

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