

OPINION

'Sensible' act vital to spread of jobs

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By Rob Brown and Cliff Ginn

It isn't often that an idea is so sensible that it can garner widespread bipartisan support in Washington, D.C., these days. Recently, however, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed the SECTORS Act as a recognition of the vital role of job training in our nation's economic recovery strategy.

Given this level of support, the SECTORS Act, or Strengthening Employment Clusters to Organize Regional Success Act of 2010, may be one of the few pieces of legislation that the Senate can agree to pass in this lame-duck session.

The act supports partnerships among industry, education and community stakeholders to create job-training opportunities that help individuals obtain skills that matter most to employers, both today and when the economy recovers and hiring picks back up. The act was first introduced in the Senate by Sen. Olympia Snowe and her co-sponsor Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio. A bipartisan version introduced in the House moved forward first, with the co-sponsorship and vocal support of Reps. Mike Michaud and Chellie Pingree.

Sector partnerships are a new approach to creating and saving jobs, meeting the needs of employers, and identifying and addressing current and future skill gaps in the work force. By working across multiple firms, these partnerships foster innovation and collaboration in improving the knowledge and skills of current and potential workers in the targeted industry sector. This efficient and effective approach is of particular benefit to a state like Maine, since we have the lowest income and education levels in New England, as well as the nation's oldest work force and highest percentage of young people who are neither working nor pursuing education.

Let's be honest. When the employment market changes quickly, when new technologies make jobs obsolete, when a recession creates the highest unemployment and underemployment levels in decades, Maine's businesses, workers and economy are ill-prepared to respond effectively. Maine's education, work force and economic development efforts need to climb out of their silos and collaborate to prepare Maine for a 21st century economy.

That is exactly the process that the SECTORS Act will facilitate.

Recently, the research group Public-Private Ventures completed a two-year nationwide study of outcomes for participants in training programs organized by sector partnerships versus those in traditional programs. Findings from the Sectoral Employment Impact Study showed that, compared to a control group, sector partnership trainees earned starting wages that were \$4,500 (18 percent) higher; were more likely to find consistent, full-time employment; and were more likely to find employment that provided benefits.

Another study by the Aspen Institute found that workers in sector-based

programs saw their median personal earnings rise from \$8,580 to \$14,040 one year after training and \$17,732 after two years.

If you look at the data, even with the unemployment rate hovering above 8 percent in Maine and above 9 percent nationally, many employers are struggling to find the skilled employees they need. In fact, a national study this year by Deloitte, The Manufacturing Institute and Oracle found that 51 percent of companies report a shortage of skilled production workers. Public investment in targeted job training that meets these industries' demands will be less expensive than paying higher social-welfare costs for workers whose jobs will be gone or changed after the recession.

Here in our region, we have a nationally recognized model for what sector partnerships should look like.

Opportunity Maine has worked with a variety of private, public and nonprofit stakeholders to build and develop the Penobscot and Piscataquis Counties Pathways Project, which is transforming traditional building-trades programs into green-building programs that produce new, affordable, super-efficient homes for low-income families living in substandard, dangerous mobile homes.

Funded by a Recovery Act grant, Maine Housing, and other public and private resources, the Pathways Project brings a variety of skills and expertise to the table to address multiple social and economic ills. This partnership will: improve the skills of our region's construction trades workforce; create jobs and economic opportunities for our workers, businesses and communities; and create safe, efficient and affordable housing for some of our most vulnerable neighbors.

Furthermore, this unique partnership is creating a new model of collaboration for other sector initiatives that seek to strengthen career ladders that bridge Career-Technical Centers, community colleges, apprenticeships, adult education and other programs.

Job training alone can't solve joblessness, but it is a critical part of the solution, particularly to ensure Maine businesses have the skilled work force they need as we slowly, but surely, climb out of the recession.

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