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Study forecasts shortage of 'middle skills' workers

Shortage of up to 100,000 employees predicted in jobs like dental hygienists and truck drivers

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An estimated 650,000 new jobs available in Michigan between now and 2016 will require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree.

That's according to a study released today by the Workforce Alliance, a Washington nonprofit, and Skills2Compete Michigan, the group's state chapter.

But the study suggests a shortfall of qualified workers and says the gap is likely to worsen. The gap between "middle skills" jobs and workers will widen to as many as 100,000 due partially to retirement and the state's aging work force, but also to a lack of worker training, according to the study, "Michigan's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs."

"Focusing on high school students isn't going to cut it," said Andrea Ray, regional field director for Workforce Alliance, and one of the authors of the report, which was funded by the Joyce Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

"Middle-skill jobs represent 51 percent of jobs in Michigan, but only 46 percent people in the work force have the credentials to do the jobs."

Among the study's findings:

- Shortages in the "green" sector. Employers already are having trouble filling jobs in energy auditing, lead/hazardous materials and trucking.
- Middle-skill jobs expected to grow by 2016 in Michigan include heavy truck drivers with a median earning of \$37,160, carpenters with a median earning of \$42,140 and dental hygienists with a median earning of \$57,376. The report details 30 high-demand middle-skill jobs in Michigan.
- Immigration trends are likely to do little to offset middle-skill attrition, as most work force growth in the state due to in-migration will likely occur at the low- or high-end of the skill spectrum.

The study urges support for such programs as the "No Worker Left Behind" initiative, which pays up to \$5,000 per year for two years of post-high school training for 100,000 Michigan residents pursuing high-demand jobs.