



Now hiring: Jobs for those with middle skills

Report says state to have shortage of workers to fill skilled jobs

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Michele McClelland can't remember a time when the shortage wasn't an issue.

"It's been this way for as long as I've been in health care," McClelland said.

For years, McClelland, vice president for human resources at Delnor Hospital in Geneva, and others in charge of hiring for health care organizations have struggled to keep up with the demand for new recruits to replenish its ranks.

However, the struggle is not to find physicians and other professionals. Rather, for hospitals and other health care organizations, the struggle is to find those with a slightly lesser skill set.

"It's in radiology, CNAs, pharm techs, any of those kinds of positions," McClelland said. "There's been a known shortage for some time."

A new study, however, says the task of overcoming that shortage could become increasingly more difficult in coming years for the health care sector and other industries seeking employees with so-called middle level skills.

This week, two groups pushing for improved vocational training programs released a report they claim demonstrates that, in the next 10 years, more and more skilled jobs – particularly those requiring greater education than high school, but less than four years of college – will go unfilled in a number of industries.

"For years, our children have been told that the only pipeline to quality jobs is through a four-year degree," Andrea Ray, regional field director for The Workforce Alliance, said. "But this study reveals that there are a great number of very good jobs that can be obtained through vocational training."

Called Illinois' Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs, the report reveals that 51 percent of jobs in Illinois are classified as "middle-skilled." However, just 43 percent of workers have the skills needed to qualify for those jobs, the report says.

That gap is only expected to widen in coming years. By 2020, the number of workers with mid-level skills is projected to decline by another 2.3 percent.

And that will lead to more and more job openings as industries expand and those now holding the jobs retire.

The shortage is particularly felt in four sectors: health care, transportation/logistics, advanced manufacturing and the building trades.

Stephanie Gregory, manager for planning and staffing at Central DuPage Hospital in Winfield, said her organization, like Delnor, also struggles to find applicants qualified to serve as nursing assistants – or patient care technicians, as they are called at CDH – phlebotomists and radiology technicians.

Part of the problem stems from a long reported shortage of nurses. At both Delnor and CDH, the hospitals offer tuition reimbursements, allowing their technicians and nursing assistants to earn a nursing degree and advance their careers.

That, in turn, however, only further fuels the shortage of technicians and CNAs.

In manufacturing, companies have also begun to partner with community colleges to create programs to train workers in mathematics, drafting and other skills needed to earn a job.

Last year, for instance, St. Charles-based Bison Gear and Engineering partnered with other manufacturers and College of DuPage in Wheaton to create such a program.

And, in the building trades, local labor unions are stepping up their efforts to draw in new apprentices to work as carpenters, electricians, plumbers and other skilled trades.

“There used to be millions of 20 to 25-year-olds working on construction sites,” Mark Baum, director of business development at R.C. Wegman Construction in Aurora. “Now, there are fewer and fewer of them.”

Part of the problem is the allure of college.

But another part of the equation lies in misinformation fed to young people about careers in middle-skill level jobs, Baum said.

“They’re told you can’t make any money here,” Baum said. “That couldn’t be more wrong.”

The report notes that in 2006 median wages for 30 of the jobs with the greatest shortages ranged from \$26,700 to \$134,700.

To remedy the problem, the study’s authors called for greater vocational training to guarantee Illinois residents at least two years of post-high school job training or education.

“These jobs represent the backbone of our economy,” Ray said. “We need to work to address this shortage now.”

Some of the jobs projected to be high in demand in coming years, listed by occupation and 2006 median wages, include:

- Carpenters, \$52,400
- Physical Therapy Assistants, \$40,600
- Auto Mechanics, \$34,600
- Registered Nurses, \$55,200
- Heavy Truck Drivers, \$38,500
- Machinists, \$34,100
- Paralegals, \$43,900
- Police Officers, \$59,900
- Air Traffic Controllers, \$134,700

Source: Illinois’ Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs report, The Workforce Alliance

COMMENTS


