

Turnover stops with her

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[Michael DeMasi](#)

Sunita Narain was worrying about her 16-year-old son, and didn't know where to turn.

"I felt like he needed counseling because he was angry all the time," said Narain, a 35-year-old single mother.

Narain is lead customer service representative at Best Cleaners in Schenectady. Her off-the-job stress is the kind of problem that can distract workers and cut into the bottom line.

But Narain had someone who could help because of a unique arrangement between a "success coach" named [Erin Sandmann](#) and a half-dozen Schenectady County employers, including Best Cleaners, **Ellis Medicine** and Union College.

Called the Schenectady Area Employer Resource Network, the collaboration between the private sector, nonprofits and the City Mission of Schenectady is the first of its kind in the region and is drawing notice from other employers.

The goals: reduce turnover and improve productivity among low-wage, entry-level workers.

"I definitely see the value in Erin," said [Dayna Marks](#), human resources business partner at Ellis Medicine, a founding member of the resource network. "She has really made a big difference and built a great relationship with our employees."

Of the 197 employees who went to Sandmann for assistance since she became a success coach a year ago, 92 percent remain employed, according to the resource network's first annual report.

Sandmann is a City Mission employee but her salary is paid by the participating employers. This year, they will spend up to \$13,000 for Sandmann to visit their job sites for up to six hours weekly. She meets with employees during their lunch breaks and other times, ducking into conference rooms for private talks when necessary.

"What I suggest to employees is, if there's something that weighs on your heart or heavy on your head, let's have that conversation," Sandmann said.

When employees leave, either on their own or because they are forced out, businesses incur the cost of recruiting and training new staff.

The average turnover among U.S. employers in 2013 was 17 percent, according to the **Society for Human Resource Management** (SHRM). That year, employers spent, on average, \$3,337 per hire, and took 35 days to fill a job.

SHRM doesn't have separate figures for entry-level workers, but local employers say turnover is typically high for that group. At Union College, that includes janitors, maintenance crews and cafeteria workers.

"These are people who are not intended to be in lifelong positions," said [Eric Noll](#), chief human resources officer at the college.

The Schenectady program is modeled after one begun in Michigan a decade ago that has spread to Milwaukee and South Bend, Indiana.

[James Vander Hulst](#) was instrumental in starting the first employer resource network in 2003 when he was vice president of human resources at Butterball Farms Inc. in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

"We thought we could solve all the problems within the four walls," Vander Hulst said. "We very quickly realized the issues our employees were coming in with were about work/life balance and we're not social workers."

Helping employees balance the demands of work and life isn't new. Many companies, for instance, have employee assistance programs that provide confidential, toll-free access to therapists, social workers and other health professionals.

The difference with the system that Vander Hulst developed is that success coaches, such as Sandmann, personally know the employees and become a trusted resource to resolve problems at home or on the job.

Sandmann doesn't consider herself a social worker.

Rather, she's a conduit to a vast array of community resources: referring someone to a food pantry because money is tight; calling **National Grid** to stop utilities from being turned off due to unpaid bills; giving someone who dreams of buying a home information about low-cost mortgages.

It's not just low-wage, entry-level workers seeking help. She has counseled managers who were trying to find health care services for an elderly parent.

"What I find is people who are higher in the organizational chart have more resources they can reach out to," Sandmann said.

Sandmann, 48, grew up in Clifton Park and has a bachelor's degree in computer science. She experienced firsthand the challenges of overseeing a workforce when she managed her husband's former dental practice.

"A lot of the struggles that any business has with any employee, I saw from the business end," she said.

She also volunteered at the City Mission. The mission's executive director, [Michael Saccoccio](#), had seen many people come through the doors and turn their lives around but weren't able to hold onto a job.

"It's not because they didn't want to work, or they didn't have a work ethic," Saccoccio said, "but life was beating them. They'd have to choose the crisis instead of the career."

Not having a car, or a grandparent to stay home with a sick child, or a flexible work schedule can spell doom at work when problems arise.

Saccoccio, who has been executive director since 1996, wanted to find ways to help those people, and move the mission beyond the longstanding model of just asking businesses for donations to support its programs.

"What we're now trying to do is structure mutually beneficial business relationships," he said. "Is the social sector capable of helping the business sector be more profitable?"

After some research, the mission learned of the employer resource network in Michigan. Ellis Medicine was the first to participate. Besides Best Cleaners and Union College, others involved last year were Schenectady ARC, **Northern Rivers Family Services**, and the City Mission itself.

Three more employers are joining this year: Proctors, Home Instead Senior Care, and Visiting Nurse Service of Schenectady and Saratoga. To handle the increased demand, another success coach, [John McCarthy](#), will start Feb. 1.

"The return on investment is huge," said [Nathan Mandsager](#), who oversees the program at the mission. "We're averaging, depending on the business, anywhere from 200 percent to 400 percent return on investment because of the increased productivity of employees, managers and human resources staff. The lift in morale has been impressive. All the businesses are coming back and saying their culture is improving."

Culture clash was a big problem at Best Cleaners when the owners acquired the former Kem Cleaners and moved their headquarters from wealthy Loudonville to Kem's central cleaning plant on State Street in Schenectady's poorest neighborhood.

"A lot of the employees were from this community, and none of us were speaking the same language," said [Susan Vellano](#), human resources director. "Operationally we were failing because of the amount of turnover we were experiencing when we acquired Kem."

One example: an employee showed up for work, said he had been evicted from his apartment, and needed to find someplace to live. He left work, and never came back.

"We know dry cleaning," Vellano said. "There were life issues we were presented with that we were just ill-prepared to be helpful."

Sandmann has made a big difference since she started helping employees. Turnover among the 36 workers in the cleaning plant fell from 300 percent annually to 3 percent last year, Vellano said.

As a result, Best Cleaners is doubling the amount of time Sandmann spends there this year, to three hours weekly. That will cost \$6,725.

"We want to open it up to the rest of our retail footprint," Vellano said. "We're in three counties."

Narain -- the Best Cleaners customer service representative who asked Sandmann for help with her teenage son and other issues -- said she's become a better employee because she doesn't have to worry so much about what's happening outside of work.

"She really wants to help you and that's what I love about Erin," Narain said. "Every time I see Erin, it's a hug."