I do that through my cultural roots. My candles are made customized to you. You get to decide on the scent. It's more personalized. You can go to Amazon or Target and buy a candle, but they are all going to be the same.

"When you want something unique and different and personalized, you come to me."

Carillo also makes personalized T-shirts, geared toward Latinas. She once owned a salon in Schererville but now does hairstyling independently. She began styling hair when she was in college.

She also has a business philosophy. "It's a hustle," Carillo said. "It's a way of figuring out how to do something that you love and that you're passionate about. And also making money."

She also has cultural freedom working for herself. "Being an entrepreneur has allowed me to embrace my Latino heritage," she said.

She also has cultural freedom working for herself.

"Being an entrepreneur has allowed me to embrace my Latino heritage," she said.

4 Michael Gonzalez Steel Shores Media

After nearly three decades as a newspaper reporter in Northwest Indiana, Michael Gonzalez felt it was time to venture out on his own.

Now, instead of covering the news, he helps his clients tell their own stories.

"I saw a need for government agencies and smaller nonprofits to get

their messages out and to deal with the media,” Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez launched Steel Shores Media in 2019. Lake Station is his home.

“It became more and more clear to me that government agencies and nonprofits needed help with messaging and reaching out to the media to share their stories,”



Gonzalez said. “And I realized that I had the experience to help them.”

Gonzalez has represented clients such as the cities of Gary and Portage, both in Indiana, and several local tourism bureaus.

A current client is United Way of Northwest Indiana.

“Nonprofits and governments have a story to tell,” Gonzalez said. “It’s an important story, and they shouldn’t have to gamble thousands of dollars on public relations agencies that may or may not hit for them.”

Gonzalez isn’t just using his knowledge to assist his clients, he’s teaching them his craft too.

His program is called “Best Nonprofit PR Method.”

“The idea is that most nonprofits can do this on their own with a little bit of extra guidance,” Gonzalez said.

Starting in May, Gonzalez said he planned to launch a website with several do-it-yourself courses for nonprofits.

“We are launching what is called ‘coaching cohorts’ where you can get actual coaching every week on the steps that are part of his process,” Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez said he does work with some smaller and larger clients.

“Part of the company serves more established nonprofits. Different agencies have different needs, and we’re trying to meet those needs,” Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez said there aren’t many Latinos in public relations in Northern Indiana. He recommends

those looking to start a business and/or public relations to seek a mentor.

“Don’t be afraid to try. Don’t be afraid to think differently,” Gonzalez said. “I had to overcome the fear of rejection and of the unknown.”

5 Gladys Reynoso Beautiful Hair & Sky Day Spa

Gladys Reynoso doesn’t quite remember why she decided to go into business for herself nearly four decades ago.



“Probably from working with other people. Then, one day, you just say it’s time for me,” Reynoso said.

“You get tired of bosses treating you with a lack of respect.”

A native of Puerto Rico, Reynoso arrived in the U.S. with her father at the age of 3 not knowing a word of English.

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“It’s difficult for minority companies to break barriers in cybersecurity. ... We’ve built an ecosystem which I think is the shining star. My motto is: ‘The only barriers are those that you place on yourself.’”

— Doreen Gonzalez Gaboyan, Industry Workforce Solutions

“My father came over here (Northwest Indiana) for a job. He met a lady and left me there with her,” Reynoso said. “She raised me to the best of her ability. It was considered a foster home.”

Reynoso found herself living in another foster home before ending up at the Mayflower Home for Girls in Hammond.

“I’m telling you that was the best thing that ever happened to me. I had great mentors and 14 sisters. It was wonderful. Great house mothers. And that’s where I got my start in the beauty world. The director, may she rest in peace, saw something in me,” said Reynoso, a graduate of the former Hammond Tech High School.

Reynoso said opening Beautiful Hair & Sky Day Spa in Portage didn’t scare her.

“I was not intimidated. I was ready for the responsibility,” she said. “To this day, I really enjoy doing hair. I do manicures, pedicures. I do facials. I pretty much do it all.”

Despite new hair salons and spas opening, Reynoso doesn’t see them as competition.

“Our professionalism is a lot better than maybe some of them. I believe in giving the client what they’re looking for,” Reynoso said.

Reynoso also believes in finding a mentor for those new to the industry and continuing to learn through education. In the end, Reynoso, who spent much of her early years living on a farm in Puerto Rico and having little money, says life is what you make it.

“Every journey is a tough journey. It’s all up to you to make that journey

happen. And here in the United States of America, which I love, you have opportunities, but it has to be up to you — whether you’re Latino, Black, white, whatever,” Reynoso said. “It’s up to you to succeed.”

6 Doreen Gonzalez Gaboyan Industry Workforce Solutions

Gonzalez Gaboyan launched a cybersecurity business in 2020 after hearing about many Hispanics who missed opportunities to expand their businesses.

“We launched the business in 2020 after seeing we had so many gaps in cybersecurity readiness,” she said. “The readiness was having an effect on companies’ abilities to compete for



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federal contracting, and actually, any kind of contracting,” said Gonzalez Gaboyan, owner of Industry Workforce Solutions in Crown Point.

Before opening her business, Gonzalez Gaboyan spent 15 years working with Purdue University in several capacities at both its Northwest Indiana and West Lafayette campuses. Before 2019, she was the assistant director of minority and women engagement and development for Purdue in West Lafayette for seven years.

At Purdue, she ran its cybersecurity apprenticeship program, recruiting minorities and women into its cybersecurity education program — the perfect training and experience for opening her own firm.

“What we want to do is make sure we can work with small and medium-sized businesses, primarily minority and women-owned businesses, to help them thrive in awareness and cybersecurity,” Gonzalez Gaboyan said. “We help them learn what cybersecurity readiness is, so they’re prepared and

“What’s really cool is that we don’t lose our culture. I love keeping our culture alive, like our family history, the customs that we have that our parents taught us and that we bring over.”

— Noe Najera, Notre Dame Federal Credit Union

ready to compete, and to do business with the government as well as corporations.”

Gonzalez Gaboyan said she’s managed to thrive in an industry where there are few women-owned businesses, and even fewer Latina-owned businesses.

“There’s been no pushback for what I’m doing. It is quite the opposite,” Gonzalez Gaboyan said. “I’m dealing with a lot of large corporations that look to the program to help understand their supply chain readiness.”

That, she said is a bigger barrier than being Latina. But she concedes that she is unique to her industry.

“It’s difficult for minority companies to break barriers in cybersecurity. ... We’ve built an ecosystem which I think is the shining star,” she said.

“My motto is: ‘The only barriers are those that you place on yourself.’”

Gonzalez Gaboyan, who is both Mexican and Irish, got her work ethic from her father. He worked for Inland Steel Co. in East Chicago for 35 years. He encouraged her to venture off on her own.

“I was born in the Region, working in Chicago for 15 years before going to the university,” Gonzalez Gaboyan said. “My dad said to me, ‘It’s about time that you launch (your business) to help minorities.’”

She said he thought she should share what she learned at PNW.

“He said, ‘It’s about time because with all that knowledge that you gained from university, you can’t just keep giving it to them. You need to give it to somebody else now.’”

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7 Edward Garza

El Popular Inc.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 20 percent of new businesses fail during the first two years of being open, 45 percent during the first five years and 65 percent within 10 years of opening.



El Popular has not only defied the odds, but it's also done so for nearly 100 years.

El Popular, makers of authentic Mexican chorizo, got its start in 1925 in East Chicago, making it the oldest Hispanic-owned business in Indiana.

"My grandfather migrated from Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico,

in the early 1920s. This is back when they were looking for people to work in the mills," said Edward Garza, grandson of Vicente Garza, who started the business. "He saw there was a need for the more native foods of the Mexican people."

Vicente Garza was born in 1890. He immigrated to the U.S. when he was in his early 20s.

During this time, Vicente Garza began manufacturing a line of Mexican chorizo, a kind of spicy sausage, and other products. His wife and their four sons and three daughters all helped with the wholesale Mexican food business.

"The whole family got involved, but the sons were more involved," Edward Garza said.

In 1968, Vicente Garza died and left the operation of the company to his four sons, with Edward Garza's father, Richard, eventually becoming the sole owner in 1981.

"My father, my brother (Richard Jr.) and I helped my father run the business up until 2002," Edward Garza said. "We were still a wholesale food business. We sold about 400 to 500 items."

In 2002, Edward Garza took over as the sole owner. That's when he decided to focus on the company's main products: chorizo, molé and chocolate.

"We were more of a Northwest Indiana-Chicagoland area company. My goal was to become a national company," Edward Garza said. "Today, we are not only national, but we also sell internationally."

The company opened a U.S.D.A. meat plant in Valparaiso to process the chorizo, which can be found in major grocery chains throughout the Chicago area and beyond and come in a variety of ways: pork, chicken, beef or vegetarian.

Today, the company is operated by four generations of the Garza family, while Edward's father, Richard, remains active at age 95.

