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REPORT: MORE THAN ONE MILLION “MIDDLE-SKILL” JOBS EXPECTED IN ILLINOIS BY 2016; BUT STATE MAY LACK TRAINED WORKERS TO FILL THEM

State Budget Crunch Limits Illinois’ Response to Future Demand for Jobs Requiring More than High School Diploma, Less than College Degree

Federal Recovery Dollars to Create Jobs in Middle-Skill Industries; Report Calls for Restored Investments to Train and Prepare Illinois Workers

CHICAGO— Already reeling from the its worst unemployment rate in a generation, Illinois is also leaving its workers ill-prepared to benefit from the biggest wave of job openings projected for the state over the next seven years, a new report released today has found.

More than one million “middle-skill” job openings—those that require more than a high school diploma, but less than a four-year degree—are projected for the state by 2016, representing the largest portion of jobs in the state’s skilled labor market, according to a new study released today by The Workforce Alliance (TWA) and the Skills2Compete-Illinois campaign, an affiliate of the national Skills2Compete campaign. But drastic cuts in state-funded employment training programs threaten to impair efforts to fill future middle-skill jobs.

While the recession is stifling current employment growth, the report projects that middle-skill jobs (including new jobs and replacement) would account for 45 percent of all openings between 2006 and 2016. Low- and high- skill jobs will account for 23 percent and 31 percent respectively.

Illinois’ budget crisis continues to severely limit the state’s opportunity to keep up with demand for middle-skill workers. Adult education funds have already been reduced by nearly 20 percent and significant outside pressure was needed to ensure sufficient funding for the need-based financial aid. Meanwhile, the report states that without any new revenue for the state budget, two key state-funded workforce training programs will be cut in half. The lack of state investments in postsecondary education and workforce training also stifles federal recovery efforts, as federal recovery funds are expected to create millions of new jobs—especially in industries dominated by middle-skill occupations, like environment/energy, construction, manufacturing, and transportation.

“If Illinois seeks real economic recovery and long-term prosperity, we must ensure our workforce has the necessary education and training to meet the labor demands of the future,” said Jenny Wittner of Women Employed, lead partner in the Skills2Compete Illinois campaign. Carrie Thomas of Chicago Jobs Council, another lead partner, adds, “If Illinois is receiving billions of recovery dollars to create middle-skill jobs in our state, it would be a waste of resources to not invest in preparing workers for these new opportunities.”

The report also finds that 65 percent of the people who will be in Illinois’ workforce in the year 2020 were already working adults in 2005—long past the traditional high school to college pipeline. The Skills2Compete campaign says this finding underscores the crucial importance of investments in training and re-training the current adult workforce to closing the skill gap. And while the nation’s overall K-12 education system also needs significant repair that alone won’t solve this problem.

Echoing a vision put forward by the national Skills2Compete campaign, President Obama first challenged every American to commit to at least one year of postsecondary education or training in February 2009, and has continued to signal that investing in a range of skills for America’s workforce—“be it at a technical college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship”—will be a priority for his Administration.

Illinois lawmakers have taken a first step in addressing the President’s challenge by adopting a version of the Skills2Compete-Illinois vision. This June the Illinois House of Representatives passed House Resolution 50, stating that Illinois make it a priority that up to two years of post-secondary education or training is available to all citizens in this State. This echoes the Skills2Compete-Illinois vision which states that every Illinois worker should have access to the equivalent of at least two years of education or training past high school—leading to a vocational credential, industry certification, or one’s first two years of college—to be pursued at whatever point and pace makes sense for individual workers and industries.

“Illinois must not ignore this federal call to action. We must provide our state residents the opportunity to obtain some form of postsecondary education or job training,” says Assistant Majority Leader David Miller (D-Dolton), who introduced the measure in February. “After this economic downtime jobs will return—middle-skill jobs at that—and Illinois’ future depends on our readiness to meet this upcoming demand.”

Lawmakers also passed the 21st Century Workforce Development Fund Act (House Bill 852) which created a state-level structure for raising and coordinating new resources for workforce development. They must now turn to the challenging task of creating new funds for the priorities outlined in the Act—skills training for occupations that experience shortages and for industries that are expected to grow, including those in the emerging “green” sectors.

“Illinois legislators understand education is important, evident by their commitment in the resolution,” notes Andrea Ray, of TWA, the convening organization for the national Skills2Compete campaign. “But we need lawmakers to move beyond awareness of this issue and towards action—restoring investments in programs to train and educate workers.”

The report is funded by The Joyce Fund, The Ford Foundation and The Woods Fund of Chicago.

“Citizens in the Midwest, and Illinois in particular, need guaranteed access to education to prepare for middle-skill jobs that will support their families,” said Ellen Alberding, Joyce Foundation president. “Illinois’ Shifting Gears project will help people learn the right skills for the right jobs and participate in the state’s economic recovery.”

Members of the Skills2Compete-Illinois campaign will meet in Washington, DC in November with congressional leaders to review the study’s findings and encourage further federal efforts to ensure all workers can get the skills they need to play a role in economic recovery. The campaign will continue to brief state policymakers on the report’s findings and begin to explore ways to close Illinois’ middle-skills gap.

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Skills2Compete is a non-partisan campaign to ensure the U.S. workforce has the skills needed to meet business demand, foster innovation, and grow broadly shared prosperity. The campaign’s diverse and growing list of endorsers include national and local leaders from business, labor, education and training, community and civil rights groups, and the public sector. The Skills2Compete Vision: Every U.S. worker should have access to the equivalent of at least two years of education or training past high school—leading to a vocational credential, industry certification, or one’s first two years of college—to be pursued at whatever point and pace makes sense for individual workers and industries. Every person must also have the opportunity to obtain the basic skills needed to pursue such education. For more information visit www.Skills2Compete.org and www.Skills2Compete.org/Illinois.

TWA’s mission is to advocate for public policies that invest in the skills of America’s workers, so they can better support their families and help American businesses better compete in today’s economy. The Workforce Alliance is a national coalition of community-based training organizations, community colleges, unions, business leaders, local officials, and leading technical assistance and research organizations. This alliance of stakeholders, who have not previously come together, ensures that our efforts are not in the self interest of a particular group, but are instead in the broader public interest of the nation. For more information, visit www.workforcealliance.org.