

Study: 'Middle skill' workers in short supply

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Connecticut faces a significant shortage in its so-called “middle-skill” work force, according to a report released Thursday by a national coalition.

The Workforce Alliance, a Washington, D.C.-based coalition that includes business, labor and educational institutions, said in its report, “Connecticut’s Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs,” that about 45 percent of future job openings in the state - compared to 47 percent today - will involve such positions as construction workers, health care technicians, truckers, police and firefighters.

These middle-skill jobs, whose importance is being underscored by the coalition’s new Skills2Compete campaign, usually require education beyond high school but not a four-year college degree.

Educational trends, however, suggest that a shortage in middle-skill jobs today will become a wider gap in the future, the report said, suggesting part of the problem lies in policymakers focusing mainly on college-level education rather than training programs for high school graduates and adults in midcareer.

“Things are changing in the labor force,” said John Beauregard, executive director of the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board in Franklin. “We are seeing structural change. People are starting to realize ‘there’s a good possibility the job I used to have will not be coming back.’”

In some cases, an upgrade of skills is necessary. Beauregard, for instance, said he has seen a 69 percent increase over the past year in the number of distance-learners taking advantage of one of his programs.

The current recession has led workers from many different fields to hold off on retirement, though some blue-collar middle-skill workers don’t have that luxury because of the physical demands of their jobs, according to the report. Still, said Beauregard, the loss of baby boomers in middle-skill jobs is inevitable and will only increase in the years ahead.

“Retirement of large numbers of baby boomers will keep demand for middle-skill workers high for years to come,” according to the report. What’s more, the report pointed out that “federal funds from the stimulus bill are expected to create millions of new jobs, and many of these will be middle-skill.”

The report pointed out that, at the current rates, “the middle-skill workforce will not grow to keep pace with demand.” Eighty-two percent of the state’s employers, in a 2007 survey, said they had problems finding qualified workers, and many of these open positions were in fields requiring mid-level skills.

Employers said the lack of people with middle skills bumped up overtime costs, decreased production capacity and increased the need for outsourcing jobs, according to the report.

The report called on Connecticut to embrace programs that would guarantee every state resident access at least two years of training after high school. Extra education helps boost workers into the middle-skill category, increasing women’s earnings by \$9,000 a year and men’s \$11,000, based on earning an associate’s degree, the report said.

“We’re dealing with the worst labor market in decades,” said Beauregard. “Demand is for highly trained people. And people are sitting up and taking notice.”

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