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Truck Driver Shortage Slows Freight

It's unlikely that anyone driving along Interstate 78 will say 'there really needs to be more trucks out here,' but ask most anyone trying to move freight and they'll say they're having a terrible time finding truckers.

The fact is the nation is in the midst of a truck driver shortage and its especially acute in the Lehigh Valley, where companies are scrambling to find enough drivers to carry the increasing amount of freight flowing through the region.

What it means for consumers is longer wait times for all those online goods they're ordering, and the next time you see empty shelves while shopping, don't assume its stuck on a ship waiting to get into an ocean port.

"It more likely to be in a packed container that's sitting idle because we couldn't get a trucker to move it," said Brian Wanner, General Manager of Peters Brothers Logistics, in Lenhartsville. "We have 60 trucks, but we could have double that if we could hire enough truck drivers to move them. It's frustrating."

Instead, Peters Brothers is turning away half its business – losing revenue – because it can't find drivers, despite spending tens of thousands of dollars on recruitment and raising starting salaries by 10% in January, Wanner said.

It's an issue that's magnified in the Lehigh Valley, where its location within a single trucker shift of 100 million consumers has made it a warehouse and transportation epicenter with national

warehousing names like Amazon, Walmart, UPS and FedEx Ground. With the region's elevated place in an evolving online global economy, more freight than ever is moving through the Lehigh Valley, and while some is traveling by air and rail, an LVPC's freight study estimated that 90% percent is being moved by truck.

With more than 33,000 jobs in the region, Transportation and Warehousing has risen to the second biggest occupation, behind only healthcare and social assistance.

Andy Plank, President of Blue Eagle Logistics in Breinigsville, tells a similar trucker shortage story for his final mile freight hauler.

"We're turning down work every week," Plank said of his 28-driver shop. "The supply chain is a mess. We could do a better job for our clients if I could hire at least 20% more drivers."

There's great debate over how big the shortage is. The American Trucking Associations (ATA), the nation's largest trade industry, puts it at 80,000 drivers and growing by about 8,000 per year, while Sharerig, a private marketplace that sells trucks and tracks the industry, puts it at closer to 120,000. Add to that a recent ATA study that estimates the industry will have to recruit 1 million new drivers within the next nine years to replace retiring drivers, and the problem appears likely to worsen before it gets better, unless national, state and community leaders get more aggressive in addressing the issue.

'Shortage' probably isn't the best way to label what's happening because according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are more than 2 million Commercial Driver's Licenses (CDLs) issued nationwide. Drivers just aren't using them.

"It can be a grueling lifestyle and society, in general, isn't built to accommodate truckers. Our profession is aging and a lot of guys have moved to other industries. It's tough to recruit young drivers," said Bob Dolan, Lehigh Valley President of the Pennsylvania Motor Truck Association who has been driving for more than 40 years. "I haven't talked to a single company over the last two years that isn't short of drivers. They're all hurting."

It's become so pronounced in this region that heavy truck driver is on the Workforce Board Lehigh Valley's "high priority list" of occupations, said Gina Kormanik, Workforce Board Director of Community Planning. According to Workforce Board statistics, with more than 500 listings, heavy truck driver is the third-most needed job, behind only registered nurse and retail sales.

The factors to blame for that are too numerous to list, but pay, working conditions and regulations certainly play key roles. While billboards and ads commonly offer high starting wages of as much as \$70,000, the median wage of the roughly 6,000 truck drivers who live in the Lehigh Valley is about \$49,000, according to the Workforce Board.

That wage is all-of-the-sudden competing with warehouse jobs that now offer starting wages of \$16 to \$22 and require little more than a high school diploma and the willingness to sweat.

Over the road truckers can make more, but spending days and weeks on the road make it difficult to have a family life, Dolan said.

With federal safety regulations prohibiting truckers from driving more than 11 hours a day – and new technology tracking their every minute behind the wheel – truckers are left wasting large portions of their work day trying to find a place to park. It's become common for drivers to load

or unload at major logistics centers, only to quickly be forced off the property to find a place to park, eat or sleep – none of which is easy to find with 70 feet of vehicle along for the ride.

It's why tractor-trailers end up parked illegally along road shoulders and exit ramps.

So, what might help fix this? Trucking companies are going to have to offer higher pay, the way most every industry is trying to do to recruit and retrain workers in an economy in which inflation is spiking.

Improved working conditions is something already being spearheaded in the Lehigh Valley, in part because the LVPC and its municipal partners are now demanding that any new warehouse or logistics center include truck parking, and lounges where drivers can wash, eat and rest.

A recent rule change by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration now allows former military with two years heavy truck experience a path to a Commercial Driver License without driving school.

Perhaps an even bigger potential change is a pilot apprentice program, being funded by the new Federal Infrastructure Law, that will allow 18-year-olds to get an interstate CDL. They can currently get CDLs, but are prohibited in 49 states from crossing state lines until they are 21. Because that severely limits their work options, graduating high school students not considering college often moved on to another trade, rather than waiting three years to fully realize their trucking potential, Dolan said.

"If that program is taken nationwide, it could be huge," Dolan said. "I feel like we're taking steps in the right directions. I have a lot of optimism about where things are headed, but this issue has been building for years. It's going to take years to overcome it."

And in the meantime?

"Get used to wondering where your package is or why those shelves are so empty," Dolan said.