"The one thing that I wanted to make sure I never lost touch with was the core items that my grandfather started." ●

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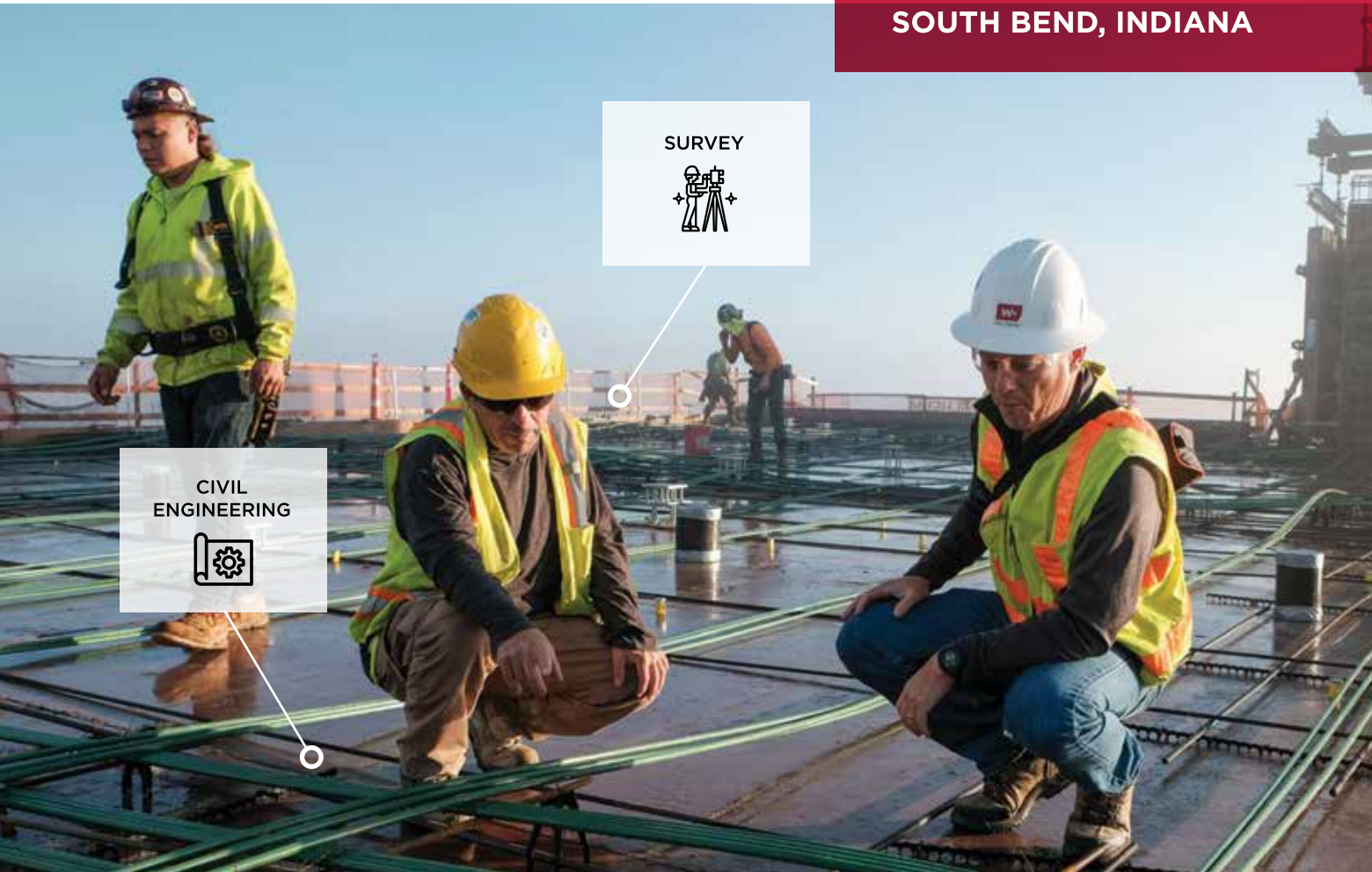
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A HIGHER CALLING

REGIONAL CAMPUSES FIND WAYS TO STAY ENGAGED, RELEVANT



About 600 undergraduate students and 250 graduate students at Valparaiso University received their diplomas May 11.

Provided by Valparaiso University

LAUREN CAGGIANO

Higher education, though many believe serves a noble goal, is still a business. Institutions today face numerous challenges, from declining enrollment to talent attraction.

Despite these uncertainties, colleges and universities in the Region have found

“You can’t really make the world a better place until you make your community ... a better place.”

— Mya Bell, PNW student

ways to stay relevant to the business community and create economic impact.

The Indiana Commission for Higher Education reported that enrollment in the state last fall was up by about 4,700

students from 2022 — particularly at two-year institutions. Enrollment for students seeking a two-year degree at Ivy Tech Community College’s Lake County campus was up by 12.5% from 2022.

Through partnerships and programming, regional colleges are positioning themselves as active, engaged and relevant community members.

Shaping the Region

Several campuses have adopted a multi-pronged approach to closing gaps in the workforce.

Purdue University Northwest is among them, according to Chancellor Kenneth Holford.

PNW contributes to the regional economy and plays a major role in the transformational changes affecting businesses

and area populations, Holford said. PNW leads the charge in terms of innovations that are shaping the Region’s future in key sectors, including steel, power, health care and mental health.

“For example, PNW’s Center for Innovation through Visualization and Simulation is a longtime partner to regional steelmakers for implementing solutions for energy efficiency,” Holford said. “Within the last three years, the U.S. Department of Energy has awarded more than \$24 million in grants to CIVS and regional partners for cutting-edge steel decarbonization research to reduce carbon emissions.”

Holford said his institution is committed to bolster workforce development in other ways too. PNW’s academics are evaluated so that

“In the last year, we’ve worked with about 90 small business owners and helped them to fine-tune their business plan, taught them things about accounting, bookkeeping, marketing, legal issues, insurance — all those types of things that a business owner would need to know.”

— Jana Szostek, Indiana University Northwest



program curricula and hands-on experiences reflect the evolving needs of employers in Northwest Indiana.

“In recent years, we have seen the need for well-prepared graduates in areas such as cybersecurity, technology and mental health care,” he said. “Some of PNW’s recently introduced programs include a bachelor of science in cybersecurity and a doctor of technology applied doctoral program. We look forward to welcoming the first cohorts of students to our new doctor of psychology applied doctoral program and master of science in psychology in fall 2024.”

The university plans to offer more options too.

“PNW also recently earned approval from the Indiana Commission for Higher Education for a master of social work program that is expected to start enrolling in 2025,” he said.

Valparaiso University is another institution that strives to serve students in the working world. Leaders launched a master of social work, which will begin part time online in the fall and full time in person in summer 2025.

“Faculty have wanted the MSW program for a long time, and I am excited we can now realize that dream for our students and community,” said Caroline Ban, program director and assistant professor in the university’s social work department, in a press release. “Students will be challenged and supported as we prepare passionate leaders to serve and practice at the forefront of social change.”

Porter-Starke Services leaders are excited about the launch of the program. They have a longtime partnership with the university.

“For years we have benefited from the excellent skills the BSW graduates possess that sets them apart from other recent graduates,” said Sandra Carlson, vice president for clinical service at Porter-Starke Services, in a press release.

Sam Burgett earned her bachelor’s degree in social work from Valparaiso University in 2020. She now is a social worker at the Porter County sheriff’s office.

“Valpo’s program is unique in that it pushes students to have real-world experiences early on and to begin applying what they learn in the classroom to their work in a way that is different from most other schools,” she said in the statement.

Data drives decisions

The majority of PNW’s core undergraduate population (85%) is enrolled full time, according to Holford. This data point has informed their approach to cultivating the built environment on campus.

“PNW has invested in spaces and resources that meet students’ needs, as many spend most of their day on campus,” he said. “From open-concept study and collaboration areas in the state-of-the-art Nils K. Nelson Bioscience Innovation Building to the

Tuesdays. The University of Saint Francis is trying to attract parents as a way to recruit and retain students. A \$65,700 federal grant awarded last fall will bring child care centers to its Crown Point location.

University officials also are considering emerging demographic trends to increase the chance of student success.

According to Holford, PNW is one of the most diverse Midwest regional institutions. Therefore, the campus reflects the communities it serves.

Some statistics drive this narrative. More than 25% of PNW students self-identify as Hispanic or Latino, and more than 11% of students self-identify as Black or African American, Holford said. PNW also welcomed international students from 50 countries and saw a 43% increase in international student enrollment.



Photo provided by Toyota Material Handling

Toyota Material Handling’s heavy-duty division in East Chicago manufactures high-capacity forklifts. The company has partnered with Ivy Tech Community College’s Lake County campus to hire students.

recently renovated Mane Zone student collaborative space in one of our primary classroom buildings, we are intentional about fostering students’ academic excellence and providing them with physical spaces to enjoy a high-quality, engaging on-campus experience.”

Ivy Tech, on the other hand, has more student commuters, so it offers vouchers for round-trip Uber rides on

PNW has increased efforts to become more inclusive. Following official designation by the U.S. Department of Education this year, PNW will be the largest public Hispanic-Serving Institution in Indiana. HSIs are colleges or universities that have at least 25% of their full-time undergraduate students identifying as Hispanic or Latino. This designation is given by the U.S.

