

Guest column: Training for jobs still essential for employment

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A July 18 New York Times article highlighted a route many unemployed Americans are taking to try to re-enter the labor market: job training ("After Training, Still Scrambling for Employment"). The piece told of individuals who had completed training but failed to secure employment. It concluded, therefore, that federal investments in retraining are dollars ill-spent. It's a conclusion predicated on a false assumption about the role of job training in our economy. It is out of touch with the realities in Iowa.

Job training alone can't solve joblessness, but it has to be part of the solution, particularly for those whose jobs will be gone or changed after the recession. Public investments in job training will skill up the wind energy technicians who enable Iowans to use renewable energy, the direct care workers who provide support to aging Iowans and the truck drivers who make it possible for Iowa businesses to create products for export.

Job training will help address the skills shortages Iowa was experiencing prior to the recession that will resurface as the economy picks up, particularly middle-skill jobs, that require training beyond high school but not a four-year degree. According to Iowa Workforce Development, in 2007, middle-skill jobs made up 55 percent of Iowa's jobs, but only 48 percent of the state's workers had the appropriate training for these jobs. Middle-skill jobs pervade almost every industry in our state, from licensed practical nurses and radiological technicians, to truck drivers and automotive mechanics, to carpenters and green heating and cooling system installers.

Fortunately, policy makers on both sides of the aisle have rejected the assumption behind the New York Times article. Recognizing the vital role of job training in an economic recovery strategy, the House of Representatives July 19 passed the SECTORS Act with a unanimous bipartisan vote, an initiative championed by Iowa Rep. Dave Loebsack. The act supports training developed in collaboration with industry partners, a model that

ensures individuals can obtain skills that have currency in the labor market now and when hiring picks back up.

This type of training developed in collaboration with specific industries has proven results. A rigorous two-year study released by analysts at Public/Private Ventures found positive outcomes including steadier employment with increased earnings and better access to benefits.

The SECTORS Act will now move to the Senate. The Senate needs to pass this bill, and Congress needs to reauthorize the federal Workforce Investment Act, which is now eight years delayed. The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) provides the largest single source of federal funding for work force development activities. WIA established a system of one-stop career centers that provide access to training and employment services for dislocated workers, low-income adults and youth. Sen. Tom Harkin is now chair of the Senate committee responsible for shaping the next generation of WIA services, which are critical for state and national economic recovery.

Job training alone will not solve our economic challenges, but if we want all of Iowa's residents to be a part of recovery, policy makers must invest in specific strategies that have been shown to effectively train workers with skills that have currency in current and emerging industries. It's an economic necessity for Iowa's businesses and families.