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## Rhode Island news

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# A new Workforce Alliance report says R.I. should focus on 'middle-skill' job training

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By **Andy Smith**

**Journal Staff Writer**

Rhode Island is not training enough workers for "middle-skill" jobs.

A report titled "Rhode Island's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs," released Tuesday, says that in 2007, about 48 percent of all jobs in the state were classified as middle-skill jobs, but only 37 percent of the workers had the necessary education or training to fill those positions.

The report was issued by the The Workforce Alliance, a national nonprofit organization, using data supplied by The Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College.

The report defines middle-skill occupations as jobs that require more than a high school diploma, but less than a four-year college degree. It's the largest job category in the state, and includes medical technicians, firefighters, police officers, mechanics, construction workers, paralegals and more.

In 2008, the report says, there were 225,350 middle-skill jobs in the state. Projections through 2016 say that 42 percent of job openings will be for middle-skill jobs, compared with 32 percent for high-skill jobs that require a four-year college degree and 26 percent for low-skill jobs requiring a high school degree or less.

The report urges the state to focus its work-force investments on middle-skill jobs.

Jessie Hogg Leslie, senior regional field director for the Workforce Alliance, said Rhode's Island's 12.8 percent unemployment rate has temporarily reduced demand for middle-skill employees. But she predicted demand will come back up as the economy recovers.

Ideally, the report says, every Rhode Islander should have access to the equivalent of two years of post-secondary education or job training. But Leslie said that's more of a "vision" than a demand, and that the state should take incremental steps to prepare people for middle-skill jobs.

The Workforce Alliance estimated that training another 5 percent of the state's work force for middle-skill jobs would require an investment of at least \$111 million, which is 3.6 times Rhode Island's federal funding for all job training, adult education and financial aid for community college students.

The report also notes that the state must deal with some basic educational requirements for thousands of its citizens — almost 149,000 Rhode Islanders need basic adult education or training in English as a second language.

"We haven't forgotten middle-skill jobs at all," said Sandra Powell, director of the state Department of Labor and Training.

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She said the state is training workers for middle-skill jobs through several programs, including partnerships with high-growth industries, such as health care, through the Governor's Workforce Board, and increased job-training opportunities through the federal Workforce Investment Act.

Powell pointed out that the state needs to look at the work force in its entirety. "We need to deal with people who have low skills, as well. The idea is to move people from level to level," she said.

As for a guarantee of two years of post-secondary education or training for all Rhode Islanders, Powell said the goal sounds good, but she would need to see more information. "Obviously, the key question is the funding," she said.

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