

BIZfact

\$128,100

Median annual wage
of Long Island's 4,170
medical and health-
services managers

Source: State Labor
Department

STUDY: PUBLIC PENSIONS AT RISK IN DOWNTURN

Many pension funds for public workers already owe far more in retirement benefits than they have in the bank, and the problem will only grow worse if the economy slows down, according to a new report.

The study from the Pew Charitable Trusts found that the New Jersey and Kentucky funds are in such perilous shape that they risk running dry.

"Even after eight years of economic recovery — eight straight years of stock market gains — the public pension plans are more vulnerable than they've ever been to the next recession," researcher Greg Mennis said in an interview.

Governments have been ramping up contributions to the funds to help cover the promises they've made to retirees, but that leaves less money to spend on schools, police, parks and other core government services.

Another option is reducing pension benefits. A plan to do that in Kentucky led to teacher walkouts earlier this year.

The Pew study, published by the Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government at Harvard University and released Thursday, examines what would happen to pension funds in 10 states under various economic scenarios.

If a fund doesn't bring in enough money to cover its promised retirement costs, the state would have to make up the difference. In New Jersey, that would mean spending at least \$2 billion more a year. — AP

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Adelphi senior Richard Spiegel, 20, interviews for an internship with representatives from Northwell Health. The university's Bridges to Adelphi program links students who are on the autism spectrum or who have other nonverbal learning disorders with internship opportunities.

Opening doors for the autistic

Adelphi program helps those with spectrum disorders find internships

BY JAMIE HERZLICH
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Just two days after starting her firm in July 2016, Felicia Fleitman attended a networking luncheon that would change the course of her business.

At the luncheon, Fleitman, founder of Westbury-based Savvy Hires, a workforce development firm specializing in creating internship and apprenticeship programs, listened to a speaker from Specialized Autism Support & Information talk about the struggles individuals on the autism spectrum face in finding employment.

"I had never thought about

this population before," says Fleitman. "Her passion inspired me."

She started volunteering for the group. Soon after, Adelphi University contacted SASI for help in finding internship op-

At a glance

- **COMPANY:** Savvy Hires, Westbury
- **OWNER:** Felicia Fleitman
- **SPECIALTY:** Creating internship and apprenticeship programs
- **FOUNDED:** 2016
- **REVENUES:** 70 percent from school partnerships; 30 percent from companies seeking interns

portunities for its students with autism. SASI in turn called Fleitman.

That connection led her to a role as a paid consultant to the university's Bridges to Adelphi program, which offers academic, social and vocational services to students on the autism spectrum and those with other nonverbal learning disorders. It also resulted in the creation of a pilot internship program last summer that started with just two employers and is expanding to close to a dozen this summer.

"Last year, we had seven interns," says Fleitman, noting they hope to at least double that when the program starts

in mid-June.

Expanding employer participation is critical for members of this population, who often find themselves unemployed or underemployed.

"This is very much an untapped labor pool," says Marcia Scheiner, president of Manhattan-based Integrate Autism Employment Advisors, an organization that works with employers to help identify, recruit and retain professionals on the autism spectrum.

The unemployment rate among college graduates with autism is 85 percent, she says.

"Our traditional vocational system has typically focused on placing people on the autism spectrum in lower-skilled work," says Scheiner. Yet, about a third of the autism population is achieving higher education levels and looking for competitive employment at their skill level, she says.

There are some real benefits to hiring this population, including their accuracy, attention to detail and ability to hyper-focus, she says. More employers are becoming aware of their value as evidenced by major companies like Microsoft devoting dedicated hiring programs to this population.

Following last year's pilot program, New Hyde Park-based Northwell Health hired



CHRIS WARE

Felicia Fleitman is a consultant to the Bridges program. Students on the autism spectrum are just as capable as neuro-typical students, she says.

two Bridges interns for full-time jobs in information technology and research, says Lauren Pearson, Northwell's manager of workforce readiness.

Northwell representatives were at Adelphi last month to interview intern applicants for this summer. Peason says the interviews are conducted at the school rather than in a Northwell office "to make it a more comfortable environment" for the students.

One interviewee, Richard Spiegel, 20, a senior studying computer science, said he appreciated Northwell coming onto campus.

"It definitely alleviates the stress," he says. Last year he interned at Enterprise Holdings through the pilot program.

Spiegel says the Bridges program has helped prepare him for what to expect from an interview and also for participating in an internship.

"Bridges provides a much easier opening for you to come in and find opportunities for internships and jobs," he says.

That's the intent, says Bridges director Mitch Nagler, who hired Fleitman in 2016 to provide students with opportunities to connect with potential employers.

"If we don't provide our students with support as they get close to graduation, it's going to be difficult for them to gain employment in the areas they studied where they get paid competitive wages so they could live independent lives," Nagle says.

Fleitman says these students are just as capable as "neuro-typical" students, but just need support.

She and the Bridges program also offer support to companies. For example, they went to Northwell to conduct

"autism in the workplace" training for managers. Northwell also created a video inviting interested Bridges students to its campus and then arranged a trip to Lake Success before the interviews.

