

Md. seeks better coordination of 'middle-skill' jobs training

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Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley called Tuesday for more training efforts to prepare the workforce to meet an expected surge in jobs requiring certification beyond a high school diploma but less than a bachelor's degree.

The state's unemployment rate has risen steadily throughout the recession, with the most significant losses having occurred in manufacturing and construction. But a study released Tuesday said that by 2016, the state will gain 434,000 so-called middle-skill jobs -- including police officers, firefighters, computer specialists and nurses. Only 37 percent of the state's workforce has the credentials to fill those jobs, however.

Left unaddressed, officials said, the gap could slow economic recovery.

"We want to raise the bar on skills training," so that more residents will have the qualifications needed to get hired, O'Malley said at a news conference at Prince George's Community College in Largo. "Our citizens need jobs, our businesses will increasingly need skilled employees," he said, adding that he wants to boost the number of workers prepared to fill middle-skill jobs by 20 percent in two years.

State officials said the initiative does not involve more spending. But, they said, it requires the state to better coordinate training programs offered by a variety of entities, including community colleges and unions, with the job demands of employers across the state.

Evolving technology is largely driving the demand for a more advanced workforce. For instance, administrative assistants in the future will have to know much more than word processing -- they'll have to be adept at Excel, PowerPoint, PageMaker and Web site design.

Martin Knott, president of Knott Mechanical, a heating and cooling company in Baltimore County, said he already has a problem finding workers possessing the training he needs. He said he would like to double his contingent of technicians to 44 in a few years when he moves more into energy efficiency, which will require an even higher level of skills.

"We know we are going to need more qualified applicants. We know we will double our size in three to four years, and training will be vital to our ability to do that," Knott said in a conference call organized by state officials to announce results of the study. "As buildings become smarter, our workforce has got to get smarter."

A target of the workforce training efforts, officials said, will be some 730,000 adult residents lacking a high school diploma and fluency in English. They said adult education and GED programs will intensify their efforts to fill gaps in basic skills, such as math and reading, to address the problem.

Over the past decade, the state has created thousands of new jobs in biotechnology, aerospace and health care. But the report, "Maryland's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs," said 45 percent of all job openings in the next few years will occur in the professions requiring certification instead of a college degree. Comparatively, 30 percent of openings during that time will require a college degree and about 22 percent will require only a high school diploma.

The report attributes the growing shortage of middle-skill workers, in part, to the retirement of baby boomers.

