

## The wrong time for cuts to workforce training

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By **Guest Columnist**

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According to a Gallup poll released on Feb. 11, 35 percent of Americans name unemployment as the most important problem facing the country, the highest percentage since the economic slowdown began and higher than at any point since October 1983. With a national unemployment rate of 9 percent, these sentiments should come as no surprise. In Oregon, we have the nation's seventh highest unemployment rate at 10.6 percent, with more than 200,000 Oregonians officially out of work and tens of thousands more underemployed or out of the labor market altogether. We currently have six unemployed Oregonians for every job opening, and we're not projected to return to pre-recession job levels until 2015.

Despite these numbers, the House of Representatives voted to eliminate the Workforce Investment Act and other job training programs as part of its continuing budget resolution, which cuts more than \$60 billion in spending through the remainder of the federal fiscal year. While spending reductions must be part of long-term deficit control, cutting job training programs now is counterproductive and threatens to undermine our still very fragile economic recovery.

The main criticism of federal job training efforts has focused on the need for greater coordination across federal workforce and training programs. Those of us on the executive committee of the Workforce Investment Board for the city of Portland and Washington and Multnomah counties couldn't agree more, and we've been working with our federal delegation and state partners for years to seek changes to existing laws that would more effectively coordinate these efforts.

Since 2005, local federal funding for workforce development has decreased by 45 percent while new unemployment claims have nearly doubled. Despite these challenges, we have worked locally with a broad array of funders and providers to align and coordinate local workforce and related efforts. As a result, 61,000 job seekers were served through the local workforce development system last year -- a 200 percent increase from pre-recession levels. Of those 61,000:

-- 47,666 received job search assistance.

-- 12,291 received personalized career counseling services.

-- 3,274 enrolled in a computer literacy class.

-- 3,025 engaged in occupational training in a regionally significant target industry or other high-growth or high-demand sector.

-- 2,826 enrolled in a basic education class such as ESL or GED.

-- 26,230 got a job!

Helping workers get the skills they need to return to work is not a partisan issue. It's an essential part of getting our economy back on track. It's time for Congress and the administration to work together to modernize and streamline federal workforce investments and provide the support we need to get our community and country back to work.

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