

# Why Congress Should Allow 24 Months of Vocational Education in TANF

February 2004

President Bush is right: more American workers need new skills to find good jobs in our new economy. TANF participants, like all American workers, need these new skills.

- In his State of the Union Address, President Bush said, "America's growing economy is also a changing economy. As technology transforms the way almost every job is done, America becomes more productive, and workers need new skills. Much of our job growth will be found in high-skilled fields like health care and biotechnology. So we must respond by helping more Americans gain the skills to find good jobs in our new economy..."
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics just released (Feb. 11) its employment projections for 2002 to 2012.<sup>1</sup> It projects that 6 of the 10 fastest growing occupations will require an associate degree or bachelor's degree. Jobs in the field of health care – which the President cited in his address – predominate among the fastest growing occupations.<sup>2</sup>
- For example, the occupation with the largest projected job growth is registered nursing (RN). Over the next decade, the economy will produce an estimated 623,000 new RN jobs.
- These new jobs, including RNs, require workers with an associate degree.<sup>3</sup> Associate degrees typically require two years of vocational education.
- The critical question for our nation's economy is: Will we have enough workers qualified to fill skilled jobs, such as nursing, during a period when the workforce shrinks as the baby boom generation begins to retire?
- The transition of people from welfare to work offers us a golden opportunity to fill emerging labor shortages. TANF participants must be allowed to prepare for these jobs.
- Jobs requiring an associate degree are the jobs of the future. If we don't allow TANF participants the time to train for these jobs, not only do we shortchange them, but we also undermine the competitiveness and productivity of employers in critical sectors of our nation's economy.

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Even in the midst of an economy characterized by dramatic job losses, employers are offering, but finding it difficult to fill, skilled jobs.

- The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, in a 2003 survey, found that more than half of the businesses surveyed considered it difficult to find qualified workers to fill job openings, even in the midst of a slow economy. Moreover, less than one-half of those businesses thought that their current employees met the requirements of their jobs very well. Less than one-third were confident that their employees would meet job requirements very well when looking ahead two years, with the lowest levels of confidence expressed by businesses in the manufacturing sector.<sup>4</sup>
- Many employers are bringing in workers from overseas to fill skilled jobs because they can't find qualified workers at home. In 2003, American employers applied to the U.S. Department of Labor for a total of 237,565 LCAs (Labor Condition Applications), the necessary first step for an employer to gain a visa to hire a highly skilled temporary foreign worker (called H1-B).

There is strong public support for improving the access of TANF recipients to education and training.

- In a recent national survey, 83% of likely Presidential election voters supported providing education and job training as a strategy for moving people off of welfare and into decent jobs that lead to self-sufficiency.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.toc.htm>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.t04.htm>

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.t05.htm>

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Chamber of Commerce Center for Workforce Preparation, *Rising to the Challenge* (Washington, DC: Spring 2003).

<sup>5</sup> The survey was conducted by Bennett, Petts, and Blumenthal and Voter Consumer Research. The survey, conducted in mid-October 2003, sampled 1,000 registered voters who plan to vote in the 2004 general election for President. The sampling error is plus or minus 3.1 percent.

