



## GROWING RURAL IOWA'S SKILLED WORKFORCE

**JENNIFER ANDRADE IS COMBINING HER EXPERIENCE WITH JOBS AND economic development into a new company focused on connecting North Iowa with a skilled workforce.**

She started Avance in 2018 to recruit skilled and professional workers from Puerto Rico to local businesses starved for employees. The name comes from a Spanish word meaning "to move forward, to make progress."

"For the last four or five years, we've been talking about the workforce problem," says Chad Schreck, President and CEO of North Iowa Corridor (NIC) Economic Development Corp. "We hear from our businesses every day that they need more applicants. It's putting the pinch on employers." Schreck says unemployment rates in North Iowa counties are hovering between 2 and 3 percent.

In 2007 Andrade moved with her husband and daughter to Clear Lake, where her mother grew up. While living in Texas, Andrade worked 15 years in public relations and marketing. "My mom kept saying Iowa is a great place to live, with opportunities to do big things. She convinced us to move up here."

At Iowa Workforce Development (IWD) in Mason City, Andrade opened the first New Iowan Center, providing services related to immigration and employment, and later moved into recruitment and marketing.

"The labor market was getting tighter," she says. "Businesses were turning down expansion opportunities or

moving to another state, because they couldn't find workers." Her most recent job as executive director of Mitchell County Economic Development confirmed to her the difficulty of recruiting companies here due to lack of a labor force.

After Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico in 2017, Andrade heard from friends there about difficulty finding jobs. The U.S. territory highly encourages post-secondary training for high school graduates, she says. But with many businesses destroyed or not yet re-opened, these skilled American citizens are not able to find jobs.

"I knew we were an attractive location here for families, providing things that other areas couldn't," she says. "They were the same things that my mom told me about: good stable jobs, good schools, safe neighborhoods. But we were not doing a good job of marketing."

Andrade talked to companies about what it would look like to bring in families and talked to people who already had moved here from Puerto Rico. "I did my research: what went well, what didn't, what's the model to make this successful?"

Fluent in Spanish and experienced in helping Latino families, Andrade says she also loves meeting and connecting new people. "I thought about 'What's my niche?' I formed Avance to do something that I'd fully enjoy and that would make use of my talents."

Avance starts out with a company

and community assessment, to plan successful housing and relocation support. Andrade proposes partnering with companies, economic development organizations, and communities to reduce the recruitment costs traditionally paid by employers and create a location-specific marketing campaign.

Working with Enterprise Media Group in St. Ansgar, she created videos highlighting the quality of life here, with testimonials from both locals and families who have already moved here. "We need to show them what it's like in Iowa, through videos. They can't just come on a weekend to visit us."

In Puerto Rico, she is meeting with school placement directors, holding career fairs, and supporting the remote job application and interview process.

Finally, Avance plans a framework for successful integration to make sure newcomers feel welcome and stay. Andrade emphasizes this is not only about jobs, it's also focused on community development.

Schreck says he's excited about Avance's potential. "It's a direct, proactive approach. We'd be working with someone actively pursuing people to bring them to this area, working on our behalf."

"Puerto Rico is still a very vibrant place. The people have a positive outlook," Andrade says. "One of my focus areas is to have a welcoming community for people moving here, to make them feel as welcome in Iowa as they make us feel down there."

**CHAD SCHRECK**

PRESIDENT & CEO

[cschreck@northiowacorridor.com](mailto:cschreck@northiowacorridor.com)

**SHAUN ARNESON**

VP, EXISTING BUSINESS & PROJECT MANAGEMENT

[sarneson@northiowacorridor.com](mailto:sarneson@northiowacorridor.com)

**KEN BALES**

DEVELOPMENT SPECIALIST

[kbales@northiowacorridor.com](mailto:kbales@northiowacorridor.com)

**HUNTER CALLANAN**

WORKFORCE SPECIALIST

[hcallanan@northiowacorridor.com](mailto:hcallanan@northiowacorridor.com)

**JOYCE MARTIN**

MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

[jmartin@northiowacorridor.com](mailto:jmartin@northiowacorridor.com)

