

CONNECTIONS MAGAZINE

YOUR CRYSTAL LAKE CHAMBER MAGAZINE



NOV 2025

A 3D illustration of interlocking gears. One gear is light gray and has the word "reimagined" written on it in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Another gear is yellow and has the word "workforce" written on it in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The gears are shown in a close-up, overlapping perspective, suggesting a mechanical or interconnected system.

reimagined
workforce

**THE WORKFORCE EDITION: WHERE
EDUCATION MEETS OPPORTUNITY IN
MCHENRY COUNTY**

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FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

In today's rapidly changing labor market, workforce development is a critical strategy for connecting individuals with meaningful opportunities and for helping businesses thrive by adapting to evolving demands and closing critical skills gaps. When employees are equipped with relevant skills, they contribute more effectively to their industries, earn higher wages, and stimulate economic mobility. With the support of corporate and community partnerships, workforce development programs can drive meaningful change.

Key elements of successful workforce development programs include:

- They are employer-led to ensure skilled workers are connected to quality job opportunities.
- They are guided by multiple community partners such as educational institutions, community-based organizations, and economic development organizations.
- Measure and evaluate outcomes such as workers' employment and compensation.

Throughout McHenry County, we are fortunate to have numerous organizations providing innovative programs within the context of workforce development. We have asked these members to share their stories with you, with the hope that you'll find it useful.

As your Chamber, we know the fourth quarter is a critical time for your business, and we're here to support your success. We're stepping up our efforts to provide valuable resources, including promoting member job openings, amplifying your events and holiday promotions on social media, and connecting you with other businesses to foster growth and collaboration. If there's any way we can assist your business during this busy season, don't hesitate to reach out – we're always happy to help!

We're currently finalizing details on a program that will allow our members to access health care benefits through the Chamber's provider. More information will be coming in the next few weeks.

Warm Regards.



Catherine Peterson

President/CEO

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Empowering Local Business: Education Through Collaboration

Earlier this year, a powerful partnership took shape between the Crystal Lake Chamber of Commerce, the City of Crystal Lake, and the Downtown Crystal Lake Association. Together, we launched an education series designed to empower local business owners with the knowledge and tools needed to thrive in today's fast-paced business world. These sessions are completely free for Crystal Lake business owners, Downtown Crystal Lake Association partners, and Chamber members.

The goal behind this collaboration is rooted in community helping entrepreneurs strengthen their skills, embrace innovation, and stay competitive in an ever-changing marketplace.

The series kicked off with the Downtown Crystal Lake Association hosting a Cyber Security Seminar led by the experts at Pique Technologies. With cyber security threats on the rise, the seminar focused on practical ways business owners can protect themselves and their customers. Attendees learned how to spot phishing attempts, recognize social engineering tactics, and take proactive steps to safeguard company data. The Pique team also shared valuable insights and information that every business owner can put into action when selecting an IT provider.



Next, the City of Crystal Lake hosted an engaging Canva Marketing Seminar presented by Lori Lattanzio, Manager of Marketing and Communications at NISRA. Lori walked attendees through Canva's creative tools, showing just how simple it can be to design fun, professional, and on-brand marketing materials. Using real examples from her work at NISRA, Lori demonstrated how Canva helps organizations maintain a cohesive look without the need for complex design software. She also shared information about the Career Spark Center at McHenry County College, where she teaches Canva classes that empower professionals to expand their creative and technical skills.



Looking ahead, the Chamber will host the next installment in the series a seminar focused on digital marketing strategies to bridge the digital gap for local businesses. Attendees will gain insights into improving their SEO, building effective paid media campaigns, and using AI to strengthen their online presence.



This series is just the beginning of an exciting, ongoing collaboration between the Chamber, the City of Crystal Lake, and the Downtown Crystal Lake Association. Together, these organizations are investing in the success of Crystal Lake's business community ensuring that local entrepreneurs have the tools, resources, and confidence to continue growing and thriving for years to come.

D155 Mirco Internships Help Students Explore Careers

In 2022, School District 155 received a \$1.5 million grant from McHenry County to finance job readiness and exploration programs for nursing and other fields. District 155's Career Experiences Program gives students a chance to explore potential career paths through hands-on micro internships before making educational or financial commitments after high school.