EDUCATION

Department of Education, which also provides grants and funding to support HSIs improve their academic quality and institutional stability.

According to Holford, PNW serves the most Latino college students in Northwest Indiana, so this presents an opportunity to better cater to an often underserved population.

“To help best serve current and prospective Latino students, some of PNW’s initiatives include the establishment of an office and director of Hispanic-Serving Institution Initiatives; bilingual recruitment materials and community outreach; professional development opportunities through PNW’s HSI office and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities; and on-campus experiences celebrating Latino students and cultures,” Holford said.

their skills as a group and finish their degrees, he said. The result is a win-win in that employees gain skills that help employers meet their goals.

Other universities also are making these kinds of decisions.

Indiana University Northwest’s Taylor VanDommelen was on track to graduate in May with a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice. She is part of an accelerated program that allowed her to already begin work on her master’s degree in public administration. She’s expected to complete her master’s degree by May 2025.

The university also provided her with the opportunity to join its 50th annual Police Academy. She earned the distinction of the top-scoring female recruit on the academy physical fitness test for the 50th class. She also works for the IU Police Department-Northwest.

graduation and hopes to eventually become a federal agent.

VanDommelen said IUN’s academic programs prepared her for the workforce. She said the variety of coursework helped round out the program. She was also impressed by the faculty, their professional backgrounds and how they enhanced learning. Specifically, she said her professors have done a masterful job of translating classroom concepts to the real world.

“I would say there are some parallels, not necessarily when it comes to police work per se, but (developing) a better understanding of the kind of people you’re dealing with,” she said. “Understanding (all the factors that affect) policing helps you perform your job better.”

Ivy Tech Community College’s Lake County campus in East Chicago also helps match qualified graduates with employers. Toyota Material Handling’s heavy-duty division in East Chicago has aligned with the campus to recruit talent. Human Resources Manager Christine Lewis said the company has found success hiring students by visiting the campus and attending career fairs. This tactic has helped them add qualified people to their payroll.

“About half of our machining department has had schooling from Ivy Tech, which has given them the skillset to be a great asset to our company,” she said. “Their skillset has helped us grow tremendously and many of them would attribute that to Professor (Philip) Bryant, who is fantastic! We look forward to a continued partnership with Ivy Tech in helping their students find employment with us!”

HIGHER EDUCATION ENROLLMENT

The Indiana Commission for Higher Education reported that fall 2023 enrollment numbers for the state increased by about 4,700 students from fall 2022. Northwest and North Central Indiana institutions of higher education reported the following enrollment figures as outlined in the commission’s fall 2023 enrollment summary:

PUBLIC INSTITUTION	FALL '22	FALL '23	% CHANGE
Indiana University Northwest	3,014	2,824	-6.3%
Indiana University South Bend	4,195	4,302	2.6%
Ivy Tech Lake County	2,872	3,232	12.5%
Ivy Tech South Bend/Elkhart	3,382	3,565	5.4%
Ivy Tech Valparaiso	2,698	2,580	-4.4%
Purdue University Northwest	6,755	6,528	-3.4%
Valparaiso University	2,964	2,868	-1.1%

Sources: Indiana Commission for Higher Education Data Submission System and Valparaiso University

Empowering working students

Holford said decision-makers at PNW have explored other ways to find connection points between the student population and the real world.

For example, the college recently started a cohort model in the College of Technology in collaboration with industry in Northwest Indiana. It will help meet the demand for development opportunities in the working adult population. The cohort model provides an opportunity for employees to hone

These academic and real-world experiences helped her land a job in her field before completing her undergraduate degree.

Raised in Northwest Indiana, VanDommelen attended Highland High School. After graduation, she enrolled at South Suburban College and then transferred to IUN to earn her bachelor’s degree. It was important to her to be close to home, so IUN proved to be a good fit. She plans to stay in Northwest Indiana after

Focus on entrepreneurship

Indiana University Northwest’s Jana Szostek wears many hats, but the common thread is making sure students, faculty and community members are equipped to meet the demands of the 21st century regional economy. As director of the Business Academy in the Center for Professional Development, she acts as a liaison between the small business community and the university.

The Business Academy provides resources free of charge to local

FROM THE STUDENTS



INDIANA UNIVERSITY

► **Taylor VanDommelen** graduated in May from the School of Public and Environmental Affairs with a Bachelor of Science in criminal justice. She plans to stay in Northwest Indiana after graduation and hopes to become a federal agent.



PURDUE UNIVERSITY

► **Mya Bell** is pursuing a double major in human development and family science and political science from PNW. The Region native is a first-generation college student who plans to become a professional in NWI.

entrepreneurs and small business owners. For instance, Szostek said they offer a speaker series, on-site workshops and a business clinic that provides a forum for business builders to gain knowledge and practical insights to support growth.

“In the last year, we’ve worked with about 90 small business owners and helped them to fine-tune their business plan, taught them things about accounting, bookkeeping, marketing, legal issues, insurance — all those types of things that a business owner would need to know,” she said.

From a qualitative standpoint, Szostek said the Business Academy programming has resonated with the small business community.

“They’re all very appreciative of being able to get that information,” she said. “It’s almost overwhelming for them. When they’re brand new to starting a business, they come in and (there’s a lot of information to process.) But it’s free information for them, and they walk out of there feeling really empowered to do what they want.”

Another way the Business Academy fulfills its mission is by offering consulting services. Staff can help business owners and entrepreneurs make better decisions and effectively act upon those decisions. Recent examples of their work include executive selection and coaching, management training, stakeholder surveys, employee manual development, job analysis, and strategic marketing and social media planning.

The Business Academy’s impact extends beyond the confines of the entrepreneurial community, however. According to Szostek, IUN faculty and staff interact with community

organizations. For instance, they volunteer with local chambers of commerce and in economic development roles.

“Being engaged with a lot of those organizations (means) we have higher education represented in those conversations,” she said.

Betting on the future

PNW student Mya Bell is no stranger to community development work. She’s pursuing a double major in human development and family science and political science.

A native of the Region, she’s also a first-generation college student. Although she didn’t realize the weight of this distinction at first, in retrospect, she said it guided her school selection process. PNW made higher

education accessible, and the natural choice due to its proximity to her hometown, affordability and shared sense of values.

“Every time I’ve done something through the school, like planning a service activity or event for the students or the community, I’ve gotten to collaborate with a lot of awesome community leaders and professionals,” she said. “Working with them has (been such a) good (source of) inspiration and role models.

“For me, becoming a professional in Northwest Indiana means I have a commitment to PNW to serve my community, like they have instilled in me. You can’t really make the world a better place until you make your community ... a better place.” ■

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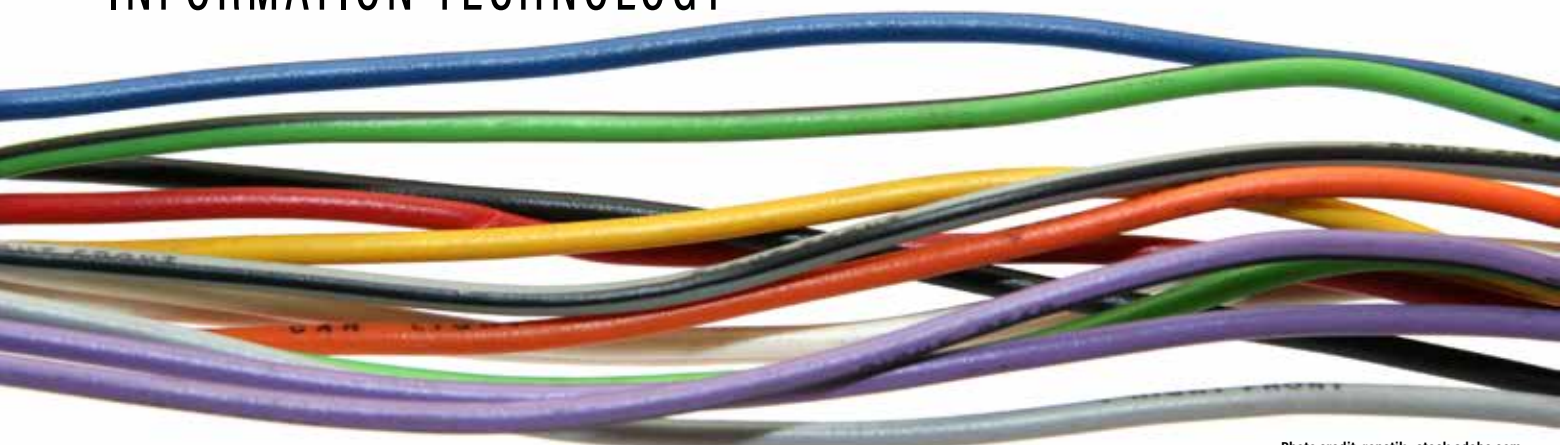


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BROADBAND CONNECTIONS

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ALEX KEOWN

From work to play to school, the world is connected via the internet. A lack of access to fast and reliable service limits opportunity and growth.