This helps, considering the interview process alone can be daunting for these individuals, Fleitman says.

Scheiner agrees. Her firm, Integrate, coaches companies on behaviors that might make them discard a candidate, such as not making eye contact or taking a few extra seconds to process a question before answering.

Still, employers don't have to drastically change the way they operate.

"It's 90 percent about clear communication," says

Scheiner, recalling an instance when a manager asked a young man on the autism spectrum "Would you like to work on this project?" and he answered "No." When she asked the young man why he said that, he said it was because he was already working on something else. Rather, the manager could have tweaked his direction by saying, "We need you to work on this project."

"It's the little things," Scheiner says.

Fleitman says companies are becoming more open to giving internship opportunities to students on the spectrum. She's expanded her reach to more employers this year. Northwell and Queens-based Enterprise are participating for a second year. Medcore Health Group of Garden City and Spark Foundry, a Manhattan media agency that is part of Publicis Media, are among the new companies that have signed on.

Enterprise hired a management intern from last summer's program to stay on part time during the school year, talent acquisition manager Natasha Johnson says.

"Participating in the Bridges to Adelphi program is a perfect fit with our company culture and values," she says.

Fleitman says the internship program has exceeded her expectations, adding that this niche now constitutes 70 percent of her business.

She's also working with other schools in similar capacities, including Suffolk County Community College.

"This has really shaped my business model in a way I didn't expect," Fleitman says. "My overall goal is to really impact the employment landscape in a positive way."

Credit card firms are using rewards to steer purchases

The Associated Press

Credit card companies are taking the next step in using their points programs to influence what millions of customers buy, going as far as influencing what color blender you might purchase.

American Express is piloting a program that will allow merchants to reward customers for purchasing specific items at their stores, starting with online merchant Boxed.

Amex is starting small: giving bonus rewards points to Boxed customers who buy Dove soap, Planters nuts, Cheerios cereal and a handful of other items. But it expects to open the program to nearly all its merchants in the coming months.

Customers will benefit by expanding the number of ways they can earn points. The program also helps Amex, by giving merchants another reason to keep accepting American Express cards, which tend to be the most expensive for merchants to process.

Credit card companies have long been able to reward spending at particular types of merchants, using what are known as merchant codes. That's how credit cards are able to give extra points or cash back on gasoline, travel, hotels and



AP / PATRICK SISON

An American Express pilot program allows merchants to reward customers for purchasing specific items at their stores.

other broad categories.

But targeting individual items on a store's shelf was a tough barrier to break. Merchants' inventory systems are different from company to company. Amex says it was able to solve the problem using blockchain technology developed by Hyperledger. It enables Amex and merchants to generate product-targeted offers while allowing merchants to keep their own inventory management systems.

Beyond promoting specific items, the change will also let American Express and its merchant customers target promo-

tions to very specific customers. Merchants could use the program as an inventory management system, creating promotions for certain items they need to sell or want to clear off their shelves — like an odd-colored blender, for instance.

"They can create programs based on a time of day, day of the week, by incentivizing a customer to download their app. The number of ways merchants can reward customers with Membership Reward points will be exponentially increased," said Chris Craccholo, who heads up the Membership Rewards program for Amex.

Other card companies also want to influence how customers spend their points. HSBC started a pilot program earlier this year that sent marketing emails to 75,000 customers using algorithms developed by St. Louis-based Maritz. A portion of customers received an artificial intelligence-recommended category of credit card reward — travel, merchandise, gift cards or cash back — while the rest received standard marketing emails. Roughly 70 percent of the targeted customers who ended up redeeming their points chose the recommendation generated by the computer.

THE ISSUE: SUMMER SAVINGS

Making sure seasonal earnings last



BY SHERYL NANCE-NASH
Special to Newsday

With summer fast approaching, seasonal workers will enjoy the flush feeling of increased cash flow. The challenge is, how not to spend it all.

Couple discipline with strategy and you'll have something to keep you going when the leaves turn to snowflakes.

■ **Get serious:** Allocate one day a week where all the pay from that day is your savings

for the week. If you work 40 hours a week, you want to save eight hours. "Make it fun and think of that day as 'your future' day," says Jennifer Beeston, vice president of mortgage lending at Guaranteed Rate Mortgage in Manhattan.

■ **Divide, but conquer:** Have two bank accounts and have a portion of your pay deposited directly into one account that you don't touch. "Start with \$100 a paycheck and see how that feels. Increase it to \$150 and see how high you can get by summer's end," Beeston says.

Automatic saving is key. "You're not tempted to spend a portion of your income be-

cause you don't see it. It's human psyche: 'Oh, I have \$500. I can spend \$500.' But when you make savings automatic, you don't even see it," says Daniel Tariq, a vice president at Quontic Bank in Astoria.

■ **Be strategic:** "Make the most of nice weather. Walk, ride or take public transportation. You'll save a ton on gas, tolls and maintenance," says Jennifer McDermott, a personal finance expert with Finder.com.

Summer is full of weddings, graduations and special occasions. Budget for the blowouts and cut back elsewhere to make up the difference.