The Micro Internship class is recommended for students who are juniors and seniors, and it focuses on resume writing, interviewing, and completing a microinternship with a minimum of 10 hours of hands-on training. The student and the job site can agree to additional hours, and the district has had students who have averaged 50-100 hours per internship.

To date, 180 business partners have hosted a student intern, with 48 placements at Crystal Lake businesses and organizations. The City of Crystal Lake, the Crystal Lake Fire Department, the Crystal Lake Police Department, the Crystal Lake Park District, and District 47 have all hosted students.

This year, over 180 students will complete a micro internship, and they have worked in a variety of fields including carpentry and construction, education, law, healthcare, marketing, zoology, engineering, autos, electrical, accounting, law enforcement, and more, representing all 16 career clusters.

The district uses Schoolinks, a career readiness platform that allows students to explore career interests. Businesses can also join and share opportunities. D155 has over 800 partners listed in Schoolinks. For more information about the Micro Internship program or Schoolinks, contact Veronica Gutzmer, career experience program coordinator, vgutzmer@d155.org.

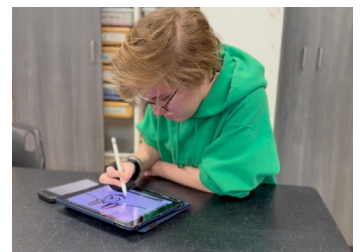
Firsthand Insight into Law Enforcement

Through a micro-internship with the Prairie Grove Police Department, Crystal Lake Central Senior Tessa Popp explored the world of law enforcement. The experience strengthened her interest in pursuing a career in law enforcement. During ride-alongs with the patrol division, she observed how reports were made, how calls were answered, and learned about driver behaviors.



CLC Senior Explores Career in Animation with Pixar

Crystal Lake Central Senior Ethan Miller, had the opportunity of a lifetime through a micro internship with Pixar. Ethan met with Pixar's Vice Presidents of Finance and Strategy to learn about the many steps that go into creating a film, and ways to continue building a career in digital animation.



Cary-Grove Junior Discovers Several Career Paths During Internship

During Junior Laura Labuda's, micro internship at Black Point Estate, her passion for history deepened. Originally interested in becoming a high school history teacher, she discovered a variety of other career opportunities in the field. She observed tours, explored the estate's archives, and learned about all the different roles involved in running and caring for a museum.



First Institute: Crystal Lake's Hidden Gem in Career Success



If you've ever sat at the traffic light at the intersection of McHenry Avenue and Barlina Road, chances are you've smiled at one of First Institute's clever signs. Whether it's a pun that makes you groan or a witty quip that makes your day, that little sign has become something of a local landmark. But behind the humor is something even more meaningful, an organization that's been helping people build better futures for over 40 years.

For decades, First Institute has been one of Crystal Lake's cornerstones for workforce development, preparing students for meaningful careers in health and wellness fields. While the programs have evolved to meet the needs of today's job market, the mission has never wavered: to give every student the tools, confidence, and support needed to succeed.

That dedication has earned national recognition. Earlier this year, First Institute was named one of the Nation's Top 250 Vocational Schools, a distinction based on graduation rates, graduate salaries, affordability, social mobility, and diversity. Of the thirteen Illinois schools honored, only six weren't community colleges and First Institute proudly stands



Today, the school offers three hands-on programs:

- Dental Assisting
- Medical Assisting
- Massage Therapy

Each year, approximately 200 students walk across the stage ready to enter the workforce and you'll find their graduates in businesses throughout the region. From local dental offices and chiropractic clinics to hospital departments and wellness centers, First Institute alumni are integral part of our community's healthcare network.



One of the biggest factors behind their success? The instructors.

Every teacher at First Institute works in the field they teach, bringing up-to-date expertise and real-world insight to the classroom. But more importantly, they care. They know that success isn't just about passing exams, it's about preparing students to thrive in life. Instructors take the time to understand each student's strengths, challenges, and goals, offering guidance that goes far beyond the curriculum. Their mentorship creates a supportive, encouraging environment where students feel seen, valued, and motivated to push themselves. This personal connection is often what students say makes the biggest difference, not just in completing their program, but in building the confidence they'll carry into their careers.



But at First Institute, “career-ready” means more than just mastering the latest techniques. It's about building the power skills, communication, professionalism, empathy, that make someone truly great at what they do. Students learn how to interact with clients, collaborate with teammates, and navigate real workplace expectations with confidence. That commitment pays off: the school ranks in the top 70% nationwide for students passing certification exams on their first attempt. And beyond the numbers, employers consistently praise First Institute graduates for their reliability, readiness, and ability to connect with the people, qualities that set them apart in today's competitive job market.



That support doesn't end at graduation, either. Through its dedicated Career Services team, First Institute helps connect graduates with employers across the region, strengthening both individual careers and the local economy. They even offer lifetime job placement assistance, a promise that reflects how deeply they value their students' long-term success. The school's externship program also gives students the chance to gain hands-on experience before graduation, learning from seasoned professionals in actual work environments. Many students say these real-world experiences give them the confidence and clarity they need to step into their first role with purpose. Combined with ongoing career-direction advice, interview coaching, and access to networking opportunities, First Institute ensures its students are prepared not only to find work, but to thrive in their chosen careers.



So, the next time you drive by that funny sign on McHenry Avenue, take a moment to think about what it represents. Behind every clever joke is a place changing lives by empowering people to learn, grow, and build brighter futures right here in Crystal Lake.



Strong Transitions: Preserving Local Legacies, Empowering McHenry County's Future



When a long-time business owner in McHenry County begins thinking about retirement, the conversation often centers on “what’s next,” not just for themselves, but for the people and community they’ve built around their company. Who will take over? How do they ensure the business stays local? What happens to the employees, customers, and vendors who rely on it?

These questions are the foundation of Strong Transitions, a county-wide initiative led by the McHenry County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC) and the Illinois Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at McHenry County College. Supported by an Advance McHenry County grant, Strong Transitions is an effort to merge the pathways of business owners and emerging entrepreneurs with the tools, expertise, and guidance needed to keep successful local businesses thriving across generations and ownership changes.

The Coming Wave of Business Transitions

Across the country, tens of thousands of Baby Boomer-owned businesses are approaching a turning point. According to a recent study by the Exit Planning Institute, more than half of all privately held businesses in the United States approximately 51% are owned by Baby Boomers, many of whom expect to exit their companies within the next decade. Yet, the same research reveals a stark reality: only 20% to 30% of businesses that go to market successfully sell, leaving as many as eight in ten owners without a viable path to realize the value of their life’s work or secure continuity for their employees and communities.

Locally, McHenry County is no exception. Many long-established manufacturers, service firms, and family-run enterprises are led by owners who have spent decades building their companies and contributing to the county’s economy.

Strong Transitions was created to change that narrative. By providing confidential, no-cost transition advising and hands-on educational programs, the initiative is an effort to ensure that McHenry County businesses aren’t just closing their doors — they’re passing the torch.



Two Pathways, One Mission

The Strong Transitions program offers two distinct but complementary tracks: Transition Advising and Entrepreneurship Through Acquisition (ETA).

1. Transition Advising

Designed for McHenry County business owners considering retirement, succession, or sale, Transition Advising connects participants with subject-matter experts who help chart a personalized roadmap for their next chapter.

The process begins with a confidential one-on-one session that covers three focus areas:

1. Personal: Assess readiness for retirement, identify potential successors, and outline personal and family goals.
2. Financial: Evaluate company position, review pre-exit cash flow, and identify potential valuation gaps between buyers and sellers.
3. Business: Strengthen long-term stability, enhance pre-transfer value, and spotlight key capital assets to make the business more attractive to buyers or family successors.

This structured approach transforms what can be an overwhelming decision into a clear, actionable plan. Participants leave with a sharper understanding of timelines, options, and strategies to maintain continuity while protecting the legacy they've built. The no-cost, confidential advising available through the Strong Transitions program extends the services of the Illinois Small Business Development Center (ISBDC) at McHenry County College.

