



August 27, 2025

Youth Outreach



Career Studio Introduces Middle Schoolers to Manufacturing

United Way of Mercer County recently hosted an “Introduction to Advanced Manufacturing and Robotics” career studio, giving 25 local middle school students an early look at careers in manufacturing.

The camp was supported by LMMC with funding from its PA Industry Partnership grant. Students were introduced to manufacturing challenges and engaged with Sphero robotics to explore how technology plays a role in modern problem-solving.

As part of the experience, students visited two local manufacturers: Sharon Tube and T. Bruce Sales, an LMMC member. Both manufacturers welcomed students into their facilities to give them a closer look at the equipment, processes and career opportunities available in the field.

“The Advanced Manufacturing and Robotics Studios not only increased the awareness of regional career opportunities in manufacturing, but also inspired students to develop high-demand 21st century skills,” said Lori Schaller, Program Director at United Way of Mercer County.

The studio is part of United Way’s broader effort to expose young people to high-demand career paths and connect classroom learning with real-world possibilities.

“These programs are about planting the seed,” said Julie Michael Smith, LMMC Coalition Manager. “When students see what’s possible in their own community, they begin to picture themselves in those roles.”

LMMC also supported United Way’s summer career studio for high school students in June when students visited Joy Cone and ELLWOOD Crankshaft Group, another LMMC member. Because of its success, United Way partnered again with Mercer County Career Center to offer a middle school version.

By supporting efforts like these, LMMC and its partners continue working to build a more informed and prepared future workforce across the region.

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Membership



Save the Date: LMMC Semi Annual Membership & Community Meeting October 7

After a strong start earlier this year, LMMC is inviting members and the community back together this fall to continue the conversation and share updates on its priority programs that will support jobseekers and students.

This session will highlight all things LMMC, including the substantial progress made on Manufacturing Readiness and Talent Factory.

Manufacturing Readiness is a four-week pre-apprenticeship program for entry level production positions, sponsored by Butler County Community College and developed with input from LMMC leaders to reflect real workplace needs. The program targets young adults, recent high school graduates and jobseekers who are unemployed, underemployed or exploring a career change, and will include career readiness and soft skills training provided by PA CareerLink and Goodwill Industries.

Talent Factory is designed to build stronger connections between schools and manufacturers in Lawrence and Mercer counties. Set to launch this fall, the youth initiative will raise awareness of manufacturing career opportunities, introduce students, educators, parents, coaches and others to local employers and give manufacturers earlier access to talent.

The October meeting builds on momentum from LMMC's inaugural gathering in April, which drew a full house of manufacturers, educators and workforce partners to set priorities and celebrate early wins such as Manufacturing Day participation and community involvement.

Attendees also shared a candid outlook on regional workforce challenges, including an aging labor force, population decline and limited awareness among young people about manufacturing careers.

LMMC's next membership meeting will be held October 7 at Mercer County Career Center, 776 Greenville Road, Mercer, PA 16137. Registration and refreshments begin at 7:30 a.m., with the meeting starting promptly at 8 a.m. and concluding at 10 a.m.

Mark your calendars and plan to attend. More details will be shared soon.

Youth Outreach

Student Video Contest Expands into Lawrence County

The West Central "What's So Cool About Manufacturing" student video contest is expanding into Lawrence County beginning with the 2026 competition.



Created to spark student interest in modern manufacturing careers, the contest pairs middle school teams with local

manufacturers. Students are given video equipment, training and mentoring to create short features showcasing what makes manufacturing unique, innovative and rewarding. The finished videos are shared online for both judging and a public Viewers Choice vote that typically draws thousands of participants.

Mercer County schools have already been active in the program, producing award-winning videos that highlight companies and careers close to home. In 2025, LMMC members Hall Manufacturing Technologies, Berner International, Wheatland Steel Processing, T. Bruce Sales and G.W. Becker all partnered with local schools, giving students an inside look at the technology and opportunities inside their facilities.

“Programs like this are a win-win,” said Julie Michael Smith, LMMC Coalition Manager. “Our members open their doors and show students the reality of modern manufacturing, while the students get to apply creativity and teamwork to tell that story in their own way.”

Adding Lawrence County schools to the mix will broaden the reach of the contest and strengthen connections between education and industry throughout the region.

