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Firm has been part of M&T Bank for years and is growing here. Page C4

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SPOTLIGHT / WORKFORCE

Factory jobs continue a downward trend in WNY

These aren’t easy times for workers looking for a manufacturing job. Employment by manufacturers has dropped by 3.1% over the past year as the post-pandemic spike in factory jobs continues to wind down.



DAVID ROBINSON

Factory employment in the region had a strong run coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic, with manufacturing jobs rising above the 54,000 mark in 2023 for the first time in 15 years. Employment stabilized at that level for more than a year, but it started dropping in the summer of 2024 and hasn’t stopped since.

A big chunk of that was the shut-down of the Sumitomo Rubber USA plant in the Town of Tonawanda in late 2024, which wiped out more than 1,500 jobs. The decline stretched into 2025 and has continued into this year as tariff costs have squeezed manufacturers and the economic outlook grew cloudy.

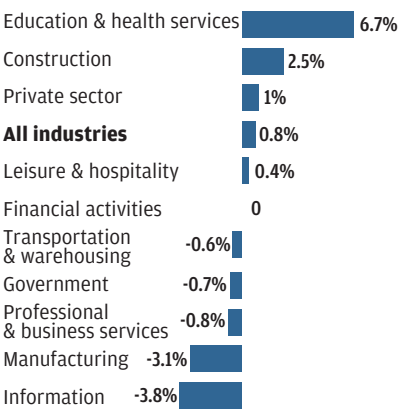
In March, factory employment dropped to an even 50,000, down almost 8% over the past two years. That hurts because factory jobs tend to pay significantly better than the average job in the Buffalo Niagara region, so when they disappear, it has an outsized impact on incomes and consumer spending, which sends bigger ripples through the rest of the region’s economy.

So what’s growing? Construction employment has been strong, rising by 2.5% over the past year, but even that growth comes with a big caveat. The Buffalo Bills stadium construction project, which employed more than 1,000 workers for much of the past year, is winding down and those jobs will be going away entirely this summer.

The other strong point is health-care and social assistance, where employment has soared by more than 8% over the past year. But that also comes with an asterisk: The federal government reclassified some home healthcare jobs that had been spread across different categories and clumped them in a single one within the healthcare sector. Timothy Glass, the Labor Department’s regional economist in Buffalo, thinks that accounts for most of that spike.

What’s growing and what isn’t

Change in the Buffalo Niagara jobs, by sector from March 2025 to March 2026.



Source: New York State Labor Department
Lee Enterprises graphic



STARTUPS

Dreams do come true

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STARTUPS



JOED VIERA PHOTOS, BUFFALO NEWS

Michelle Epps plays an interactive game at Funville in Buffalo's Black Rock neighborhood.

M&T program helped bring Funville to life

Yolanda Fonville worked for years as a registered nurse at Sisters Hospital, but it was always a dream to open her own business and run an entertainment center.

As Fonville got closer to making that dream a reality a few years ago, she needed guidance and strategy, and some additional money.

She had saved money over the years and bolstered her bank

account further by working as a traveling nurse after the Covid-19 pandemic but finding a home for her business, fixing it up and then getting needed games and equipment would require an

insurgence of funding.

It wasn't until Fonville went through the M&T Bank Emerging Entrepreneurs program hosted by the University at Buffalo School of Management's Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership three years ago that she was able to understand how to get what she needed to move ahead.

Being an entrepreneur is difficult enough, so Fonville needed all the help and resources made available through the program, which she graduated from in 2023. That includes building a relationship with M&T and borrowing hundreds of thousands of dollars for the project.

"Without the help, I wouldn't be here right now," said Fonville, who opened Funville – a play on her last name – earlier this year at the former Hatchets and Hops on 68 Tonawanda St. in Buffalo's Black Rock neighborhood.

"I had no idea what it takes to run a business, but that gave me the foundation and opened my eyes to a lot of the things I needed, like more of a business plan and business model," she said. "The mentorship is great and they even connect you with a banker, because I was going to need way more than what I saved."

Funville features virtual adventures, like a roller coaster; an immersive gaming arena; karaoke stage and entertainment games; ax throwing with rubber axes; shuffleboard; and a multi-ball game with training for an array of sports.

