

&gt;

By Annette.Manwell  
 @hollandsentinel.com  
 (616) 546-4270

Print Page

October 28, 2014 7:00PM

## Zeeland Twp.-based Primera Plastics launches new job training program

About one year ago, Zeeland Township-based Primera Plastics adopted a simple mission statement: Defy expectations. To live up to its own mission, the company launched Monday, Oct. 27, a new program that will provide job training, financial advice and transportation to work.

Primera Pathways is meant to help “The lost and forgotten middle,” company President Noel Cuellar said.

The program caught the attention the Lt. Gov. Brian Calley, Senator Arlan Meekhof and Representative Joe Haveman who all joined the company Monday for the launch. The program will start with 15 young adults who are now going through the application process at Primera Plastics. They were screened through area agencies including the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Holland, Destination Education, Escape Ministries, The Bridge, Macatawa Resource Center and Latin Americans United For Progress. The organizations will continue to work with the company to send new possible recruits its way.

Escape Ministries Executive Director Willie Watt was thrilled to be part of the process for Primera Pathways. He had 27 kids age out of the Holland Youth Connections program that is for 14 to 17-year-olds. Five of them are interviewing for Pathways, he said.

For those workers, Youth Connections exposed them to the work field. Pathways will give them on-the-job training with full time, entry level positions that start at \$10 per hour with full benefits. Primera can only offer so much, Cuellar said, so the training could also be a springboard to bigger and better careers at Primera’s clients, such as Gentex and Herman Miller.

The company is specifically seeking out young adults in need of jobs and training and will work with them on second and third shift, “to keep them off the streets,” Cuellar said.

However, vocational education is needed, Cuellar said. The program will handle that and remove any barriers holding back up and coming young workers, most specifically transportation and the availability of on-the-job training. The company’s bank, PNC, will provide one-on-one budgeting, credit and financial advice as well, Cuellar said.

Michigan employers aren’t competing with other businesses, but with other states for a workforce, Cuellar said.

“The recession changed things,” he said. But “We’re willing to adapt.”

“It’s right at the heart of what we need,” Calley said of Pathways, adding Michigan lost the most jobs during the recession and the need for a skilled workforce is a problem in the state.

“There are jobs, but there’s a skills gap,” Calley said. “I like this problem better than the one of a few years ago.”

He called Primera Pathways “a very good business decision as well as a charitable one” and thanked the company for taking the initiative. “They have the opportunity to change the trajectory of someone’s life.”

Primera Plastics bought a bus to provide transportation. It will pick up those who start the program at a few selected locations and bring them to the 100,000 square foot Primera Plastics facility on Production Court in Zeeland. The company does plastics injection molding, Chief Financial Officer Steve Berkenpas. The company has grown during its 20 years, he said, starting with smaller rental spaces, then buying and building on the large property it owns now. It’s been there since 2003, Berkenpas said.

“We’re staying here,” he said, adding there is plenty of room to continue growing.

Primera Pathways is a one year program for those hired. The hope is that it will be even bigger next year, Cuellar said.

— Follow this reporter on Facebook or Twitter, @SentinelNetty.



Primera Plastics President Noel Cuellar, Lt. Gov. Brian Calley and leaders from nonprofit organizations stand in front of the new bus as part of the new program a "Primera Pathways" Tuesday Oct. 28, 2014 in Zeeland. Andrew Whitaker/Sentinel Staff

<http://www.hollandsentinel.com/article/20141028/NEWS/141028944>

Print Page