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## O'malley Administration Wants To Bridge Skills Gap

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by ADAM KERLIN @ Capital News Service

LARGO - Gov. Martin O'Malley and Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown launched Skills2Compete Maryland at Prince George's Community College Tuesday, an initiative designed to increase the skills of Maryland's workforce so it can fill the abundance of "middle-skill" jobs that make up the largest portion of the state's job market. Middle-skill jobs are defined by the O'Malley administration as jobs that require some post-high school training, but not a four-year degree. The emphasis on middle-skill jobs comes along with the release of a study by the National Skills Coalition, a Washington-based worker advocacy training group, which found 46 percent of Maryland's jobs in 2008 required "middle skills." The goal of the skills initiative is to ensure that every Marylander has access to a two-year education, or credentials and skills that are equivalent to one, after graduating high school. The program will require various state agencies and partners of the Skills2Compete initiative to assist Marylanders in accessing career centers, community colleges, apprenticeships and private career schools so they can gain skills, according to an O'Malley press release. The National Skills Coalition report projects 77 percent of Maryland's job openings between 2006 and 2016 will require some type of post-high school education. It also says jobs created as a result of federal stimulus aid, such as manufacturing renewable energy products and repairing roads, will be middle-skill jobs. "The truth of the matter is there are jobs available in Maryland that are not all Ph.D.'s," O'Malley said. "If we can uplift the skills that our people have with that additional couple of years after high school, then they can meet and fill those jobs that are actually available in our state." Brown, who will lead the initiative for the Administration, said he and O'Malley set a goal to strengthen and grow Maryland's middle class when they took office. "We do believe it is our responsibility to participate in the improving of the competitiveness and skills of our most important commodity, which is our workforce," Brown said. Andy Van Kleunen, executive director of the National Skills Coalition, said the commitment to improving the skills of Maryland's workforce over the next two years could set the bar for what other states should be expected to do to raise the skills of their workforces. "The goal of raising a substantial number of Maryland residents to two years of education and training past high school, the commitment to actually track the state's progress towards achieving that goal, that is a standout proposition," Van Kleunen said. "That is not being done in any other state in this country." About a third of Maryland's workforce is currently qualified to move into the advanced jobs that will make up a majority of the state's job openings in the coming years, something Van Kleunen described as a skills gap. "It is a skills gap that is in every state in this country," Van Kleunen said. "What's distinctive about Maryland is that over the past several years they have been working actively to address those issues across a range of different policies." The announcement of Skills2Compete Maryland is O'Malley's latest effort to create job opportunities for Marylanders. Job creation and retention has been a priority for his administration this legislative session. Maryland reported a 7.5 percent unemployment rate in December, a record high, but still lower than the national rate of 9.7 percent reported in January. "Jobs and skills along with homeownership are the building blocks to a stronger, growing, more diverse and more upwardly mobile middle class," O'Malley said. "If we're the first state to figure out how to do this, the opportunities come to us many, many times over." The Administration's workforce development initiative comes just four days after the Maryland Senate unanimously passed a bill that would give businesses a \$5,000 tax credit for every unemployed worker they hire. O'Malley has also been a strong proponent of green energy, sponsoring legislation that would clear the way for offshore wind farming and supporting bills that would

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increase the state's solar energy production in hopes of creating jobs in green energy. The National Skills Coalition's study suggests increasing the skill sets of Maryland's workers will bode well for alternative energy companies. The report says "skills needed in the green economy closely mirror middle-skill demands." Promoting those skills would create opportunities in the energy efficiency, wind and biofuel sectors.

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