In the Region, technology companies are committed to making broadband available for everyone.

“We live in a digital world,” said Bert Cook, executive director of the La Porte Economic Advancement Partnership.

Indiana Broadband Office with \$868 million in federal funding to support broadband infrastructure. Those funds will be allocated to internet service providers such as Surf Internet, Comcast, AT&T, NITCO and others to support new broadband infrastructure in underserved and unserved areas across the state.

Cook noted that La Porte is in a strong position because of the amount of fiber

that broadband is “absolutely essential in this day and age.”

“This is one of the most significant advancements we’ve seen,” Cook said. “It’s connected governments, businesses and created a competitive landscape.”

Sean McCarthy, Comcast’s regional vice president of business development and strategic initiatives, said high-speed internet will be a great equalizer.

The communications giant is partnering with Indiana state and local governments to understand which areas are unserved and underserved.

“We want to better serve these customers,” McCarthy said.

He points to projects Comcast recently completed that provided connections to underserved areas in La Porte and Marshall counties. The company brought broadband with speeds of up to 100 Mbps to more than 1,300 people, McCarthy said.

The company also recently announced higher internet speeds for business customers nationwide.

42M The estimated number of people nationwide who do not have access to broadband, according to BroadbandNow, a data technology company.

“Schools, businesses, they need this access. It’s crazy how reliant we are on this access. We look around and it’s not like we’re going to get any less reliant on connectivity.”

Lawmakers know this too. A new federal grant program will support new broadband infrastructure across Indiana.

The Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment Program will provide the

that has been laid throughout the town, particularly across the business district. Recent broadband projects by Surf Internet in the La Porte area have turned it into a “multi-gig city,” Cook said.

Several projects are coming to La Porte that are communications heavy, Cook said. The availability of broadband was key to making those deals. He added



Broadband defined

According to the Federal Communications Commission, the qualification for broadband is a minimum of 25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload speeds. With fiber, which is being used across parts of northern Indiana, the speeds are much higher.

The BEAD program was created to expand access to high-speed broadband services across the nation. Specifically, it prioritizes unserved locations that have no internet access or limited access under 25/3 Mbps and underserved locations that only have access under 100/20 Mbps, the program states.

Nationally, an estimated 42 million people do not have access to broadband, including many people in Indiana, according to BroadbandNow, a data technology company.

Funded by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the BEAD program will provide \$42 billion to the states to support broadband access in areas that are not yet covered. Internet service providers can secure grant funds by matching up to 50% of the award.

Surf Internet's Steve Carender calls the BEAD grants "the big kahuna" for bringing broadband to underserved areas across Indiana. It will radically change the level of connection in those areas. The lack of broadband access prevents people from using services such as online banking or telehealth. It also hinders people hunting for a job, he said.

"Many job interviews are conducted through Zoom or the like, and many of these positions are remote," he said. "If you don't have reliable service, you'll be at a severe disadvantage and maybe disqualified."

Bridging digital divide

Broadband access is becoming increasingly important to communities across America, both urban and rural. To address that lack of access in rural areas, the government developed a number of initiatives.

In 2021, the U.S. government established the Digital Equity Act, which

"We live in a digital world. ... It's not like we're going to get any less reliant on connectivity."

— Bert Cook
La Porte Economic
Advancement
Partnership

provides \$2.75 billion for three grant programs. All three are designed to promote digital equity and inclusion. In 2022, Indiana was awarded \$842,000 from the Digital Equity Planning Grant to fund the creation of the state's first digital equity plan.

Indiana ranks 23rd among states in consumer group BroadbandNow's annual rankings of inter-

net coverage, speed and availability. An estimated 89% of people have access to 100Mbps broadband and about 78.7% of Hoosiers have access to 1G broadband, BroadbandNow reports. Many of the areas in Indiana that do not have reliable access to broadband are rural. An estimated 28% of farms across Indiana do not have broadband access, according to the USDA 2022 Census of Agriculture.

Building broadband infrastructure isn't cheap. It costs tens of thousands of dollars to run 1 mile of broadband cable. The costs increase depending on whether it is run along an electric pole or placed underground. The infrastructure requires

senior vice president of the Northwestern Indiana Telephone Company. "But, it's not just government money. Private money is involved in this too. It's a public-private effort to bring broadband to underserved communities."

Carroll is excited about the BEAD program and how it can meet the demands for broadband access. Some of the biggest users are schools and municipal services. In East Chicago, NITCO is providing 10 gigs or more to support the needs of the schools there.

"The amount of broadband needed for school corporations is huge," he said. "Five years ago, it was unheard of for a school to need more than 5 gigs, and today, it's more than double — they need 10 gigs or more."

While Carroll believes the BEAD grants are essential, they will not be enough to connect every Hoosier household. At a recent Indiana Broadband Office meeting, Carroll said Lt. Gov. Suzanne Crouch confirmed his suspicion.

"The grants are a great start but more needs to be done," he said.

In March, AT&T announced plans to invest an additional \$3 billion by 2030



Scott Franko, of Surf Internet, assists residents in applying to the Indiana Connectivity Program during a Jan. 18 event hosted by the Starke County Economic Development Foundation.

Photo provided by Surf Internet

the placement of conduit, cables and electronics, not to mention labor expenses.

"This is the reason for the (BEAD) grants. The government figured it out early that they need to bring broadband to people in the rural areas so they can participate in the digital age," said Tom Carroll,

to help close the national digital divide. That's on top of a \$2 billion investment in 2021. AT&T says its mission is to "help every American connect to greater possibilities" by expanding internet access.

NITCO also is making continued investments across the Region. The

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

84-year-old company is building fiber throughout its territory. NITCO placed its first fiber in the ground in 1985 to support long-distance calls. That fiber is still there, and it's still working to bring broadband services, Carroll said.

NITCO provides services to five Indiana counties, Lake, Porter, Jasper, Newton and Starke. Carroll says those counties have "a lot of underserved addresses," and that's where the grants will provide more opportunities to establish services in these areas. In 2023, NITCO brought internet to 300 to 400 homes in Hebron alone, Carroll said.

Surf Internet also has been busy bringing high-speed services to communities across the Region. The company has added services to places like Valparaiso, Portage, La Porte and Knox. In March, Surf initiated construction on broadband infrastructure that will connect approximately 1,500 homes in

broadband internet service with service providers and assist in the expense of extending broadband to those locations.

Carender says these events are well-attended, which demonstrates the desire and need for broadband services. The state program provides a subsidy of up to \$4,800 to help bring broadband to homes where the service is not available.

"It shows the critical importance for broadband and what people want," Carender said. "You can live a short distance from your neighbor, and they can have broadband service, but you don't. That needs to be addressed so people can participate on even ground."

Indianapolis-based Managed Health Services is addressing the issue also by creating the Broadband Access Strategic Partnership, the first program of a \$2 million initiative. It will focus on bringing broadband to marginalized communities, especially in Northwest Indiana.



Photo provided by Comcast

Comcast recently brought broadband with speeds of up to 100 Mbps to more than 1,300 people in La Porte and Marshall counties. The company also recently announced higher internet speeds for business customers nationwide.

rural northern Indiana. The project will include areas in Elkhart, La Porte and Newton counties.

Carender likens the speed of the multi-gig service provided by Surf to that of a Ferrari. He said people not used to high-speed service will be pleased with what they're getting.

In addition to providing broadband services, Surf Internet hosts a number of events across the Region to educate people about the Indiana Connectivity Program. Its goal is to connect residents and businesses that lack access to

Benefits of municipal services

Town leaders in Chesterton embraced the importance of broadband for economic development. They believed it was important for Chesterton to have an ownership stake in the infrastructure. The town launched the Chesterton Fiber Optic Network to accommodate current and future telecommunication needs in the town. CFON, which is managed by NITCO, is made up of a 15.5-mile high-speed fiber-optic broadband network.

Town leaders believed owning the fiber optic system would be an ideal economic

development investment to attract and support businesses in the community. More than 300 businesses in Chesterton are within reach of the gigabit capable fiber network there. Chesterton Town Manager David Cincoski says the establishment of CFON is vital to continued economic development in the community.

"The redevelopment commission decided years ago that the establishment of a broadband fiber network throughout the town ... could be used as a driver for enhanced services for the businesses and economic development. It provides a service that we believe is above and beyond what is accessible otherwise," Cincoski said. "It's fantastic for town services and community emergency services. It fits our needs. We have all the access we need, and then some."

CFON supplies broadband to most of the school buildings in town, as well as all municipal buildings. Businesses downtown can access CFON as well, Cincoski said. However, at this time, the system has not been opened to Chesterton residents.

In nearby La Porte, a fiber optic system keeps municipal services connected. Andy Snyder, chief of the La Porte Fire Department, praises the reliable broadband service there. He said the service creates a seamless connection between the department's stations and trucks.

"We no longer have to relay information through channels. Now we can provide on-the-spot decision making, which saves time and resources," Snyder said. "Things don't get lost in translation if the on-scene director is talking directly to who they need to."

