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## Middle-skill jobs will revive the state

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By Kenneth Donnelly

If we want to get serious about putting the unemployed and under-employed back to work, we need to increase the availability of good jobs and match the skill-set of workers to the needs of the industries and businesses. Labor market research shows a mismatch in today's economy between worker skills and jobs that employers need to fill. In Massachusetts, there are a host of industries that have job openings but surprisingly few skilled workers to fill those jobs. And it is projected to get much worse.

These jobs, referred to as middle skill jobs, require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree. According to the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, 45 percent of all jobs in the state fall into this category. They include dental hygienists, physician assistants, medical secretaries, licensed practical nurses, computer support specialists, quality control technicians, and auto mechanics. These are good jobs that pay a living wage and in many cases there is room for advancement. For instance, you may start as a medical secretary and then move to a medical assistant or begin as a line technician and then move to a supervisor.

Unfortunately current worker skill-sets do not meet the needs of employers in these industries. Only 32 percent of Massachusetts workers have the education required to fill those positions. Additionally, there will not be enough workers coming from the traditional pipeline – high school to college – to fill the available jobs. Studies show that our population of high school graduates is shrinking. By 2020 adults who began working in 2005 will make up two-thirds of the workforce. This means that if we want industry to come and stay in Massachusetts, we must provide training and education for adults who are under-employed and unemployed to fill middle skill jobs.

To help address this problem, I've filed The Middle Skills Solutions Act. This act increases opportunities for workers to obtain good paying jobs and meet employer needs. It builds on existing resources to provide programs and training that prepares workers in the targeted fields that have middle skill job needs.

One aspect of the act creates regional skills academies in the state and includes community colleges, vocational-technical high schools, community-based organizations and employers. These academies will develop and implement programs that train Massachusetts residents for middle skill jobs that match employer needs today and, as businesses and industry change, in the future.

If we are serious about building a healthy economy over the long term and providing good jobs for our residents, we must bring a laser focus to building a strong workforce that will attract business and industry to the Commonwealth. We should focus on creating pathways and opportunity for our young people and adult workers to gain the middle-skills training and credentials that our businesses need. We must ensure that we deliver programs that provide the education and skills to power industry and business. If we are serious about creating good jobs for our residents, we must begin now. The Middle Skills Solutions Act is a beginning.

Senator Kenneth Donnelly represents the 4th Middlesex district in Massachusetts.