

Matching skills to jobs

State is addressing need to train residents in multitude of 'middle-skill' positions

By William G. "Bill" Robertson

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As Maryland readies itself to rebound from the recession, it must first look to what employers will need from the next generation of workers to sustain prosperity.

Maryland lays claim to major universities, prestigious federal laboratories, top-ranked K-12 schools and a strong system of higher education. These assets have helped Maryland attract high-skill, high-wage jobs in health care, biosciences, information technology - and soon many more jobs in Base Realignment and Closure transfers and cyber security.

While many of these jobs require bachelor's degrees or higher, many more will be "middle-skill" jobs, which require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree. These middle-skill jobs account for the largest share of jobs in Maryland today, and demand for them will continue to grow.

The faces of middle-skill workers are those we see every day. They repair our roads and bridges, transport goods, keep our communities safe, care for the ill and provide a host of other services we rely on daily. Filling and sustaining these positions is critical to our long-term recovery and economic success.

In a new report titled "Maryland's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs," released this week by the National Skills Coalition, some 42 percent of all job openings projected for the state by 2016 are in the middle-skill category, - more than 434,000 positions.

While these openings signal new opportunities for Maryland's work force, many Marylanders do not have the proper education and skills to take on these jobs. Despite Maryland's strong investments in postsecondary education and work force training, preparation for middle-skill jobs has not kept up with demand. Many of the state's employers continue to report trouble filling positions from the local talent pool.

As Maryland's economy rebounds, more workers will retire, job openings will grow and the possibility for a greater skills gap looms. This reality should move the state to use this economic down time to boost the skills of our existing work force.

This is a national goal, too. In recent months, President Barack Obama has called on all Americans to obtain some form of postsecondary education or job training to prepare for a "21st century global economy."

Gov. Martin O'Malley has long talked about an educated and skilled work force being critical to attract and expand businesses and create jobs. Mr. O'Malley is taking action to train more state residents for better, more plentiful middle-

skill jobs and careers.

On Tuesday, the governor announced "Skills2Compete-Maryland," a new, nonpartisan economic and education policy with the goal of giving every Marylander access to the equivalent of at least two years of education or training past high school - leading to a career or technical credential, industry certification, or one's first two years of college.

Uniquely among the states that have taken up the Skills2Compete challenge, Maryland will implement new tracking and reporting requirements for existing work force development programs to ensure we meet the governor's goal of increasing the skills of Maryland's work force by 20 percent by 2012.

Under the leadership of Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown, and with the Governor's Workforce Investment Board playing a key role, Skills2Compete-Maryland will focus our existing programs at the state and local levels, across many governmental entities as well as business and labor, on a single goal: to provide more Marylanders with more skills more efficiently. This will involve increasing outreach and access to education and training opportunities, not just in our community colleges but also in occupational and technical certificate programs, labor and nonlabor apprenticeship programs, community-based training organizations and workplaces.

The Skills2Compete vision will lead to a strong work force and a wealth of opportunity for our state. But it can't happen on its own.

State agencies, partners and stakeholders must promote programs and activities related to middle-skills development; assist customers in navigating the appropriate resources and pathways at places ranging from one-stop career centers to community colleges to apprenticeship programs; and work with the business community to ensure our programs are preparing the world-class work force they need to be even more competitive.

Businesses, labor, educators, advocates, community-based organizations and others must work together to see this through. Policymakers must step in with strong political leadership and commitment to ensure that all stakeholders work toward the same goal - making sure Maryland has the both the high-skill and middle-skill work force we need to recover and thrive.

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