

'Mid-skill' job openings to increase

Report: Worker shortages expected in next six years

by Kevin James Shay | Staff Writer

Martin Knott has a problem that may seem puzzling at a time when the U.S. unemployment rate is hovering near 10 percent.

The president of Knott Mechanical, a heating and cooling company in Timonium, says he has difficulty finding qualified workers, and he expects his need for employees to increase soon when his company takes on more energy-efficiency work.

"The industry has changed dramatically the last three to five years," Knott said during a conference call this week involving business executives, state officials, educators and labor leaders. "As buildings become smarter, our workforce has got to get smarter."

To that end, Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) and others talked up the need to spend more on training programs to help prepare low-skill workers to fill the growing number of middle-skill jobs that are expected to experience a worker shortage in coming years. Middle-skill jobs are those that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree, such as insurance claims adjusters, computer support specialists and health-care technicians.

Nearly half of all Maryland jobs in 2008 — 46 percent — were middle-skill jobs, and about 434,000 middle-skill openings are expected in the state through 2016, according to a study released this week by the nonprofit National Skills Coalition, formerly the Workforce Alliance, of Washington, D.C. The middle range will account for 42 percent of all job openings in the next six years, compared with 35 percent in high-skill fields and 23 percent in low-skill ones.

An education and training strategy guided by the national Skills2Compete program would give Maryland a competitive edge to address the "skills shortage," said Eric M. Seleznow, executive director of the state Governor's Workforce Investment Board.

"Pre-apprenticeship programs become very important," he said.

Among the higher-paying middle-skills jobs in the state are dental hygienists and diagnostic medical sonographers, which are expected to have about 1,300 and 500 openings, respectively, through 2016. Those fields had 2007 median earnings in Maryland of \$68,840 and \$67,050, respectively.

The mid-skill field with the most projected openings in the state is carpenters with 11,575. That segment paid \$39,160 in 2007 median earnings.

Technology is a key factor spurring the increase in middle-skill openings, said Daniel Mosser, vice president for workforce development and continuing education at Prince George's Community College. The college, which has an average student age of 30, has programs in numerous middle-skill fields, such as health-care technicians, he said.

But the need for more training in these areas is apparent, Mosser said.

The Skills2Compete initiative is being launched at all 16 of the state's community colleges, said H. Clay Whitlow, executive director of the Maryland Association of Community Colleges. More than 12 other states also have launched Skills2Compete.

"Just having a high school diploma isn't enough. People need to go beyond high school," Whitlow said. "We

want to help put people to work."

Staff Writer Liz Skalski contributed to this report.

Nurses, drivers,

carpenters

Middle-skill job openings expected in Maryland through 2016, with 2007 median earnings:

Carpenters, 11,575 openings, \$39,160

Heavy truck drivers, 7,465, \$37,770

Electricians, 7,080, \$47,100

Police officers, 6,310, \$51,310

Computer support specialists, 5,545, \$46,890

Auto mechanics, 5,365, \$37,530

Licensed practical nurses, 5,140, \$46,690

Radiology technicians, 1,630, \$59,400

Sources: National Skills Coalition, Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation, U.S. Department of Labor