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Middle-skill positions show promise across Wisconsin

By Pete Bach

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KAUKAUNA — There aren't enough good carpenters to go around.

But even if there were, there would still be a problem. There's not enough work for good carpenters.

"Right now there's more of a demand for millwrights than carpenters," said Al Atkinson, director of education for the North Central States Regional Council of Carpenters near Kaukauna, which trains both trades at its Bodde Road facility. "I agree there's going to be a shortage. Right now, in today's market, there isn't."

By conceding to a shortage in the making, Atkinson reflected the forecast from the Workforce Alliance, a national coalition of community-based training organizations.

While demand for carpenters has ebbed as new home and commercial construction sunk in a gimpy economy, the long-term picture is much brighter for the skilled tradespeople in the ranks of middle-skill jobs, those requiring more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree, according to the alliance. Middle-skill jobs will make up nearly half of Wisconsin's job openings into the next decade.

The alliance said a gap is being left as the baby boomers retire from the trades in increasing numbers.

The Fox Valley Technical College has said full time equivalent enrollments are expected to climb 15 percent this year, spurred in great part by a flood of displaced workers.

When the Alliance came out with its projections last month, the head of the chairman of the Governor's Council on Workforce Investment stressed the importance of preparing trained labor for the eventual economic turnaround.

"We've experienced shortages in skilled workers for years," said Tim Sullivan, who is chief executive officer at Bucyrus International in Milwaukee. "While the current recession limits our ability to grow, we know that when the economy bounces back we will need a strong, skilled work force to sustain growth and keep our company moving forward."

Gov. Jim Doyle gave the Kaukauna center a big boost soon after that. Two grants totaling \$247,000 were given out to help apprentice carpenters and millwrights train with the latest equipment.

Additional Facts

In demand

Average annual openings projected in Wisconsin for certain middle-skill jobs to 2016:

- Registered nurses, 2,180
- Customer service representatives, 2,100
- Truck drivers, heavy and tractor trailer, 1,520
- Bookkeeping, accounting and auditing clerks, 1,200
- Carpenters, 700

Source: Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS)