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NM growth will come in 'middle skills' jobs

New Mexico Business Weekly - by [Megan Kamerick](#) NMBW Staff

The largest share of future job openings in New Mexico will be so-called “middle skills” jobs. But the state is already experiencing shortages of these workers and that could hamper its future economic growth.

That is the conclusion of a new report, “New Mexico’s Forgotten Middle Skills Jobs,” by the **National Skills Coalition**. Middle skills jobs are defined as those that require more than a high school diploma, but not a four-year degree. They include construction workers, health care technicians, truck drivers, police and firefighters, the report states. They also include many of the jobs being created in the emerging renewable energy sector.

These positions represent the largest share of jobs in the state, about 48 percent, and the largest share of future job openings — 133,280 between now and 2016. The National Skills Coalition, based in Washington, D.C., compiled the data using figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the **New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions**. These jobs also make up the largest segment of the U.S. economy, according to the report, and will continue to do so for years to come.

The New Mexico report is one in a series of reports the Coalition has been doing on states as part of a national campaign called Skills2Compete, a nonpartisan effort that will help the country recovery more quickly from the recession, said Zach Silk, Western field director for the Coalition.

The Coalition says it has more than 3,200 members representing more than 1,400 organizations in 25 states.

The **report** notes that New Mexico has made significant investments in the education and training of this work force, but demand still outpaces supply for these workers. Businesses across the state were reporting skilled worker shortages before the recession, it notes. The report calls for making more investments in programs to train laid off workers, workers in low-wage jobs or with low basic skills to ensure a more robust economy.

These efforts also will require more attention to older workers, said Silk. A large portion of the work force from now until 2020 will be adults who need retraining and new skills to move up the career ladder or change jobs.

“But what we focus so much of the time and resources on is people in high school or just out of high school,” he said.

The report calls for making the equivalent of at least two years of education or training past high school available to every New Mexican, with the idea of that leading to a vocational credential, industry certification or the first two years of college.

The disconnect between work force demands and those with the necessary skills is an issue nationally, he added, not just in New Mexico, even in the current recession. Part of the reason so many are unemployed is that they don’t have the skills necessary for the jobs that are in demand, Silk said. This is the best time to start beefing up people’s skills so they are prepared to fill jobs when the economy recovers, he added.

That sentiment was echoed by Sally Adams, chair of the nonprofit **Albuquerque Economic Development**, and president of **Clear Channel Outdoor** in New Mexico.

“It’s critical we stay competitive with other states as the economy turns around,” Adams said during a briefing on the report. “When we recruit companies to the state, there is a one- to three-year period before they start hiring, so this gives us time to train people and get them up to speed so we have a skilled work force for them to hire.”

The **New Mexico Office of Philanthropic Outreach** is also involved in the effort in New Mexico. Its role is to ensure that all the right people are at the table, said Robin Brulé, executive director.

“I think we have a lot of strengths moving forward, but it’s just connecting those pieces in a non-siloed way – where can Workforce Solutions hook up with the Higher Education Department or the Public Education Department?” she said. “So it’s learning and the sharing



Middle skills jobs include police and firefighters, according to a new report.

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of information resources.”

Becky Rowley, executive vice president of **Clovis Community College**, said training middle skills professionals is now the largest part of the college’s mission. More and more of its students are people in their 30s and 40s looking for intensive short training with a job at the end, she said. The college has worked with **Southwest Cheese**, which opened one of the largest cheddar cheese processing plants in the world near Clovis, to train people for those jobs, Rowley said.

Food processing has become a large part of the area’s economy, she added, so this training also provides career mobility.

Other partners in the campaign include the **Association of Commerce and Industry**, **Associated General Contractors**, the **New Mexico Business Roundtable**, community colleges around the state, **New Mexico Voices for Children** and the Lieutenant Governor’s Office.

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