“Every business transition is unique,” says John Mink, manager of the ISBDC at MCC. “Factoring in the owner’s desire for the business transition after succession is key to developing a plan. Whether this is a family succession, employee sale/ownership plan, or an outright sale, our experienced set of advisors partner with the business owner throughout the planning and execution of the transition.”

2. Entrepreneurship Through Acquisition (ETA)

On the other side of the equation are the buyers, individuals eager to take on leadership of existing companies rather than start from scratch. The Entrepreneurship Through Acquisition (ETA) track is an eight-week instructor-led course that trains these emerging entrepreneurs to identify, purchase, and operate local businesses.



ENTREPRENEURSHIP THROUGH ACQUISITION

Hosted at Catalyst Campus in Woodstock, the 8-week course uses a cohort format, encouraging entrepreneurs to problem-solve and develop relationships with their peers. The curriculum includes:

- How to source and evaluate businesses for sale.
- How to approach and negotiate with sellers.
- Understanding financing and investor structures.
- Managing day-one operations and implementing sustainable growth strategies.

Tuition for the program is \$1,899, but thanks to grant support, scholarships are available that reduce the cost to just \$189. The class attracts first-time business buyers, emerging leaders in family companies, and employees stepping into ownership roles.

“Awareness of ETA as a framework is gaining traction nationally,” says Mark Piekos, Executive Director of the MCEDC. “Rather than take on the risk and stressors of launching a start-up, more entrepreneurs are seeking quality existing businesses with established infrastructure.”



While ETA pathways are commonly found in postgraduate programs nationwide, the Strong Transitions course removes the barriers of cost and exclusivity, offering practical, hands-on instruction to anyone with the entrepreneurial spirit who is ready to take the leap into business ownership.

Graduates leave with practical tools, local connections, and the confidence to pursue real acquisition opportunities within McHenry County. Many will go on to engage with local lenders, brokers, and business owners who are ready to sell, creating a self-sustaining pipeline of new local ownership.

Why It Matters

When a business stays in local hands, so do the jobs, relationships, and investments that define McHenry County's economic identity. Each successful transition keeps manufacturing capacity, professional services, and supply-chain activity anchored here, rather than lost to outside buyers or closures.

That continuity has ripple effects:

- It preserves jobs and stabilizes the tax base.
- It sustains long-standing suppliers and community partnerships.
- It keeps industry knowledge and talent rooted in McHenry County.

In short, Strong Transitions is not just about ownership — it's about stewardship. It ensures that businesses built by one generation continue to provide opportunities for the next.

A Collaborative Effort

Strong Transitions represents a partnership between public agencies, local institutions, and the private sector. The Advance McHenry County grant program, administered by the County Board, recognized the importance of supporting small and mid-sized businesses through generational change.

The Illinois SBDC at McHenry County College brings seasoned business advisors who guide owners through valuation, operations, and financing. Meanwhile, the MCEDC leverages its network of municipal leaders, lenders, and professionals to make connections that move deals forward.



That collaborative framework allows the program to remain accessible, confidential, and tailored to each participant's situation.

The Road Ahead

As Strong Transitions moves into its next phase, MCEDC and its partners are expanding outreach to connect with more business owners and aspiring buyers. Information sessions, networking events, and case studies are being developed to help more people see what's possible.

“McHenry County's strength lies in its locally owned businesses,” says Piekos. “Strong Transitions is about honoring those who built them and equipping those who will build what comes next.”

Business owners or emerging entrepreneurs interested in learning more can contact info@mcedc.com or visit mchenrycountyedc.com/strong-transitions for details.

Enhanced Members

Inspire Level



Visionary Level



Invest Level



Engage Level



Elevate Level

American Community Bank	Family Dentistry of Crystal Lake	Mariano's
Black Diamond	FORTRESS	MSU Federal Credit Union
BMO Bank Crystal Lake	General Kinematics	Miller Verchota
Camfil	Hampton, Lenzini & Renwick	Northern Illinois Foot & Ankle
Castle Auto Plex	Hand & Stone Massage & Facial Crystal Lake	Specialists
Cilantro Taco Grill	Home Instead	Northwest Herald
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