

Solis: Focus on preparedness for high-skill jobs

By Philip Rucker
Washington Post staff writer
Thursday, December 3, 2009 5:17 PM

As the Obama administration tries to create jobs amid the recession, some two dozen industry leaders, local elected officials and union representatives advocated Thursday for improved workforce training as the key to economic prosperity.

In a breakout session on "Strengthening Workers and Main Street," participants shared ideas for growing training programs to prepare a new generation of workers for the 21st-century economy. They stressed the importance of helping people learn new job skills while still earning an income.

"What we're talking about is meeting people where they live and the realities of their lives," said Melody Barnes, director of the White House Domestic Policy Council.

Labor Secretary [Hilda Solis](#) said it is essential to prepare workers for highly-skilled jobs in fields that are likely to grow as the country emerges from the recession. "A lack of trained workers can hold back employers from hiring even when good jobs are available," Solis said.

Many employers often view workforce training as a longer-term strategy and cut resources for such programs during economic downturns, participants said. But Andy Van Klenen, executive director of the group Workforce Alliance, said such programs are critical for stimulating the economy.

A job training program at a community college in Indiana may be a model, said Jamie Merisotis, president and chief executive of the Lumina Foundation. He said the Indiana program trains people in various job skills over nine months and gives each student a \$12,000 stipend to cover living expenses while they are in training. Marisotis suggested the federal government try to replicate the program across the country.

"You could get a lot of people out of unemployment very quickly and very quickly train people for jobs," he said.

For state and local governments, meanwhile, strengthening a community's pool of available workers can help spur development and recruit new businesses.

Burrell Ellis, the chief executive of DeKalb County, Ga., in the Atlanta area, said the federal government's funding and support for job training programs can be as critical to economic development as the tax incentives that states and localities offer developers.

"We need the incentives," Ellis said, "but we also need the stick that only the federal government can provide."