

DRIVERS

Continued from Page 1

Enrollment is kept small, usually no more than 11 students at a time. Right now, there are two trucks and two instructors.

Two, 16-week courses are offered during the year, one each in the spring and fall. Two eight-week classes are also held during the timeframe of the 16-week course.

In the summer, there is also an eight-week course, said Ripperda, who came aboard in 2016 after a long career in logistics.

The students come from a mix of backgrounds, with some out of work and looking for a job and others trying to transition to a new career.

He estimates 50 percent are displaced workers. Some qualify for tuition assistance funded by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act in Madison County.

In the end, graduates are working to get a Class A commercial driver's license, or CDL.

The classes are held at the college's Bethalto Extension Center next to St. Louis Regional Airport.

Students are all but assured of a job — the program has enjoyed a 100 percent pass rate since 2016.

"We bring in about a dozen to 15 companies that hire from us," Ripperda said. "It's a good mix — not just over the road jobs. Years ago, you had to start over the road before you could get a good

local job. That's not the case anymore. There are home-every-night jobs also."

And, they are well-paying jobs.

"I'm amazed, every time we have a company come in here, they've upped their pay scale. There is no reason (graduates) should be making less than \$50,000 a year," he said. "We have quite a few making six figures."

LCCC's driver training tuition and associated cost is about \$3,800.

"The bang for your buck, you can't beat it," Ripperda said.

Many of the companies, are large, national LTL firms (less than truckload), such as Central Transport and R & L Carriers. Others are smaller or operate closer to home.

XPO Logistics, Schneider National, TransWood, Piasa Motor Fuels, DKD Trucking and Maverick Transport have regularly dealt with the college's graduates, he said.

Driver shortages, the supply chain, and the growth of ecommerce have all led to this point in the truck industry's challenges, Ripperda said. The industry is not necessarily seen as a favorable career by young people, and that point has been exacerbated by the lack of vocational classes in the high school setting.

"There has been a gap there," he said.

Another challenge is a federal law that prevents people under 21 from

engaging in interstate commerce.

"That hampers the truck industry from getting students right out of high school because they are limited where they can work."

That is especially tough in an area like Southwest Illinois, he said.

"It's ironic, they can drive to Chicago, but they can't go to St. Louis," Ripperda said.

There are legislative efforts to ease that restriction and create some exceptions, but more time is needed for change to happen. Meanwhile, many high school grads have turned to other career fields by the time they reach 21.

There is no typical driver, he said. Men, women, and a variety of ages and ethnic backgrounds are involved. The program has had about 8 percent women students, he said.

LCCC's program is sanctioned under the U.S. Department of Transportation and accredited by the Illinois Community College Board.

There are several places to get truck driving instruction in the region, both public and private. Kaskaskia College and St. Louis Community Colleges also have programs.

Among other private schools are Premier CDL Training, 160 Driving Academy, and MCT Truck Driver Training.

LCCC's own program has evolved

a bit. For one thing, there is more textbook and theory and not simply hands-on driving. Students first have to get a Class A driving permit, then they get time on a driving simulator.

"Usually in the middle of the second week, they get time in a truck working on initial skills — like backing up," he said. Around the third week, the instructors will get the students out on a road.

Ripperda is the coordinator of the program, but also serves as an instructor. He has a second instructor, Joe Turner.

The pair rely on two trucks. One is a Kenworth T680, with a sleeper unit converted for seating five students. There is a 53-foot dry van trailer attached to it.

The other is a day cab. It does not have a sleeper unit, so it can only accommodate one student at a time.

There is also a decertified tanker trailer donated by Werts Welding in Wood River that can be hooked on, as well as smaller trailers for double-unit training.

"We try to give them a fairly well-rounded education, for sure."

Ripperda was in warehousing for 25 years, much of it on the operations side.

"I dealt a lot with drivers and trucking companies and decided on a career change at 49 years old. I went to Kaskaskia College and got my CDL back in 2010. I drove over the road a few years and got on at Kaskaskia College as an instructor."

TRUCK

Continued from Page 1

The company said it is coming off a record year for hiring truck drivers and plans to keep hiring aggressively to meet customer demand.

"In a nutshell, it's a universal problem. Everybody you talk to is saying the same thing: We're short on drivers, we can't find enough drivers," said Don Schaefer, executive vice president of the Springfield-based Mid-West Truckers Association.

The pandemic made worse a growing problem brought on by the impact of ecommerce, which prompted the national boom in logistics warehousing and more goods being shipped more places. Schaefer said the Edwardsville/Pontoon Beach area is a major example of the recent growth.

But there are other underlying issues for truck companies that "are caught between a rock and a hard place."

For instance, insurers are telling trucking companies they have to have drivers with at least two years of a clean record — meaning no accidents.

Companies also want to make sure they are hiring drivers who haven't

tested positive for drugs or alcohol. That task has gotten easier, Schaefer said.

Last year the U.S. Department of Transportation enacted a clearinghouse. Any driver with a positive test result was entered into a central database.

"In the past, a company would hire a guy and if he tested positive, they would fire him. So, the guy goes down the road and goes to work for another company. He does a pre-employment test, comes out clean, and then goes back to his old habits.

"Most companies will tell you:

They don't want those kind of drivers. If you have a truck worth a couple hundred thousand and a trailer with another quarter-million, there is a lot of financial exposure," Schaefer said.

The new scrutiny is good for weeding out bad drivers, but it's also reducing the pool of available drivers.

Some of that shortfall is being made up by community colleges and private schools, which are training a new generation of drivers and doing a good job of it, Schaefer said, citing the largely, common curriculum standards.

"A lot of the bigger companies

are going after the graduates of the truck driver training schools. They can (further) train them as to what they want out of their drivers," he said.

A commercial driver's license, or CDL, is needed for a variety of driving professions, from school bus driver to dump truck driver to big rigs. Schaefer estimated there are upwards of 200,000 truck drivers in the state of Illinois.

The pay is all over the place, he said. Some grain drivers, for instance, may be paid by the load, while others get a salary.

Some truckers can make six-figure incomes "if they are a good driver," he said.

Hazardous material, long haul, and team drivers fall into the upper end. Team drivers take breaks long enough to swap drivers and for rest periods. They work on expedited delivery schedules.

COVID-19 made people realize the impact a pandemic could have on the shipment of goods in every field of transport, not just trucking. Schaefer feels trucking is the most significant.

"If you're going to move goods, there's a good chance it will move

by truck at one time or another," he said. "It was such a finely tuned process. We're at the mercy of each cog in the wheel," whether it's steamships, trains or other shipping alternatives.

He predicts the situation will remain in its current state for the foreseeable future.

"It's not slowing down," he said. "Every time you turn around, you see a warehouse going up."

Trade, distribution and logistics, known as TDL and accounting for multiple types of workers, now makes up 10 percent of the state's workforce," he said. Among those are support services, logistics companies and warehouse workers arranging the loads and breaking them down. "There are so many people now who have their fingers in this area."

It used to be, products were taken to a warehouse and then to a store. Now they are taken to multiple warehouses, broken up, repackaged, and perhaps shuttled to another place, then on to final destinations.

"There are big trucks, little trucks, package vans, Amazon, FedEx and UPS, all of them," Schaefer said.

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