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## Jobs agency faces daunting task with stimulus

by **Chad Graham and Betty Beard** - Apr. 12, 2009 12:00 AM  
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Federal stimulus money will provide a windfall for one of Arizona's largest agencies that help find jobs for workers.

It has also provided headaches.

Maricopa Workforce Connections is set to receive \$7.87 million to help train clients in growth areas such as health care and green technology.

The funds couldn't come at a better time for the agency, which oversees one of 17 workforce areas in the state offering job centers funded by the U.S. Labor Department.

But the agency's experience shows that accepting the money was the easy part.

Determining how to best spend it has been a daunting exercise in transforming Washington policy into reality.

Arizona has shed a high number of jobs during the recession and has struggled for decades to diversify its workforce.

Many of Maricopa Workforce Connections' clients have only a high-school degree, are 55 or older, are youths or have served in the military. Nearly two-thirds are women with yearly household incomes below \$15,000.

Developing strong training programs, with little time to prepare and with no fiscal crystal ball, has been a major challenge.

"The language of the legislation and the spirit of the recovery act is such that we are being strongly encouraged to spend the money efficiently, effectively and rapidly," said Patrick Burkhart, assistant director of Maricopa Workforce Connections. "(We're) trying to get as much out the door with the maximum effect as we possibly can, sooner rather than later."

That's easier said than done. Consider:

- President Barack Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act into law Feb. 17. It provided nearly \$3.1 billion for U.S. workforce development.

Maricopa Workforce Connections is set to put its plan into action by mid-May. That's about 90 days to implement the largest single federal jobs initiative in the state since the Great Depression.

- Maricopa Workforce Connections could not add full-time, permanent staff because the funds aren't permanent. It had to develop the plan as client visits soared from about 6,600 per month last fiscal year to an expected 12,000 per month this year.

- Every penny of the stimulus must be spent by June 2011 or returned to Washington. Most of the funds should be allocated quickly, which has prompted a scramble to accelerate some job-training programs, particularly at Valley community colleges. Officials have to commit to job training now, identifying fields they hope will provide jobs for students later.

That has meant a mad dash, but "I don't think anybody in this economic climate wants to be in that box of having to give it back," Burkhardt said.

The nearly \$8 million will help only a fraction of the people in need. Officials want to ensure that people who start job-training programs get the support to follow all the way through, so they estimate they can help about 700 adults and 800 youths. Similar programs will help up to about 2,000 more in the Valley. But more than 172,300 jobs have been lost in the Phoenix area since the recession began.

"We could make use of additional funds, but we have what we have," Burkhardt said. "Our job is to make them go as far as we possibly can and help as many people as we possibly can."

Arizona will receive a total of nearly \$43 million through the Workforce Investment Act to be divvied up among local workforce areas.

Gary Burtless, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said worker retraining serves two critical functions during a recession.

"First, it can help equip unemployed and underemployed workers to find good jobs when the economy begins to recover," he said. "Second, it can reduce the number of jobless workers who are looking for work."

That includes people such as Diana Tarango, a single mother of three who wants to become a medical assistant.

"There are a lot of doors in the medical field," she said.

Tarango could use a combination of federal education loans and stimulus money to pay for school.

Maricopa Workforce Connections, for example, has partnered with Maricopa Community Colleges to offer training in areas such as medical business services or solar-panel installation, said Mary Vanis, director of the Center for Workforce Development.

"(We've) been looking at where the jobs are today and aligning that with the programs that we currently have and then looking at the jobs that are going to come back first," she said.

A team has been poring over workforce data and future job trends to identify key industries. The hope is that workers who graduate from a program in six to 12 months can find entry-level jobs and move up in industries that are expected to grow.

Vanis said the worker-training effort will be a success if there are stronger partnerships between workforce agencies and community colleges and if more skilled workers in