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BUSINESS

Ohio jobs center to partially reopen after renovation and COVID changes

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The OhioMeansJobs center in Columbus will partially reopen Thursday after a major renovation and a strange COVID year.

The center, in the Jerry Hammond Building at 1111 E. Broad St., underwent a \$600,000-plus overhaul during the pandemic, improving everything from cubicles to common space.

"Everything is different," said Scott Johnson, who manages the center. "There wasn't a square foot of the space we didn't touch."

As part of the remodeling, the space was rearranged to allow more physical distancing, a feature that the center plans to continue after the pandemic.

The remodeled space was unveiled Wednesday in anticipation of reopening the center on Thursday by appointment only. Except for a few weeks in the fall, the OhioMeansJobs center has been closed to in-person visitors since March 16 of last year.

The center provides career services for Franklin County residents, including resume-writing, interviewing skills, job searching, talent development and goal setting. It was on track to serve about 6,500 people a year before the pandemic struck, Johnson said.

COVID forced a dramatic change in operations. Instead of working in person with clients looking for jobs, the center's staff found itself helping people apply for unemployment benefits.

"We initially had a ton of questions about unemployment insurance," Johnson said. "Helping people get their claims processed, that was a really big shift in our staff."

He estimated that 80% of the center's calls early in the pandemic were related to unemployment insurance, a figure that has since dropped to about 10%.

"Now our calls are, 'I need to find a full-time position with benefits,' which is really our focus," he said.

"We want to offer hope, we want to offer empowerment, we want to offer the opportunity to live the best life possible."

Even when it fully reopens to walk-in traffic, which Johnson hopes will be in the summer, the center will continue offering the remote services it has offered during the pandemic. Among the remodeling improvements is the technical ability to offer workshops in person and virtually.

The center has its own staff, including Johnson, but serves as a hub for up to 17 service organizations, including Equus Workforce Solutions, Columbus Urban League, Goodwill Columbus and Jewish Family Services. On a typical, nonpandemic day, between 40 and 50 employees are in the center, Johnson said.

The center is overseen by the Workforce Development Board of Central Ohio.

"The redesign of the job center accomplishes two very important goals for the community," said Lisa Patt-McDaniel, president and CEO of WDBCO. "The improvements allow job-seekers and job center staff to interact in a safe environment with a design that also inspires and energizes."

Renovations were funded by \$400,000 from the city of Columbus, \$100,000 from Franklin County and \$140,000 from the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (for technology improvements). The Neighborhood Design Center designed the space.

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