

Michigan manufacturer deals with labor shortage with paid training, free rides to work



Noel Cuellar, president of Primera Plastics, shows the bus that will provide free rides to work to employees in a new training program, to Lt. Gov. Brian Calley and Rep. Joe Haveman, R-Holland. (Courtesy photo)



By [Shandra Martinez | smartinez@mlive.com](mailto:smartinez@mlive.com)

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ZEELAND TOWNSHIP, MI -- Like other employers, **Primera Plastics** struggles to find skilled workers.

But the growing plastics injection molder company that supplies the auto and furniture industries is taking a new approach to growing its workforce.

Noel Cuellar, the company's owner and founder, has launched Primera Pathways, an initiative that gives unskilled workers on-the-job training and even provides a free bus ride to work at the company's 106,000-square-foot manufacturing plant, at 3424 Production Court in Zeeland Township.

"The upturn in the economy has created a skilled labor shortage," said Cuellar. "People with skills have jobs and are working, but local companies like ours have hundreds of jobs they need to fill."

It may be surprising that Cuellar's relatively small firm, which has annual sales of \$25 million and 130-person workforce, is taking the initiative on an industry-wide problem, but education has long been a passion of Cuellar's. Earlier this year, **he provided \$10,000 in tuition grants** for Holland and West Ottawa schools students to attend summer school classes to stay on track to graduate.

The first class in Primera Pathways will have 15 trainees, who were selected after going through a series of pre-employment tests. The one-year program will provide training in advanced plastics manufacturing along with guidance in personal development skills. PNC Bank has signed on to provide a free course on personal finance to the trainees.

Pay for the trainees starts at \$10 an hour with benefits, plus a bonus for those who work second or third shift.

Except for the bus ride offered from locations throughout the community, Pathways employees receive the same opportunities as Primera's current employees.

“When we train people at Primera, we also develop personal career skills, teaching new workers about attitude, work ethic, communications skills and time management,” Cuellar said in a statement. “Things that have a big impact on how you do your job and advance your career.”

Company officials declined to share how much is being spent on the program, but they say it isn't being supported by state or local tax dollars.

Cuellar isn't just training workers for his own company. Automotive supplier Gentex and Office furniture-maker Herman Miller, which are customers of Primera Plastics, have committed to hiring those who complete the training instead of routing them through a staffing agency before they are hired permanently.

Cuellar sees Pathways as a chance to help young adults, ages 18 to 27, who haven't yet had a chance to start a career. His efforts are generating praise from the community.

“This is a great way for young adults to get into industry and gain the type of technical and personal experience that will help them in the future,” said Craig Spoelhof, executive director of the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Holland.

Primera Pathways is asking the Boys & Girls Club and other community organizations to recruit and recommend people for the program.

Lt. Gov. Calley, who visited Primera Plastics on Tuesday, Oct. 28, praised Cuellar's efforts, noting there are over 300,000 job openings currently available across the state.

“There are jobs in the state but there's a skills gap,” Calley said. “This program is right at the heart of what we need.”

Cuellar sees the program as an investment in people striving to succeed in life and a way to solve the skilled labor shortage for his company.

“It's a win-win for everyone,” Cuellar said. “They learn new skills for a career, we get solid employees and at the same time help people get a leg up in the job market.”