By investing in efforts like “What’s So Cool About Manufacturing,” LMMC and its lead partner, Penn-Northwest Development Corporation's Homegrown Initiative, are helping to reshape perceptions of manufacturing while giving students a firsthand look at the opportunities available in their own communities.

If you are a manufacturer or school interested in participating in the 2026 competition, please contact Julie Michael Smith at julie@lawrencemercermfg.com for more information.

Membership



New Member Profile: Solar Atmospheres

Solar Atmospheres of Western Pennsylvania is affirming that world-class manufacturing happens right here in Mercer County.

Its Hermitage facility spans 115,000 square feet, employs 75 people and houses some of the most advanced heat-treating systems in the nation, designed to handle exceptionally large and complex parts.

“Next year we’re going to be celebrating our 25th anniversary at this facility, but we’ve been heat treating for nearly 50 years now,” said Michael Johnson, Sales Director. “We’re the largest American-owned heat treater in the United States, and this location operates the biggest commercially available vacuum equipment in the world.”

The site serves aerospace, medical and defense markets and continues to position itself for long-term growth.

Advanced Heat Treating with a Family Touch

Though Solar Atmospheres has expanded to seven other locations nationwide, its culture remains rooted in family. Founder Bill Jones, along with his wife Myrtle, continues to stay involved in the company even in his 90s. The couple’s dedication continues to guide Solar Atmospheres today.

Employees describe the Hermitage plant as a workplace where teamwork is valued and long-term careers are encouraged.

“This is a family run company, and that feeling extends to how we operate,” said Zachary Thomas, Outside Sales Manager. “Everybody here pulls together, and that is why people stay. It is a place where you can build a career, not just a job”

Why Join LMMC?

Like many manufacturers, the company is focused on finding and developing the next generation of talent right here in Lawrence and Mercer counties.

“When we came out here in 2001, if I put a little sign out front, by the end of the day I would have 100 applicants. Now it is not like that,” said Kevin Bekelja, Vice President of Operations. “For our growth to continue, we need kids to stay here and not go somewhere else.”

To help address the issue, the company looks forward to participating in the Coalition’s efforts, specifically the Talent Factory youth initiative launching this fall. The program will introduce students to manufacturing careers and provide employers with a chance to connect directly with the workforce of the future.

Membership

New Member Profile: Pennsylvania College of Technology Workforce Development

Pennsylvania College of Technology Workforce Development has joined LMMC as a community and economic development partner.



**Pennsylvania
College of Technology**

A Penn State Affiliate

Workforce Development

Known for its strong industry connections and applied technology focus, Penn College Workforce Development brings valuable statewide perspectives and resources to LMMC's mission of strengthening the regional manufacturing workforce.

"We are excited to continue our partnership with LMMC as a member," said Sara Hillis Ousby, Director of Workforce Training Programs. "We have an established history in upskilling and reskilling the manufacturing workforce and look forward to bringing that experience to LMMC members. By sharing insights, best practices and access to targeted training solutions, we hope to support their ongoing workforce development goals in a way that's both practical and impactful."

A Penn State Affiliate with Strong Industry Ties

Located in Williamsport, Penn College is a special mission affiliate of Penn State and serves students from across Pennsylvania and beyond. The college offers more than 100 associate, bachelor's and certificate programs, many of which are directly aligned with industry demand in manufacturing, engineering technologies, mechatronics and industrial automation.

Penn College Workforce Development partners with businesses to deliver practical, customized training that builds skills, improves performance and drives results. Whether you're looking to upskill your team, close critical talent gaps or stay ahead of industry changes, their flexible programs are designed with your goals in mind. Led by experienced instructors and built around real-world needs, Workforce Development helps your workforce grow – and your business thrive.

LMMC has already been working with Penn College Workforce Development and Forward Lawrence to bring training directly to area youth. In 2025, 28 Lawrence County high school students enrolled in Penn College's advanced manufacturing pre-apprenticeship program. That program is now expanding into Mercer County with support from Penn-Northwest Development Corporation's Homegrown Initiative, creating a broader pathway for young people to explore careers in modern manufacturing.

As an LMMC partner, Penn College Workforce Development will support ongoing discussions around aligning training with employer needs and helping expand manufacturing career awareness. The partnership also creates opportunities for collaboration on pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship and certification programs.