Tablets in department vehicles are connected to the town's service, which provides the crews access to the same information they have in the station, Snyder said. The tablets can access information about pipelines in the area, hydrant locations and more.

Reliable broadband service allows the engine companies to conduct training in their substations without having to go to a centralized location. Snyder says this keeps firefighters on site in case an emergency occurs.

"It's good for the community," he said. "It keeps us connected with each other but allows us to remain ready to respond to emergencies." ■



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FINANCIAL PLANNING

EARLY FISCAL LESSONS

PARENTS FIND PLENTY OF RESOURCES, SUPPORT FOR TEACHING CHILDREN HOW TO MANAGE MONEY



Students at La Porte High School run the Coffee Club from 7 to 8:30 a.m. each school day. Teacher Angie LaRocco wants her students to embrace entrepreneurship.

Provided by Angie LaRocco

PATRICIA SZPEKOWSKI

Teacher Angie LaRocco wants her students to have the financial literacy to open their own businesses one day.

“We started an entrepreneurship program as part of our curriculum last year and decided to create a student-run business to give the students hands-on learning experience of what it takes

want to make sure youth know how to pay the bills and grow financially throughout life.

Misty De La Cruz is one of them. She is involved at schools and libraries to empower students and adults to create a knowledgeable and financially secure community.

“I’ve had an amazing reaction from kids who are very excited and savvy

big topics with high school students include budgeting and credit.”

Across all age groups, including adults, De La Cruz noted that, “when you know better, you do better.”

Priority of financial literacy

The state has been on board with the philosophy since 2009 when it incorporated “personal finance responsibility” for school instruction.

But a 2023 report from the Penny Hoarder showed that Indiana has fallen behind in financial literacy. The study ranked Indiana 43rd with a score of 46.6%. The scores were determined by how each state reports financial literacy and resilience through a variety of criteria, such as personal consumption, earning, knowledge,

2028 The year that Indiana Senate Bill 35 will require students to complete a personal financial course to graduate from high school.

to run a business,” the La Porte High School entrepreneurship teacher said.

She is among a growing movement of parents and people from schools, organizations and businesses who

as young as first and second grade talking about entrepreneurship to business students at the university level,” said De La Cruz, a financial wellness specialist at First Financial Bank. “The

“I've had an amazing reaction from kids who are very excited and savvy as young as first and second grade talking about entrepreneurship to business students at the university level.”

— Misty De La Cruz, First Financial Bank



investing and savings, state policy and resilience.

Gov. Eric Holcomb again made financial literacy a priority signing Senate Bill 35 during the 2023 legislative session last spring. Senate Bill 35 officially made Indiana the 19th state to guarantee personal finance education for high school students.

The legislation requires personal finance to be a separate subject with content instruction to include managing credit scores, investing and filing taxes. Senate Bill 35 was sponsored by Sen. Mike Gaskill (R-Pendleton) and was passed unanimously through both chambers of the legislature.

Senate Bill 35 will become effective with the cohort of students who are expected to graduate from a public school, a charter school or a state-accredited nonpublic school in 2028. Students then must successfully complete a personal financial responsibility course to graduate.

Teaching financial responsibility to young students is not new in the Northwest Indiana area.

From the early years to high school, students have vast opportunities to learn in a variety of creative and practical ways through the support of local schools, businesses, financial institutions and key nonprofit organizations.

Collaborative efforts emphasizing financial literacy for young adults have had a strong local impact.

Banks have access to resources like the American Bankers Association's Teach Children to Save program. It targets kindergarten through eighth-graders by offering banks lesson plans, activity sheets and other tools to engage the community. Horizon Bank and Centier Bank both are enrolled in the program.

The Crossroads Chamber of Commerce in Merrillville and Duneland Chamber of Commerce in Chesterton have had dynamic programs for the past few decades. They partner with organizations like Junior Achievement and their local school districts to help get kids thinking about their future financial goals.

Chamber partnerships

Celebrating their 10th year of partnership this year, the Crossroads Chamber and Junior Achievement Chicago held a JA Chamber Town Event on March 19 that empowered nearly 2,000 eighth-grade students from seven middle schools across the Region. From their beginnings at Merrillville and Crown Point middle schools, the JA Chamber Town Event evolved into a cornerstone program for both organizations.

Chamber members voluntarily contribute their time and expertise to teach students essential budgeting skills and instilling a mindset for planning. By bridging the gap between local businesses and schools, the event fosters a collaborative environment where students can gain practical insights and mentorship from industry professionals.

students — when our youth succeeds, we all win!”

Deann Patena, president and CEO of Crossroads, noted that the program empowers the next generation with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in an increasingly complex financial landscape.

“Our longstanding partnership with Junior Achievement Chicago has allowed us to expand our reach and impact, ultimately shaping the future workforce of Northwest Indiana,” she said in a press release.

The Crown Point Community School Corp. provides instruction to its students and involvement in the event.

“Each year our eighth-grade students participate in the program with Crossroads Chamber of Commerce and Junior Achievement,” said Dr. Todd Terrill,



About 500 students turned out for the Duneland Chamber and the Duneland School Corp.'s May 10 Eighth Grade Reality Check.

Provided by Duneland Chamber of Commerce

“This partnership exemplifies the power of community engagement and education, shaping the next generation of informed and prepared youth,” said Roslyn Malouhos, Junior Achievement of Chicago's NW Indiana division director, in a press release. “It's volunteers and local businesses partnering with JA that open up possibilities for

superintendent. “Students each receive a career at the start of the event. They ‘walk around town’ to visit various businesses for financial information. Students visit booths with information about insurance, auto, retirement, utilities, childcare and more. As they move from place to place, students must prioritize their given budget. They must make choices about



Provided by Crossroads Chamber of Commerce

Matt Scheuer of Purdue Federal Credit Union greets students at his station during the 10th JA Chamber Town Event on March 19. Nearly 2,000 eighth-grade students from seven middle schools across the Region attended the event.

what fits their income and determine the difference between needs and wants.”

Terrill says the event is an opportunity for students to put part of their advisory class into practice, where they recently completed Junior Achievement’s Economics for Success program.

“Chamber Town uses approximately 65 volunteers from local organizations and businesses,” he said. “With the help of these volunteers, students are coached through understanding the cost of living, how expenses may occur outside of our control, and how life’s circumstances can affect financial well-being.”

For more than 20 years, the Duneland Chamber and the Duneland School Corp. have had their own signature event: the Eighth Grade Reality Check. Students learn how to be successful in life after graduation. Over 120 volunteers assist students, who take part in financial literacy real-life scenarios.

This year’s event May 10 attracted about 500 students.

“Reality Check provides our members with a meaningful opportunity to contribute to the community by educating students about the importance of making wise financial decisions,” said Rachel Campbell, Duneland’s events manager.

Many of the members have children or grandchildren in the area or were part of the school system too.

“Witnessing our business representatives engaging with students and sharing their expertise is a wonderful

demonstration of community involvement,” Campbell said.

Students are given a predetermined salary that they would earn in their chosen profession at age 28. During the checkup, they visit tables where they pay expenses such as taxes, housing and childcare, to name a few.

The experiences of each student are different. Some end up in bankruptcy, others have a little money left over at the end. Those who have remaining funds can spend their money on “imaginary” rewards like investments, trips, concerts and more. The results are indeed a financial reality check.

School level

Schools also are stepping up with unique class offerings and projects.

Terrill said a variety of classes are offered at Crown Point High School.

“Two of our courses that were previously electives will now be offered as choices to meet the new graduation requirement for financial literacy,” he said. “Students can choose either personal financial responsibility or personal finance and banking. Incoming freshmen were able to schedule one of these courses for next year.”

Students can continue learning about financial responsibility by taking courses in finance like accounting, principles of business management, finance and investment, and entrepreneurship.

LaRocco’s students at La Porte High School have taken financial responsibilities to the next level by creating a student-run coffee shop, better known as the Coffee Club. Nine students run the shop, which is open from 7 to 8:30 a.m. each school day.

Students created the menu and serve hot and iced coffee, hot and iced lattes, tea and hot cocoa. It is the first self-sufficient student-run business at the school.

LaRocco is proud of what her students accomplished.

“In order to learn what it takes to run a business, we decided to create a coffee shop to offer the students and staff more drink options,” she said. “We created a business plan last year and got approval to move forward this school year.”

LaRocco said there were challenges, but students have learned “the ups and downs of making enough money to be self-sustaining as we don’t have a budget.”

She said they also learned running a business is hard work.

“They have realized that there is a lot of work, especially behind the scenes, to launch a business and keep it going,” she said. “Students are learning to receive feedback from customers and each other to help the business and themselves to improve.”

Educating youth about financial literacy is also a top priority for Mariana Reyes, assistant branch manager of Centier Bank’s Elkhart north branch.

“We have a very diverse community, and it is very important for me to empower families, including many who don’t speak English,” said Reyes, who is bilingual.

Her work helping youth run a lemonade stand has been noticed by the Junior Achievement of Elkhart County. She was named Volunteer of the Year.

