

Article published Mar 23, 2011

Don't slash workforce training AS I SEE IT

By Roger Herzog and Ann Donner

Climbing out of a jobless recovery is not an easy task. For college-educated men and women who are out of work, it requires diligence. It is even more of a challenge for lower-income residents without the professional networks or skill sets that will make them competitive in the workforce.

That makes the work of employment counselors and job training center professionals all the more important. They are the individuals on the front lines connecting job seekers with potential hiring managers. And right now, funding and other resources for their critical work is threatened. At a time when we should be providing resources for those in workforce development, we are instead limiting their means to help employers find employees and the unemployed find jobs.

This is especially significant for Central Massachusetts. In Massachusetts, Worcester County has borne much of the brunt of the Great Recession. Even though the state has fared better than the national average in terms of unemployment, many communities in Central Massachusetts have unemployment rates that are higher than both the state and national averages.

For instance, according to state unemployment statistics, the Leominster/Fitchburg area had a 10.7 percent unemployment rate in December (not seasonally adjusted), whereas the overall state average was 8 percent.

This is part of the reason that the Commonwealth Workforce Coalition (CWC), managed by the Community Economic Development Assistance Corporation (CEDAC), recently held our annual conference at Devens. More than 350 individuals from across the state, whose job it is to boost Massachusetts' overall economic performance by helping others find work, came together to share insights on finding jobs for individuals eager to work.

It is important to understand what these professionals do. Job counselors and workforce development experts are largely invisible but vital to making this economic recovery sustainable and to keeping our region competitive nationally and internationally. They assist job seekers by identifying opportunities and matching the skills of unemployed individuals with prospects.

As important, they are helping employers find qualified workers. They are meeting with hiring managers and working with them to make sure that their needs are fulfilled. They are also helping underemployed individuals gain the appropriate skills to achieve family-sustaining wages.

Research shows that, on average, a person will have 25 different jobs in their lifetime. For lower skilled workers, job developers are critical in helping them prepare for jobs and career paths to family-sustaining wages. At the same time, productive, appropriately trained employees are necessary for the long-term growth of businesses in New England.

Despite their importance to our economic recovery, however, those who specialize in workforce development are facing diminishing resources themselves.

According to the National Skills Coalition, \$2.97 billion in funding for the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) would be eliminated in the 2012 budget the House of Representatives passed recently, which is 100 percent of WIA funds. The proposal also rescinds \$175 million for the current year.

Such cuts threaten the very existence of career centers and workforce development agencies. The commonwealth of Massachusetts has been a strong partner in promoting these services, but slashes to job training on the federal level will have a strong, and potentially devastating, impact on employment and slow economic recovery.

Additionally, workforce development professionals need added opportunities to share with each other what they are seeing on the ground. The conference content came straight from the field, from agencies like the Worcester Housing Authority or Employment Links Inc. in Leominster.

As part of CEDAC, a public/private agency that offers support to nonprofit community development agencies throughout the state, CWC's mission is to provide technical assistance to the men and women who are critically important to developing the workforce pipeline. This conference is the one major opportunity they have every year to learn from each other regarding critical issues such as youth employment and navigating the CORI system. More resources for job counselors means more effective job placement, which is a win for everyone, a fact that Lt. Gov. Tim Murray recognized when he addressed the conference to say that "now, more than ever, it's imperative to provide the right assistance and training."

The calls for shared sacrifice in a challenging economic environment are understandable. But it makes little sense to defund workforce training and leave those on the front lines of economic development with even fewer resources. Central Massachusetts needs these job counselors to help employers find workers with the most potential and assist job seekers develop the skills they need to be hired.

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