She built the business from scratch, starting with a photo booth she hauled to events on



"These are people with a big dream, the work ethic to get something done and they just need a hand up. They need a little bit of help and some introductions," said Susan Steffan, executive director of the UB School of Management Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership.

nights and weekends while working 12-hour overnight shifts at the hospital to make money to save. One of those photo booths is now located in her business.

The M&T Bank Emerging Entrepreneurs program is a 10-month program that helps socially or economically disadvantaged business owners take their companies to the next stage of development. Since 2004, it has helped more than 400 individuals trying to build their businesses. A new cohort of 40 will start in the fall.

Across all CEL programs, which began four decades ago, more than 1,700 alumni employ more than 23,000 Western New Yorkers, and their businesses are worth more than \$2.3 billion to the local economy.

Fonville, who's been with Catholic Health for the better part of three decades, has always loved entertaining. She hosts parties and haunted houses at her Grand Island home and used to create carnivals in her backyard. So, at first, she was thinking big.

Her ideas included bringing in bounce houses, bowling lanes and a roller-skating rink, but the program helped her understand that all of that might not be feasible at first.

Fonville went from having a seven-figure idea to a more realistic six-figure idea, said Shannon Johnson, business banking



Susan Steffan and Amy Meisenzahl ride a virtual roller coaster at Funville. The entertainment center also features an immersive gaming arena; karaoke stage and entertainment games; ax throwing with rubber axes; shuffleboard; and a multi-ball game with training for an array of sports.

relationship manager at M&T Bank, who's served as a mentor and in leadership roles for CEL programs.

"Her dream was years in the making, so from the time three years ago when we first met, she had an idea of what she wanted to do and we had to pivot a bit from that, but for the most part, she effectively made that dream come true," Johnson said.

M&T Bank is a significant supporter of CEL with funding for its programs, boots on the ground and providing opportunities for these growing businesses to acquire a small-business loan or other forms of funding. They play the part of advisers and bankers at the same time. The bank also serves as a networking partner and an ear for founders to pitch ideas.

"That's where we come in to make sure it happens the way it should," Johnson said. "Small businesses are the backbone of the community, so we want to make sure those are built and operating appropriately."

Susan Steffan, executive director of the UB School of Management Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership, said it's not always the most comfortable thing to be around bankers, but Johnson and other M&T representatives come across as approachable and friendly.

"It makes it feel less intimidating," Steffan said. "One of the

things we love about the partnership with M&T is obviously the funding they provide the CEL keeps the cost of the program very minimal, but it's not just them writing a check. Shannon and others from M&T come in to provide financial training and business plans. A lot of people can write a check but they're not always willing to put their time and effort behind it."

Fonville finished the program and became a traveling nurse to make some bigger money and start to save for the business. She continues to work part time at Sisters Hospital, even as she owns and runs the business.

She reached out to Johnson after he helped her during her cohort of the emerging entrepreneurs program. Fonville came to their first meeting with her vision board and business plan, and everything she learned from the program, Johnson said.

"She brought everything from the curriculum to the negotiating table with me," Johnson said. "She checked me and questioned me when she needed to do but it was a healthy relationship that couldn't have been better."

It wasn't always a smooth ride, but the two sides made it work. The funding is critical for many of these first-time business owners.

"We had a lot of obstacles – a lease that didn't work out, a government shutdown," Johnson

said. "We had almost everything you can think of go on during that two and a half years, but we just worked together to get through them all."

Fonville said her location is not as big as she first hoped, but she's settling in nicely after rebuilding much of the place that was filled with ax-throwing cages.

Steffan said entrepreneurs like Fonville come in with a business idea and they're given the tools to grow it, and as their needs change, CEL tries to provide the programming for it.

The program's alumni include Rebecca Brady, founder of Top Seedz, the artisan cracker company that won the \$1 million first prize at the 2021 43North startup competition; Allison DeHonney, founder and CEO of Buffalo Go Green and Urban Fruits & Veggies; and Nicole Davis, whose Franci Jewelry designs went from her kitchen table to shows at Paris Fashion Week and the cover of European Vogue.

"We provide a deep pool of experts that come in to present what it means to have a business plan, how to find your customers and what are the financials that you need," Steffan said. "Most of the time, these are people with a big dream, the work ethic to get something done and they just need a hand up. They need a little bit of help and some introductions."

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The Buffalo Next team covers the forces reshaping the Buffalo Niagara economy.

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