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## Connecting to jobs

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SOME PARTS of the economic stimulus bill now in the Massachusetts Legislature would overspend state dollars on pet projects, but other parts would make wise investments in the state's workforce.

Like wallflowers at a high school dance, many unemployed people can see job vacancies for which they lack skills. The state has responded by training workers. But more funding and programs are needed.

At the end of 2004, the state had 143,800 unemployed people but only about 72,000 job vacancies, according to a December report from the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University. There aren't enough jobs to go around, but data-driven training and matchmaking could drastically cut the number of unemployed.

For example, retail had a large number of vacancies. And in healthcare there were more jobs than job seekers, with an average of 15,000 openings during 2004.

Another problem the report cites is the decline in the state labor force which "should be viewed as a serious economic problem by state and local policy makers. If left unchecked, it will constrain future economic and job growth."

Key steps should be taken, such as more actively retaining the state's new college graduates, offering help with jobs and housing.

Seasonal retail jobs may not add up to a career, but they can help students and retirees increase their incomes, especially if there are easy ways to link job-seekers to openings.

Geography matters. Statewide, it's tough to get a job in the arts and entertainment industry, but not in the Berkshire region where this industry had the highest vacancy rates at the end of 2004. Some of these 492 vacancies appear to be seasonal, related to winter recreation. The report notes that a closer look at this region could reveal the best ways to link people to appropriate jobs.

It's no surprise that healthcare dominates the openings in Greater Boston -- showing the need for aggressive training in health careers -- but the region also has jobs in retail and professional and technical services.

Overshadowed by the healthcare bill, the House and Senate versions of the economic stimulus bill are in conference committee. Two programs supported by the House deserve funding. One is a trust fund to finance training programs that would be jointly designed by business, nonprofit organizations, and community colleges. The second is a grant program to help people pay for training programs. As they reconcile their bills, legislators should cut pet projects and invest in the workforce. ■

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