

Shortage Of Skilled Workers Hurts D.C.

City in Competition For Stimulus Funds

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Long before the economy soured into the worst financial and unemployment crisis in a generation, D.C. officials knew that tens of thousands of residents did not have the training to compete for mid-skill jobs in construction, maintenance and other professions that pay a livable wage.

The problem has hurt the city for years. The government struggled to find qualified residents to work on multimillion-dollar construction projects it funded, such as Nationals Park and the convention center.

The lack of skilled residents will cost the city in the coming months, when the government and nonprofit groups will compete with hundreds of other municipalities for a share of the \$500 million in grants to train workers for the emerging "green" economy. To qualify for the stimulus funds, municipalities must demonstrate that they can train adults fast and put them to work on shovel-ready projects.

"I think the stipulation around the stimulus money and green jobs is that you have to be project ready, and money needs to be expended within a 24-month period," said Barbara Lang, president of the D.C. Chamber of Commerce. "If we have to go create a program and get people prepared, then chances are we won't be able to go after that money."

D.C. Council member Kwame R. Brown (D-At Large) put it more bluntly. "The city has failed to make adult job training a priority," he said.

Brown, chairman of the Economic Development Committee, has pushed the city for years to establish night and weekend job training programs in public schools, and recently submitted legislation calling on Mayor Adrian M. Fenty (D) to establish programs for adults at schools such as Phelps Architecture, Construction and Engineering High School.

"This should have been done eight years ago," Brown said.

A Fenty administration official brushed off the criticism. Joseph P. Walsh Jr., who heads the D.C. Department of Employment Services, said he is not worried. "We are going to be very poised to compete," Walsh said. "We've been planning for months."

Residents are being trained to take green jobs as part of a long-standing city program to weatherize homes, Walsh said. According to the department's Web site, the city offers job training through a few for-profit providers such as Rize Up and Quality First Training Center, as well as schools such as Southeastern and Strayer universities, the University of the District of Columbia and others.

In recent days, the department received \$9.6 million for green job training as part of the federal stimulus package, a spokeswoman said.

"I don't think it's fair to suggest that the District is lagging behind other cities," Walsh said. When the competition for the \$500 million in stimulus money begins later this year, "we will already have demonstrated what we can do . . . and we'll be able to go in and make a case for those dollars."

But last summer, a report released by the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program noted that about a third of jobs in the city are available to workers with a postsecondary degree. "Yet too often, District residents do not meet this threshold," it said.

According to the latest data from the Census Bureau, about 200,000 adults living in the District -- 51 percent of residents over age 25 -- lack a postsecondary degree.

Walsh, who has been on the job only since December, could not say how many residents were trained last year. But council member Brown said that whatever the figure is, it is not enough.

When the city was building Nationals Park, hiring at the site was guided by an agreement between the city and contractors to give half of the lucrative journeyman construction hours to District residents. The agreement was part of a city mandate called "First Source," which requires companies to make a good-faith effort to hire at least 51 percent of its workforce from the District at work sites partly or wholly funded by taxpayers.

But the actual hours worked by residents at Nationals Park barely surpassed 25 percent. Contractors often complain that D.C. job seekers lack the skill level even for apprenticeships and training programs.

The stimulus money is meant to help skilled residents who are poised for quick training so they can go to work and spend their earnings to help the economy.

"It targets low-income folks and seeks to get them training in the support services they need and give them a seat at the table in this new economy," said Jason Walsh, national policy director for Green for All, a national environmental group headed by Van Jones, President Obama's top adviser on the green economy.

"It'll be rigorously competitive," Walsh said.

Kathleen McKirchy, executive director of the Community Services Agency at the AFL-CIO, said she has no worries about the District's ability to compete.

"In the District, there are plenty of shovel-ready projects . . . sitting and waiting for the economy to get rolling again," she said.

McKirchy said training is only a matter of tweaking the skills of construction workers who already know how to do their jobs.

"Green construction jobs require the same basic skills as non-green construction jobs," she said. "I don't think it's any big deal."

The Brookings Institution's report said that in 2006, the city had more job opportunities -- about 700,000 -- than residents. Only "a third of those who work in the District live here," the report said, hurting the city's pocketbook as \$200 million in potential taxes flowed across the city line. The federal government does not allow the city to tax the income of nonresidents.

The report advocated for a free-standing city community college to compete with systems in Maryland and Virginia. It cast doubt on the University of the District of Columbia's ability to offer both university baccalaureate degrees and community college associate degrees. "Even a stable, adequately funded and well-managed institution would struggle" under such an expectation, the report said.

Among the nation's 50 largest cities, only the District lacks a community college, leaving residents unprepared for the changing economy, the report said. Under an agreement with the city, Brookings is studying whether UDC could one day be home to a community college.

Maryland long ago laid out a strategy to help its 750,000 residents who lack a high school diploma, said Eric Seleznow, executive director of the governor's workforce investment board. Maryland community colleges offer training in traditional skilled jobs such as construction and maintenance, "and we're looking at training for jobs in home energy auditing and weatherization," Seleznow said.

Maryland and Virginia community colleges offer more than 100 associate degree programs each, while UDC offers fewer than 25.

In Northern Virginia, classes in building maintenance and project management will launch this spring. They will complement traditional courses in mechanical engineering, radiation and oncology, jobs that pay \$60,000 to \$70,000 a year, said Robert G. Templin, president of Northern Virginia Community College.

"Any community without a community college is at a significant competitive disadvantage," Templin said. "It takes having a postsecondary credential to have a living wage. Not a low-skill wage, but a living wage."

Joseph Walsh, the employment services director, said a community college in the District "would be a wonderful addition."

Based on meetings he has attended, Walsh said, he thinks there is a lot of support for establishing a community college in the city.

For now, the District will continue to rely on federal funding to help residents with skills in technical job training and pre-construction training such as apprenticeship programs.