

she felt that squeeze.

In fact, her Sawmill Road restaurant opened with fewer employees than projected. She's built up from there in part by changing her approach – not just texting potential candidates, but also by doing things such as attending a job fair for Dublin high school students.

Chris Crader, whose Grow Restaurants runs six locations in Central Ohio and Cincinnati, said the crackdown on immigration has been a big blow to hiring, further depleting an already thin pool of workers. He also said that while growth and development of new business is good, there's a downside.

"You look at Dublin and we do well there and the development is great," he said. "But there's not always affordable housing. The cost of living is going up."

It isn't a simple matter of raising wages. Margins are tight in restaurants as is, particularly small local-owned ones, so paying more has its limits.

"Restaurants – particularly fast food – is often a first job for many. You can come in day one with no skills and get a job," Barker said. "There are other industries that can pay you more, so that's not an easy answer."

The key, Petro and Crader say, is to create an environment that employees want to be a part of – a place with a career path.

And it's an industry in constant motion. Barker pointed to the arrival of Jeff Ruby's Steakhouse, which pulled employees from other area high-end establishments, but created jobs to backfill in those restaurants.

The restaurant association works in a few ways to strengthen the pipeline. Its ProStart program is in 60 high schools across the state, helping students interested in the restaurant world get a jump on their culinary and management education.

It's also active in Lt. Gov. Jon Husted's workforce development initiative and has close connections to 25 colleges and universities in the state.

One of those is Columbus State Community College, which is building the \$33 million Mitchell Hall, named for restaurateur Cameron Mitchell, which will allow the college to expand its hospitality programs.

Jim Taylor, Columbus State academic chairman for hospitality programs, said the college has created "stackable" certifications in areas including cooking, meeting planning/catering and dietary management, to save students time and money as they build toward a degree.

The school also switched to eight-week semesters, which also saves time and money. Its ServSafe/Sanitation course in particular is a key one that gives its students a leg up in restaurants and hospitality as well as hospitals and other facilities.

"This is not rocket science," Taylor said. "We can put them in real work scenarios. Budgeting. Management practices.

"We cover diversity. You're going to work with a lot of people from different backgrounds."

Dan Eaton

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