



Shelby Boston, director of Butte County's Department of Employment and Social Services, says that many employees have felt supported throughout the pandemic, and that having the ability to continue working from home has played an important role.  
CN&R FILE PHOTO

office.

One way the organization has helped connect employers and job seekers is by providing wage subsidies to support training. For example, they might have a welder who has successfully completed a job program, she said, but doesn't have field experience. The organization could offer to pay a prospective employer half of that person's wages for their first six months on the job.

This helps make the investment more attractive for employers, she said.

In the current job market, employers have had to be more competitive, Velazquez said. As a result, she has seen small companies offer entry-level positions starting at \$15 per hour that typically would have been listed at \$13 an hour pre-pandemic. Those same companies are offering pay increases in three to six months based on job performance, she said.

"They're offering a much more competitive wage, I think, in response to the pandemic and sheer need for staff," she said. "I've seen a lot of employers be more flexible with their schedules, with their benefits package and paid time off, just to try to make it as lucrative as possible."

However, Velazquez said unemployed workers shouldn't wait too long to enter the market.

"We do project that as vaccines roll out and other things end—mask mandates, reopening restrictions, rent moratorium, additional \$300 in weekly [unemployment] benefits, extensions, and [limits on] schools reopening full-time—there will be a large increase in unemployed [individuals] suddenly rushing to hit the job market," she said.

The wage increases might be tough on small local businesses at first but will be more beneficial for everyone in the long run, Velazquez said, resulting in "happier workplaces [and] more loyal employees" ultimately creating a more productive work environment with less turnover.

"I know that that's hard on a lot of businesses and there's a lot of pushback, but in the big picture, we're seeing employers offer more sustainable wages, which for us is our goal," she said. "Employees are getting paid wages that with our housing prices are a little more promising." □

twice a week during the school year to be able to drive him to and from campus.

"That would have never been something I would have been able to do [before]," she said.

The shift has translated into cost savings as well. The department cut \$200,000 from its travel budget this year—many staff trainings and management meetings hosted outside the county, for example, became virtual. The county directed that surplus back to employees, allowing them to participate in a vacation buy-back program.

## Incentive plans

Another pandemic-inspired change for the better is the offering of higher wages/better benefits packages, according to Amy Velazquez, director of business services for the Alliance for Workforce Development.

Velazquez and her team provide job-seekers with training and resources to help them gain employment. They assist businesses, too, providing them with job development support and subsidies to train new hires. All of these services are free to clients, funded by the California Employment Development Department and the U.S. Department of Labor.

The Alliance for Workforce Development has been very busy lately because everybody is hiring and nobody can find candidates, Velazquez told the CN&R via telephone from her home

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