“I have been very involved in the annual



“I’m proud of my daughter for getting her first job and wanting to manage her money responsibly.”

— Heather Hunter, mom in Hebron

Junior Achievement Lemonade Day serving Elkhart County,” she said. “This event encourages financial literacy and youth entrepreneurship at an early age with the goal of preparing them to succeed.”

She said participants start, own and operated the lemonade stand.

“It’s rewarding to encourage and mentor them along with other adults in our community,” she said.

Parental responsibility

Parents are an integral part of their children’s financial education.

With the help of financial institutions like Centier Bank, First Financial Bank, Horizon Bank, Peoples Bank and others, special student savings and checking accounts help them teach their children how to manage allowances and money for chores.

Becky McKeever, a mom of four, a PTO president and bookkeeper at Munster High School, said that when her kids were young, she and her husband helped them open savings accounts.

“We gave them brochures from several banks and let them pick where they wanted to go,” she said. “When they started receiving money as gifts or earned it by helping out around the house with extra chores, we had them put everything in the bank first.”

Heather Hunter is another mom trying to teach her daughter the value of money. Hunter recently was named a monthly \$1,000 drawing winner of Centier Bank’s prize-linked savings account, Billinero. The savings account awards cash prizes in monthly and quarterly drawings to winning users and is designed to develop and strengthen the habit of saving money.

Hunter said her teenage daughter, Joslynn, a ninth-grader at Hebron High School, just got her first job and opened her first student checking account.

“I’m proud of my daughter for getting her first job and wanting to manage her money responsibly,” Hunter said. “I’m excited to share this moment with her.”

McKeever said the effort to teach financial responsibility was worthwhile.

“Our children would talk to us about what they wanted to buy with some of the money and what they would keep in the bank,” she said. “As they got older, they naturally followed this process.” ■



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'Living *the* Lake Life'



The iconic La Porte County Courthouse looms over commercial buildings on Lincolnway in downtown La Porte. City officials hope to promote residential use of unused upper floors of buildings downtown to generate more foot traffic.

CITY PREPARES FOR INFLUX OF NEW RESIDENTS, DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

DOUG ROSS

The city of La Porte is gearing up for an influx of new residents. City leaders plan to attract them with quality-of-life improvements and economic growth.

The city also has an ambitious goal of increasing its population to 30,000 by the year 2030.

Since 1970, the city's population has held steady at about 22,000 people, according to Indiana's public data utility STATS Indiana.

Mayor Tom Dermody is capitalizing on the outdoor recreation opportunities here. Soon after he took office in 2019, he adopted the slogan, "Living the Lake Life." Residents can enjoy water skiing,

kayaking, fishing, swimming and more without having to travel outside the city.

"When we have the lakes that we have here, when we have the park system that we have here, 'Living the Lake Life' made all the sense in the world," Dermody said.

He likes seeing people wear shirts with the slogan.

\$135,800

Median value of owner-occupied housing units, July 2018-2022

\$55,031

Estimated median household income, 2018-2022



Photo by Doug Ross

Advancement Partnership, said huge economic development projects in the area are drawing attention to the city.

“Residential is an area that we’re just seeing a tremendous amount of growth in, and then the industrial sector as well,” he said. “Usually, that’s customers, suppliers, service providers for some of these larger businesses.”

Cook pointed out that available property, affordability, the cost of living and quality of life are advantages over other communities.

“People forget we have seven lakes within our city limits, which is a huge quality-of-life advantage for us,” he said.

Business development

One of the challenges in recruiting businesses to any community is having available space.

“That may be one of the least understood aspects of what we do is the under-roof space, the availability of buildings,” Cook said.

He said leads come in two ways: companies looking for land to build new facilities or leasing available space.

“We’re not immune to the supply and demand issues that exist,” Cook said. “All of Northwest Indiana has this issue of we just don’t have enough space under roof. Every community struggles with that.”

To meet that need developers are erecting buildings and then trying to fill them. That trend has been a success for La Porte. A 150,000-square-foot building in the Thomas Rose Industrial Park was fully leased before construction was finished.

“That’s a perfect example of how that’s supposed to work,” Cook said.

With the first building such a success, the developer decided to build a second 150,000-square-foot building.

“That will be a really good advantage for us,” Cook said. “It’s very flexible. I mean, that’s what every community is working on right now are these flex spaces where that could be a 25,000-square-foot lease or it could be 100,000 square feet or 150,000.

“You build the buildings in a way to satisfy a whole lot of different end users in the market.”

Thomas Rose Industrial Park was full before LEAP worked with a private developer to expand it by 200 acres in 2015.

Living arrangements

Cook is also interested in bringing additional housing to the city.

“That’s been another focus ... working with private developers to build new residential opportunities, whether it’s single-family townhomes, condos, multi-family or apartment complexes,” he said. “Those are all desperately needed.”

Last year, 464 homes were sold in the city, according to Northwest Indiana Realtors Association data. Only 34 of those homes were built in the last 10 years.

“It’s old housing stock,” said Chuck Vander Stelt, who blogs about real estate at Quadwalls.com and is a broker with Listing Leaders Northwest. “It’s exceptionally old compared to some other cities and towns in Northwest Indiana.”

He said the challenge is creating housing for families as they grow.

“There’s a lot of people who are starting out in life, and they’re finding homes to buy because La Porte does have a lot of lower-priced real estate, which is excellent for the first-time homebuyer category,” Vander Stelt said. “(However), it’s difficult to find homes that are larger

and can fit the growing family with more modern core features. It’s hard for people to make the trade up in La Porte, and that’s a big challenge.”



“La Porte is that special place that’s an hour from Chicago, has the lakes, the parks, walkability, safety, and we think, it’s the place to be moving forward.”

— Mayor Tom Dermody

“We’re trying to instill that pride of how special our community is,” he said.

Seth Spencer, owner of Sera Group and a La Porte native, appreciates all the city has to offer.

“Our office is right on the edge of the trail, so quite literally yesterday we went for a walk,” he said. “People in our office complex go for walks, so I think it’s a great thing there.”

Attracting businesses like Sera Group is Bert Cook’s specialty. Cook, executive director of the La Porte Economic

THE FUTURE OF LA PORTE

A housing study done for the Health Foundation of La Porte and the city found that an additional 500 to 1,000 housing units are needed just to deal with the backlog necessary to provide for current housing needs, said Craig Phillips, city development and planning director.

The city is working to make lots available for infill development as well as larger tracts for subdivisions and other larger residential developments, he said.

Vander Stelt projects that in 10 years La Porte will have met those needs.

“They will be blowing away everyone, just building and building and building those larger homes that growing families love to buy, and then La Porte will have almost a stronger economic base than Valparaiso has,” he said.

Making room

City officials are well aware of the housing shortage. This spring, the city completed the annexation of about 1,200 acres on Indiana Route 39 north of the previous city limits. Dermody said

that’s just 1 of about 10 annexations over the course of the last year.

“Obviously, a clear majority of people in that area wanted to be annexed, and still others fall into that ‘super voluntary’ category where they’re asking the city to be part of it,” Dermody said. “Ultimately, I think the annexations have been very, very positive for both the city and those individuals whose properties are being annexed.”

The annexations allow for additional residential growth but also commercial.

“We talk about the new residential, but with that comes the expecta-

tions for restaurants and retail, and we have to address those weaknesses as well in order to make sure that our residents are finding or able to shop and dine and do all of those kinds of things within our community,” Dermody said.

Among the newer developments in La Porte is NewPorte Landing. That project quickly brought retail shops but also health care and other service facilities. Residential buildings came, too, near the edge of Clear Lake.



Photo provided by Doug Ross

La Porte County Public Library's Exchange building brings a large makerspace for hobbyists and entrepreneurs to downtown La Porte.

Amenities

Spencer said he often sees people enjoying the trail by his office on East Shore Parkway.

“I’m literally looking at a family — it’s like your most picture-perfect family, kid with a dog on a leash attached to a bike, riding together. It’s a great trail,” he said. “I love the amenities here.”

Fox Memorial Park, which is on Clear Lake, offers park visitors a view of the iconic red sandstone courthouse and downtown across the lake. The park has been upgraded in recent years, with the parking area along the lake improved and the lakefront becoming more accessible this year.

There’s also a trail encircling Clear Lake to help bring people closer to nature while becoming more active.

The Health Foundation of La Porte has been generous in funding recreation opportunities in the city to improve public health, recently retired CEO Maria Fruth said.

The foundation also is exploring the idea of an indoor recreation facility. City Council President Tim Franke, a member of the YMCA board, hopes the downtown facility and its aging pools can be replaced by the new facility Health Foundation of La Porte is exploring.

“Pools are expensive to keep open, especially in a 130-year-old building,” he said.

He said a facility like this is important since YMCA facilities have opened in Lake County in recent years.



BERT COOK

LA PORTE ECONOMIC
ADVANCEMENT PARTNERSHIP
Residential growth is part of the economic puzzle.



TIM FRANKE

CITY COUNCIL PRESIDENT
A downtown recreation facility is important to families who want things for kids to do.



