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AIM FOR THE MIDDLE

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Jun. 6, 2010 (McClatchy-Tribune Regional News delivered by Newstex) -- The bulk of the jobs available to New Mexicans over the next six years will require more training than high school but less than a four-year degree, according to a new study from the National Skills Coalition, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization that seeks to raise the skill levels of American workers.

The share of these so-called middleskill jobs in New Mexico is expected to shrink from 48 percent of employment statewide in 2006 to 40 percent in 2016. That still represents almost 460,000 jobs available to graduates of trade schools, junior colleges and apprentice programs, the study said.

Demand for all occupations is expected to grow at about 1.5 percent a year until 2016. High-skill and lowskill jobs will grow at 2 percent a year. Middle-skill job growth will be about 1 percent a year, according to the study.

The coalition expects New Mexico employers to face a shortage of middle-skilled workers as the recession ends because before the recession began in December 2007 employers reported having trouble finding enough of them.

"What's more, as federal economic recovery funds are invested, a large share of the jobs they create will be middle-skill jobs building and repairing roads, manufacturing renewable energy products and caring for our aging population," the study said.

Among the fastest growing middleskill jobs are in the health care industry. Employment for dental hygienists, physical therapist assistants and respiratory therapists is expected to grow much faster than employment for all occupations.

Employment for firefighters, police officers and emergency medical technicians should also grow rapidly, according to the study.

Construction jobs, on the other hand, are expected to grow slowly over the next six years. Employment for electricians and plumbers is expected to grow especially slowly. Still, because the industry remains large, despite the recession, a lot of jobs are expected to be available in construction.

The coalition found that nationally growth in demand for many middleskill jobs "has been fast enough to generate not only strong employment growth, but also rapid growth in wages." Local wage trends are similar, according to the study.

"For example, 2007-08 graduates of Central New Mexico Community College's air-conditioning, heating and refrigeration certificate are earning from \$15 to \$28 per hour, while graduates of their diagnostic medical sonography degree program are earning \$26 to \$33 per hour, and graduates with a plumbing certificate earn \$19.50 to \$28 per hour," the study said.

Based on 2008 data, highest wages are offered in more technically difficult fields. Computer specialists in New Mexico had a median income of \$67,090, the study said. Dental hygienists made a median income of \$74,370. On the other hand, painters made \$28,420.

The coalition expects the emerging green energy industry to be a major source of middle-skill jobs. Middleskill jobs will account for 66 percent of the employment with employers who provide energy efficiency services, 71 percent of jobs in the wind energy industry and 56 percent of jobs in the biofuels industry.

The report, including a list of middle-skill jobs the coalition expects to be in demand over the next six years, is available at http://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/assets/reports/-skills2compete_forgottenjobs_nm_2010-04.pdf.