

THE ECONOMIC LADDER

More companies need to step up and help N.J.'s 'working poor'

Michellene Davis *Guest Columnist*

Janet, a single mother with elderly, health-challenged parents, had spent many years on public assistance. She juggled child care and her job as a receptionist earning \$10 an hour. She dreamed about having a career, going back to school and being able to support herself and set a good example for her daughter, Gabriella.

Daniella, a lone child of a single mother, was a waitress in a bakery in 2013, struggling to make her monthly rent. She wanted to go back to school, but could not afford to pay for the tuition. She yearned for more, but could not figure out a way to make it happen. She was cash-strapped and lived month-to-month on her meager salary.

Janet and Daniella were prime examples of women whom the United Way define as ALICE — Asset Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed. “ALICE” lives and works in every community — but does not earn enough to cover basic essentials and pay for monthly expenses. One-quarter of New Jersey households are considered ALICE, despite being one of the wealthiest states in the nation.

Fortunately for these two individuals, their careers have been nurtured through the Career Ladders for Front Line Employees program at Jersey City Medical Center, an RWJ-Barnabas Health facility. The program began in 2010 and since then, Janet, Daniella and more than 100 others have graduated.

For Janet, Daniella and their families, their worlds have dramatically changed.

RWJBarnabas Health recently launched a systemwide Social Impact and Community Investment Practice, which is aimed at addressing the social, economic and environmental conditions that contribute to poor health outcomes, reduced life expectancy and higher costs. These “social determinants of health” include economic instability, lack of education, food insecurity, unaffordable housing and unsafe living environments.

The system recognizes that each of its facilities is an anchor institution in its community and therefore should be leveraging resources and influence for the long-term benefit of all residents. As a result of this commitment, RWJBarnabas Health is working to replicate Jersey City Medical Center’s Ladders program at all of its facilities.

Only recently have health care industry experts begun to attribute health outcomes to the social environment surrounding a patient’s well-being. These social determinants



of health are estimated to impact between 70 to 80 percent of health outcomes, and job insecurity is a prime social determinant of health.

The need to expand programs such as Career Ladders for Front Line Employees was underscored by United Way's report on ALICE in New Jersey. We've taken the report's recommendations to heart by focusing intensively on our local hiring practices, formalizing internal career pipelines and creating pathways to livable wages. We've formalized our support of ALICE and have become part of the ALICE United Way National Advisory Council.

Within the past three years, Janet has continued to grow in her career at Jersey City Medical Center. She began as a medical assistant/phlebotomist, moved on to a medical biller and coder, and is now a billing coordinator, which has doubled her salary. She was able to go back to school and is currently working to attain a degree in health business management. Her daughter, Gabriella, was once an indifferent student, and is now excelling in school. She has become especially good at math, and in December, she began helping her mom with her algebra homework.

Daniella, a self-starter, jumped at the opportunity to become a patient access associate at Jersey City Medical Center. In relatively short order, she was able to transfer to unit secretary, then on to unit clerk, all while attending school and achieving her certification as an EMT. Her salary has nearly doubled and she will graduate in 2018 with a bachelor's degree in business administration, concentration in finance. Her goal is to become a chief operations officer in the health care field. For the first time, Daniella says she can see her future.

As we continue to explore career pathways across our health care system, more and more of our corporate partners are stepping up to do the same. This work aims to build community wealth and end generational cycles of poverty in order to create healthier communities.

Shouldn't every company strive to better their workforce, improve productivity and profitability and life in the communities where we work and live? The collective efforts of all employers to elevate their workforce will reduce the number of struggling ALICE families and improve life for all.

Isn't it time to examine the opportunities for ALICE in your work environment?

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