

New Riverside Industries leader working to restore staff, bring disabled clients back in person



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EASTHAMPTON — With plans to expand its services, President and CEO Lynn Ostrowski-Ireland says the future of Riverside Industries is looking bright.

Since taking the helm from Char Gentes, who retired from the nonprofit organization in December after nearly 40 years, Ostrowski-Ireland says she knew she found a place she wanted to be.

“It’s been great. The team here is phenomenal. The community has been incredibly supportive and welcoming,” she said. “What we do each and every day is really important and makes such a difference in people’s lives that I can’t really imagine being anywhere better.”

The search for a new president and CEO began in February 2021 and included screening many applicants and narrowing them down to a pool of four finalists. After interviews and further screening, the search committee unanimously selected Ostrowski-Ireland to lead the organization.

Ostrowski-Ireland holds a doctorate in psychology with a concentration in health behavior from Capella University in Minneapolis and a master’s degree in health promotion wellness management from Springfield College. She most recently served as the chief operating officer for Holyoke-based Sisters for Providence Ministry Corp., where she oversaw programming focused on helping elders and the underprivileged.

Before that, she served as the chief operating officer for Viability Inc., which is headquartered in Northampton, where she contributed to the company achieving a score of 99.8% on CARF Accreditation. She’s also worked at Health New England as the director of corporate responsibility and government affairs.

Though Ostrowski-Ireland describes the atmosphere at Riverside as being very positive, the job isn’t without its challenges, especially in the midst of an ongoing pandemic. Although many businesses and nonprofits have transitioned to a post-pandemic approach to health policies, she said Riverside is treating circumstances as “endemic” at this point.

Currently, the nonprofit — which empowers people with disabilities with life skills development and employment— is operating at about 65% of capacity, strictly due to staffing challenges. There’s currently a waitlist that’s been building for the past two years that includes previous clients and those that have started aging out of the school system looking for assistance.

While the agency provides services via Zoom, those services can also be isolating.

“Although every industry is experiencing the workforce crisis, we in human services have always had workforce challenges. And the pandemic has exacerbated or highlighted those challenges in a significant way,” Ostrowski-Ireland said. “I really do think human service organizations as we do with people with developmental disabilities have been disproportionately affected with staffing.”

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At full capacity, Ostrowski-Ireland said, Riverside had just under 200 full-time employees. Now, there are about 125.

Riverside receives the majority of its funding from the state Department of Developmental Services and MassHealth.

“We cannot compete with Target, who is starting people at \$24 per hour, or Amazon that’s paying \$18 per hour and has sign-on bonuses,” she said. “And because our funding is predominantly from the state, we can’t increase wages to compete ... We’re not able to do the work that we want to be able to do and that the individuals we serve really deserve.”

Ostrowski-Ireland said Riverside has been working with a number of provider organizations in state legislative efforts to try to increase wages to a more competitive level.

With the recent surge in COVID-19 cases and out of additional caution, Riverside staff and its clients also continue wearing masks during program hours.

Besides working to fully staff the organization and bring all its clients back to the facility for in-person services, Riverside is also looking to expand its Pre-Employment Transition Services, also known as Pre-ETS. With the program, staff members go into a high school to help students ages 14 to 22 who have intellectual or developmental disabilities explore educational and employment opportunities as they prepare for life after high school. The agency has contracts with four high schools, including Easthampton and Northampton.

Ostrowski-Ireland also aims to provide autism-specific programming in the future.

Moving forward, Ostrowski-Ireland said she feels very positive about the future of Riverside Industries. The organization’s annual auction, which was held last week, raised more than \$113,000.

“Riverside will survive and thrive and a big piece of that is the work of the board, the support of this community and the incredible dedication of the team here at Riverside,” she said.

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