

## Employment

### Mid-level skills needed in Colorado economy

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Nearly 300,000 "middle-skill" job openings-positions that require more than a high school diploma, but less than a four-year degree-are projected for the state by 2019, concluded a new study released this by the National Skills Coalition in partnership with SkillBuild Colorado and the Skills2Compete-Colorado Campaign. To unleash the full economic benefit of these openings, Colorado needs to expand investments in training and education for its workforce to make sure residents are ready for those jobs, the report called Colorado's Forgotten Middle-Skills Jobs states.

Though the Great Recession and sluggish recovery have slowed current employment growth, the report projects that jobs for workers such as health care workers, electricians and mechanics (including new and replacement jobs) will account for nearly 40 percent of all openings between 2009 and 2019.

"Colorado's health care and manufacturing sector, two important sectors in the state's economy, show robust demand for middle-skill workers with jobs that provide pathways to the middle class," said Tom Clark, executive vice president of the Metro Denver Economic Development Corp. "As the economy recovers and the growth of middle-skill jobs increases, Colorado's employers will need workers with the skills, training and credentials to fill these middle-skill, family-sustaining jobs."

Despite Colorado's investments in post-secondary education and workforce training, the state is at serious risk of a "middle-skills gap," the report says. At the national level, proposals by Congress threaten to dismantle the state's public workforce system.

Prior to the national recession, Colorado was already experiencing shortages of middle-skill workers in crucial industries. About 47 percent of all jobs are classified as middle-skill, but only 36 percent of Colorado workers have the credentials to fill them. As Colorado moves from recession into recovery, employers will likely once again face the challenge of finding quality middle and high-skill workers, slowing the pace of economic growth.

The report, which tracks Colorado's jobs at the middle-skill level, notes that as the economy picks up, the state will see growth in these kinds of jobs.

"Our skills vision is a simple one, we need to support workers in gaining the skills for high-demand, high-wage jobs that will help businesses and industry thrive," said Paula Gomez Farrell, executive director of SkillBuild Colorado. "As Colorado looks to remain a strong competitor in the global economy, it's critical that we align our workforce and education resources with current and projected labor market demand. Investments in programs to train and educate Coloradans who are laid off or working in low-wage jobs for well-paying, more plentiful middle-skill jobs will generate more economic prosperity for everyone."

The study also assesses the current and future middle-skill employment and education patterns in the state:

Middle-skill jobs expected to grow by 2019 in Colorado include dental hygienists with median annual earnings of \$76,490, electricians with median annual earnings of \$45,860, and aircraft mechanics with median annual earnings of \$54,720. The report includes a list of 30 middle-skill jobs that Colorado can't live without.

Colorado workers face challenges when it comes to having even basic skills. Of the 2.7 million working-age adults in Colorado, more than 360,000 have not completed high school or its equivalent. Only 14,000 (4 percent of Colorado adults with less than a high school diploma) are enrolled in adult basic education, not even coming close to meeting the need.

The report also finds that nearly two-thirds of the people who will be in Colorado's workforce in the year 2025 were already working adults in 2010 -- long past the traditional high school-to-college pipeline. This underscores the need for Colorado to bolster investment in training and education to people who are working or who could be working today.

"The Colorado community college system is committed to creating higher education opportunities for all Coloradans to successfully enter the Colorado workforce," said system President Nancy McCallin. "We know that Colorado's most important asset is our workforce and we are proud to be the largest provider of post-secondary education in Colorado. During the last year, even with decreased funding, we developed 178 new career programs in high-demand, high-wage

industry segments," she concluded.

Echoing a vision put forward by the national Skills2Compete campaign, President Obama first challenged every American to commit to at least one year of post-secondary education or training in February 2009, "be it at a technical college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship."

"If Colorado seeks timely economic recovery and long-term prosperity, the state must ensure that its workforce has the necessary education and training to meet the labor demands of the future," urged Eric Seleznow of National Skills Coalition, the convening organization for the national Skills2Compete Campaign. "This moment provides an opportunity for businesses and the state to be strategic, evaluate labor and skill needs, and train and prepare for the jobs that are expected to grow."

In partnership with a broad coalition of business, labor and education leaders, the Skills2Compete-Colorado Campaign is calling on state leaders to embrace a strong vision to guide an economic and education strategy that would allow residents to meet or exceed the president's challenge: Every Colorado resident should have access to the equivalent of at least two years of education or training past high school -- leading to a vocational credential, industry certification, or an individual's first two years of college-to be pursued at whatever point and pace makes sense for specific workers and industries. Every person must also have access to the basic skills needed to pursue such education.

The analysis for the study was performed by National Skills Coalition using data from the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, American Community Survey and state labor market data from the Colorado State Department of Labor. The analysis is based on the methodology developed for the national Skills2Compete report -- America's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs -- by labor economists Harry Holzer and Robert Lerman, released in 2007.

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