

## Meeting the Challenge - The Customer is First with Food Stores

By Dr. Joanne LaPerla Morales, President and Board Chair, Middlesex County Community College

**Saturday morning food shopping is a tradition for countless New Jersey residents each week!** It doesn't get more main stream than that. But did you ever stop and wonder how all those shelves got stocked, prices marked and the entire store set up to welcome and encourage us to shop 'til we drop?

Food stores across the Garden State rely on a cadre of employees to make this slice of the American experience as pleasurable and hassle free as possible. Making sure these employees are up to the task has been a challenge for every human resource manager and store owner for years. These days, food store operators can find the help they need with the NJBIA Basic Skills Workforce Training Program.

The program is designed to improve workers' skills while helping businesses improve productivity and their bottom line. It's a partnership between the NJ Department of Labor, the New Jersey Business & Industry Association (NJBIA), and the state's community colleges working through their Consortium for Workforce and Economic Development.

The food industry, with almost 109,000 workers across the state, is one of the few business sectors that has added jobs over the past year. Overall employment is up 3 percent since January 2009. In this fiercely competitive industry, store owners count on their employees to give them an edge with excellent customer service and computer skills to handle tasks like inventory control and staff scheduling.

David Zallie, president of the Zallie ShopRite, jumped in at the chance to improve customer service and productivity through the Basic Skills Training Program. He praised Middlesex County College for holding the training at his stores. He said an added benefit of the training was that the "group learning" experience helped to improve store teamwork.

A number of other food-store operators across the state have looked to the training program to improve customer satisfaction by having their employees take classes in verbal communication and customer service.

Food Circus, the owner of 10 Food Town stores in Middlesex, Monmouth and Ocean counties, got training from Brookdale Community College to improve employee computer skills. Says Nancyanne Fama, assistant vice president for human resources: "Training such as this could never be replicated by a small family-owned business. We needed this grant to make things happen for our team members."

Employees with Wegman's New Jersey food stores received instruction from Middlesex County College in computer skills and English as a second language. Camden County College will be helping ShopRite stores in Cherry Hill improve employee confidence with upcoming customer-service classes.

The training provided under the NJBIA Basic Skills Training program is managed by the Consortium, but is delivered by local community colleges at no charge to participating companies. To sign up for training, call the New Jersey Community College Consortium COO, Bob Rosa, at 609-393-9009, or send an e-mail to [rrosa@njworkforce.org](mailto:rrosa@njworkforce.org).

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