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Jobless urged to 'retool, reorganize'

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Senate Minority Leader Dennis L. Algiere, right, and Sen. Louis P. DiPalma listen to remarks by economist Paul E. Harrington at Monday night's conference at CCRl.

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WARWICK — In a state that bled jobs for 36 straight months and where as many as 25 percent of those who are unemployed have been out of work for 50 weeks or more, those now looking for jobs have become "stale in the job market," an economist told state senators Monday night.

It's vital they become "retooled, reorganized, refocused," Paul E. Harrington told those who gathered for an economic summit about jobs hosted by the Senate at the Community College of Rhode Island's Knight Campus. Harrington is director of the Drexel University Center for Labor Markets and Policy in Philadelphia.

Many jobs lost in Rhode Island were in the construction and manufacturing industries, the majority held by men with low educational attainment, Harrington said. He pointed out that every age group below age 55 lost ground during the recession.

For example, while 46 percent of those ages 16 to 19 were employed in 2007, just 35 percent were employed in 2010. The only group with a larger percentage of the population working in 2010 were 65 and older. Those ages 55 to 64 held steady, with 65 percent of that age group working in both 2007 and 2010.

For young people not working, more schooling is vital, he says, particularly because the industries where high school dropouts are most likely to work are the same that lost the most jobs — construction and manufacturing.

To better prepare themselves for jobs, Harrington said, the unemployed must make personal connections.

"The labor market is social, based on networks and trust," he said.

Referrals that businesses get about potential employees from friends and institutions are key in a tight job market like Rhode Island's, Harrington said. And for that reason, he advised, Rhode Island institutions of higher education and those offering other training opportunities must have a "strong outreach to businesses." It shouldn't be the responsibility of employers to seek out such relationships, he said.

He held up the Davies Regional Career and Technical High School, in Lincoln, as a model for how training institutions must work in a world where long-term relationships between educators and employers are more important than any individual referral.

"If I send a lousy referral to you, I can ruin [that relationship]," he said.

Eric Seleznow, state policy director for the Washington, D.C.-based National Skills Coalition, echoed Harrington's analysis, stressing that skills matter.

"Are you training people and giving them in-demand skills?" he asked.

In a world where 63 percent of all jobs between now and 2018 will require some postsecondary education, Seleznow stressed that Rhode Island must improve its high school graduation rates and recognize that a high school diploma is not enough.

He urged the state to make sure it's tracking exactly how many training programs are offered, and available programs prepare people for jobs that will also be available.

The idea that it's the educational institutions' responsibility to reach out to employers struck a chord for Senate President M. Teresa Paiva Weed.

"I thought that was a really important concept that institutions need to reach out to employers," she said. She said that's what she talked about with the state's new director of the state Department of Labor and Training.

Director Charles J. Fogarty said he believes the state is working to bring partners together, but he also said there's room for improvement in tracking the kinds of training programs in the state.

"I think it's important to know what our capacity is," he said.

The last thing the state wants, he said, is to be training a surplus of people for jobs that aren't available.

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