LAURA KONIECZNY

CITY COUNCIL MEMBER
In 10 years, the city will have more employers that offer benefits and higher-paying wages.



FONDA OWENS

LIBRARY DIRECTOR
Makerspace can help entrepreneurs to launch a business and realize their dreams.



CHUCK VANDER STELT

QUADWALLS.COM
La Porte has affordable housing prices but fewer “trade up” opportunities.

“It’s attractive as a parent to move to a community where you know that your kid will have these amenities and also for yourself to exercise and have a better quality of life,” said Franke, who also is the president of Duneland Media.

Neighborhood parks continue to see improvements as well, thanks to the parks foundation established in 1984, Parks Superintendent Mark Schreiber said.

“One of their main functions has been to make sure that all of our community’s playgrounds are first rate,” he said. “Within the last 10 years, we have renovated and added equipment to every one of our playgrounds and all of our neighborhood parks.”

Another perk of life in La Porte is the La Porte Civic Auditorium. It recently underwent a \$6 million renovation. The historic building was donated to the city by Maurice Fox in 1929 as “a permanent monument dedicated to recreation and social progress,” a plaque in its lobby proclaims.

“It’s built really solid, but we knew we had to make some renovations and



Provided by City of La Porte

The Sunflower Fair brings family-friendly fun each year to downtown La Porte. This year’s festival is from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sept. 21 along Michigan Avenue.

make it viable into the next 50 years or so,” Schreiber said.

There’s all new seating in the balcony, which is the main seating area, and the HVAC is new, leaving the main section of the auditorium air conditioned for

year-round use. It used to shut down a couple of months in the summer.

The auditorium has been a staple of social life in La Porte for decades. Dermody remembers proms and other events there when he was growing up.



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Photo by provided Doug Ross

The La Porte Civic Auditorium has undergone a \$6 million renovation that includes a new roof and a new HVAC system that now provides air conditioning for the main auditorium room, allowing year-round use. The seating in this room is new, too.

More recently, the venue has hosted the La Porte Invitation. The national high school basketball tournament in early January brings top athletes and ESPN to the city.

U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas spoke there during the 2016 presidential primary season.

Downstairs, some rooms are being used as classrooms for park activities and life skills lessons.

At Soldiers Memorial Park, La Porte is looking at potentially building a larger venue for up to 225 guests at weddings and other large events.

“We get a lot of calls from people looking for something a little larger,” Schreiber said.

Cummings Lodge, right on the lakefront, can seat 88 in its air-conditioned space plus additional guests on the large deck.

Downtown, which already hosts festivals, has a park on Lincolnway for people to gather.

Downtown plans

Phillips hopes to make downtown more attractive for pedestrians by siphoning truck traffic off Lincolnway. A long-term solution is to build a bypass around the city, which has been discussed for decades and is still on the table. Another idea focuses on keeping truck traffic downtown but route it off Lincolnway, perhaps a couple of blocks north. The city is working with engineers on that idea.

“We feel that is a critical step that we need to take to get trucks out of the downtown to improve the quality of life of residents and start to encourage more investment and commerce in the downtown,” Phillips said. “It creates a better, more pleasant environment — and safer environment absolutely — for everybody to enjoy downtown La Porte.”

Phillips also hopes to encourage more residential growth downtown, including above storefronts. More people downtown means more foot traffic for local businesses.

The city is also working with Northwest Health leaders to see how the site of the former hospital on the edge of downtown could be redeveloped.

“If the heart of downtown is strong, the rest of the city is even stronger,” he said.

La Porte County Public Library’s flagship is downtown, but the Exchange building, which used to be a telephone switching station, has become a large makerspace.

“We want people to continue to learn and grow and develop,” Library Director Fonda Owens said.

The Exchange features a commercial kitchen, sewing machines, Cricut machines, wood lathes, 3D printers, CNC machines, a bandsaw and more. There are even video and audio studios available for the public’s use.

Owens said the makerspace can be a way for entrepreneurs to launch a business without investing in equipment before realizing whether the business idea will succeed.

Reasonable expectations

City Council member Laura Konieczny moved to the city in 2003.

“I find that people are very friendly and engaging and accepting,” she said.

In the 1950s, La Porte was a booming industrial mini metropolis that had a lot of jobs that paid well.

“Unfortunately, over time, jobs were outsourced to other places, including overseas, but that deep-rooted pride, history and the strong foundation that is here is transcended throughout generations,” Konieczny said.

Ten years from now, she hopes, the city will have attracted more great employers that provide benefits and higher-paying wages, but that has to come in conjunction with having the workforce ready, willing and able to meet employers’ needs.

Dermody offers many reasons for people to move here.

“When you talk about businesses wanting to attract people, La Porte is that special place that’s an hour from Chicago, has the lakes, the parks, walkability, safety, and we think, it’s the place to be moving forward,” Dermody said.

That means doing just what La Porte is working on now — attracting not only businesses but also residents who will enjoy the quality-of-life amenities La Porte offers as residents enjoy “living the lake life.” ■

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Corn Dogs hit it out of the park

Baseball enthusiasts, former players deliver winning team to Crown Point



Cornelius, the Lake County Corn Dogs mascot, is a big hit with the community.

Provided by Lake County Corn Dogs

STEVE ZALUSKY

The Lake County Corn Dogs have been pleasing the public since 2022 with a lineup of local talent and fun for families.

When the Northern League announced its newest team in January 2021, officials said the team's motto would be "building community through baseball."

The Corn Dogs have been doing just that at Legacy Fields at Center Ross Park in Crown Point.

In 2022, its inaugural season, the team captured the Northern League crown.

This year, the Corn Dogs will play as an independent summer collegiate franchise.

The team's success on and off the field is a testament to the dedication of its majority owner, Ralph Flores Jr.

"The sports marketing industry has been my passion," said Flores, who graduated from East Chicago

Roosevelt High School and Indiana University Northwest.

Like a lot of his Corn Dogs players, Flores played collegiate baseball, in his case at Dodge City Community College in Kansas. But when he realized a major league baseball career was not within reach, he found a niche in athletics as a sports agent with several professional basketball clients around the world, including Europe and Asia.

He also worked with the foundations headed by such NBA players as Vlade Divac and Andrew Bogut. However, with commissions and donation dollars shrinking during the Great Recession, he shifted gears and entered the insurance industry.

However, Flores had a feeling he would return to sports. He did just that after learning about the Midwest Collegiate League, a summer baseball league that

evolved into what is now the Northern League. He inquired about bringing in a franchise and, after receiving the OK, "I started to look for the best city to have the franchise, and Crown Point was at the top of list."

Former Crown Point Mayor David Uran welcomed the team after setting some goals for Flores.

"The addition of a preprofessional team like the Corn Dogs is an excellent complement to the wide variety of youth and adult sports throughout our community," Uran said in January 2022.

From there, it was a matter of assembling a team. Of immense help was Bobby Morris, co-founder and CEO of the Great Lakes Sports Hub. The brother of former Cincinnati Reds first baseman Hal Morris, Bobby Morris was a former Chicago Cubs farmhand. Also helping recruit player personnel was Kyle Hallberg, assistant

coach at South Suburban College in Illinois.

Flores found his manager in his own backyard. Former Kansas City Royals pitcher and Crown Point resident Justin Huisman was his man. Huisman offers clinics and lessons at the Great Lakes Sports Hub, the nearby sports training complex.

Huisman previously managed the Northwest Indiana Oilmen and Illinois' Trinity Christian College baseball team.

"The atmosphere is great. We get good crowds. The players have been a joy to coach," Huisman said.

Ambassador of fun

Among those involved in the beginning was Tom Byelick. He served as the club's public address announcer in its inaugural season and took on some general manager's duties, including securing sponsorships and generating some promotional ideas.

Byelick's efforts included the YouTube series "Ketching Up With the Corn Dogs" and the "Around the Corn" fan events at such venues as the Back Court Bar & Grill in Crown Point.

Byelick's background is in sales and marketing. But he had a little time on his hands after retiring from the pharmaceutical industry.

He is involved in several projects, including producing and co-hosting the TOMFOOLERY Fun Club.

"The first season of the Corn Dogs was a pretty successful one," Byelick said. "The team won the league championship. So, the word really started to get out about the team and the fun atmosphere that was associated with the games."

Play ball

On the baseball side, the Corn Dogs are in good hands. Huisman in 2012 piloted the Northwest Indiana Oilmen to a title Midwest Collegiate League, the precursor to the Northern League.

"Right now, we're fairly local with a lot of names and faces that the fans recognize, and it's a lot of fun that way



"Our model from the very beginning has been building community through baseball."

— Ralph Flores Jr.
Lake County Corn Dogs

because it feels like it's your home team," Huisman said.

Morris, who helps recruit players, runs the 5 Star Great Lakes Chiefs, a youth baseball organization.

"A lot of the guys that play for us, when they were younger played for 5 Star, so Bobby knows a lot of them," Huisman said.

Some of the players are postgrads who are trying to get picked up by professional teams.

"We've had a couple of guys get picked up and go professional for independent ball," he said. "And that's the ultimate goal, is to provide an avenue for those guys that want

to get better and get picked up and achieve the dream that I was able to do as a player, which is to play professionally."

Last year, Ray Hilbrich became the first member of the team to sign a professional baseball contract. The 23-year-old from Schererville joined the Birmingham Bloomfield Beavers of the United Shore Professional Baseball League, which has sent a number of players to the major leagues.

Huisman played professionally for several years, reaching the majors in 2004 for the Royals. His career, however, was derailed by injuries, and he transitioned into coaching.

Enthusiastic response

The Corn Dogs, Flores said, provide a minor league baseball experience, replete with pregame music, an area where kids can play, cornhole for adults, a beer garden featuring Crown Point's own Off Square Brewing as one of the team's partners.

A big hit in the community is the Corn Dogs' mascot, Cornelius, a corn dog with mustard.

And, yes, there are dizzy bat race competitions.

"We're not the Savannah Bananas, but we are entertaining," Flores said.

The local community has embraced the Corn Dogs. Crowds also responded enthusiastically.

"There isn't a game that goes by that we'll get a mother that comes by with her kids and says, "Thank you. Thank you for bringing this to our community," Flores said. "Our model from the very beginning has been building community through baseball. If you are good for the community, the community in return will be good to you." ■





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Passion for learning



PNW's new chancellor eager to partner with Region's business community

CHAS REILLY

Chris Holford has kept the same focus after more than two decades with the Purdue University institution. “My passion is working with the students,” he said.

Holford began his career with Purdue as a biology professor, and he has



► **Kenneth (Chris) Holford** was named the new Purdue University Northwest chancellor Jan. 8 after serving the PNW community for more than 20 years.

worked his way up to chancellor of Purdue University Northwest.

Holford said he started on his current path after graduate school when he joined Purdue as a “newly minted assistant professor teaching in the classroom.”

At that time, he didn't even think of becoming a chancellor. Holford said his first five years were dedicated to being the best faculty member he could be.

“I was really focused on being in the class-

room and my research lab and the activities I had going on,” Holford said. “That's why I got into this profession.”

It was around his fifth year at Purdue that he was asked if he would consider serving as a department chair.

“I really wasn't interested in it at the time,” Holford said. “I enjoyed being in the classroom. I enjoyed my 8 a.m. lectures in an auditorium. It really wasn't something I ever had aspirations for.”

He turned down the opportunity twice before the university convinced him to try out being a department chair when there was a vacancy.

“That started for me what turned into a wonderful opportunity, and it set me on sort of a different trajectory over the next 20 years,” Holford said.

Holford was the dean of the College of Sciences and chair of the

department of biology and chemistry at the former Purdue North Central, which is now PNW's Westville campus. Holford is the founding dean of PNW's College of Engineering and Sciences, and he served as the provost and vice chancellor of academic affairs before becoming chancellor.

“In his roles as provost and dean, Chris has emphasized the importance of academic and research quality, while prioritizing the quality of the student experience, the importance of developing a highly trained workforce, and the enrichment of the regional community and economic growth,” said Purdue President Mung Chiang. “He is ideally qualified to lead during a time of significant advancement for Purdue Northwest and transformative opportunities for the northwest Region of our state.”

Holford said Purdue provided him with many “amazing opportunities” in his career, and he's thankful for each of them.

“What I'm grateful about is the opportunity to serve our student body,” he said.

One way he does that is by staying active and open on campus, walking around it regularly.

“I want the chancellor to be accessible to the student body; I think that's important,” Holford said. “I really enjoy when our students walk up to me, shake my hand, introduce themselves to me and tell me what they do on campus.”

He said setting priorities for PNW requires forecasting what's to come in Northwest Indiana. Holford said he believes there are many opportunities on the horizon in the Region, and PNW will be significantly involved in them.

“One of our primary functions is workforce development to make sure, in particular in technical areas and health-related areas, that we're anticipating where these markets are going

to go and making certain we're having active conversations with communities around us, and we're preparing students to go into these careers that are going to emerge,” he said.

Holford said industry remains a critical component in Northwest Indiana, and PNW has a strong partnership with the steel mills, the BP oil refinery and utilities.

He said health care is the largest employer sector in the area, and a signature program at PNW is the nursing program. In addition to that, the university is exploring opportunities in other health care fields.

PNW launched an integrative human health program, which Holford said is growing. Holford said the university has placed an emphasis on social and mental health fields, which he described as “pinnacle programs” at PNW.

The regional university recently added a master's degree program in social work and a master's and doctoral degree program in psychology.

“We're looking for opportunities to partner more closely with the hospital systems that are up here in the training of professionals in these critically needed areas in the mental health spaces,” Holford said.

He said he's proud of what's being accomplished at PNW,

and he intends for the university to continue making progress and having a significant impact in the communities that the school serves.

As he grows in his new role as chancellor, Holford said he has challenged other senior school leaders to focus on the same thing

he's prioritized since he was a professor.

“I never want to lose sight of who we're here to serve,” Holford said. “That's what brought me to this institution — the hardworking students that we have that are looking for their own career opportunities and setting their own trajectory.” ■

“**(Holford) is ideally qualified to lead during a time of significant advancement for Purdue Northwest.**”

— President Mung Chiang
Purdue University



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Bridging the digital divide



How to reach millions locked out of modern life with high-speed internet

STEVE CARENDER

Most of us have experienced that one person on web conferences whose connection is continually glitchy and cutting out. Perhaps you're that person — struggling to work from home only to be faced with slow and unreliable internet service.



► **Steve Carender** is the director of special funding at Surf Internet, a fiber-optic internet company. He has contributed to Surf's growth since May 2002.

If so, you're not alone. For millions of rural residents across Indiana and the U.S., working from home is frustrating if not impossible. E-learning days are a scramble. Telehealth and virtual consultations, while they would be convenient, are out of reach. Football fans without a reliable internet connection are out of luck on Thursday nights because games are streamed on Amazon Prime.

At this point, we are so bound to the internet for work, school and quality of life, that high-speed internet, not just any internet, is a necessity for modern living. High-speed internet service should now be considered a utility — ubiquitous, dependable and available on demand.

Too many Hoosier families experience and live a digitally connected life only when they are at a coffee shop or at their workplace or at school, coming home to spotty, slow or even disconnected internet. Every aspect of broadband connectivity that many of us take for granted, from the most trivial IMDB query to an important business meeting, is out of reach for many of our neighbors. Those families living on the other side of the "digital divide" face a lack of opportunity, diminished quality of life and even feelings of isolation.

The digital divide should not be seen as a mere inconvenience. The digital divide

causes real and measurable disparities economically, professionally, educationally and personally. Case in point:

- A home or property without broadband connectivity available is far less desirable to potential buyers. Many Realtors can attest to the difficulty of trying to attract buyers — especially families with children — to a home that has no access to broadband.
- Employers expect that workers have an ability to work remotely — even most job interviews are conducted via web conferencing. Lack of broadband at home is akin to not having reliable transportation to get to and from work.
- With the predominance of cloud-based class content and remote instruction days, students without reliable broadband access can neither access their school work or effectively engage with their teachers and classmates.
- Those lacking broadband access face limited physical and mental health options, especially in areas with few local providers. Federal health agencies have recognized internet access as a "super determinant" of health.

Investment in digital infrastructure is not just for what we do with the internet now, it's for what connectivity will mean in the future. Autonomous vehicles, immersive virtual reality, intelligent traffic monitoring, smart home integration, and precision agriculture are just a few of the current and emerging technologies that will require robust connectivity to operate at maximum efficiency. Just as we, as a society, have invested in electricity and roadways to extend commerce and interconnectedness, we must do the same for our digital infrastructure.

So why, with high-speed broadband technology having been available for years, isn't it already everywhere? The reason for the lack of broadband connectivity in rural

areas is simple: economics. Areas with relatively low household density require essentially the same infrastructure investment as more populated communities, but with far fewer customers to pay for the financial outlay.

Recognizing the digital divide and acknowledging the prohibitively high construction costs, the federal government passed bipartisan legislation to fund the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) program, which allocates \$42.45 billion in funding to establish broadband to underserved households and businesses. Indiana's share of the fund is \$828 million. BEAD will provide financial support to providers to build broadband to locations that are too costly to build on a private investment basis.

In Northwest Indiana, La Porte, Newton and Starke counties are exemplars of proactive efforts to address the digital divide. These counties have utilized a combination of community outreach, stakeholder engagement, broadband mapping and public-private partnerships to connect the unconnected — doing so, in many cases, road by road and household by household. Their efforts have set the stage for further broadband development via the BEAD program and state programs.

As residents across Indiana continue to struggle with access, there are multiple initiatives underway to address the digital divide. However, the solution requires a variety of tools, and it requires local initiative. I encourage the business and community leaders to actively engage with local providers such as Surf Internet and others to solve the problem collaboratively. The upcoming federal BEAD funding represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to close the digital divide, and partnerships will be crucial for delivering those dollars to local communities.

Now is the time to come together to transform our communities and unlock the limitless resources and potential that high-speed internet delivers. ■

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