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Jobs with a future

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HOW DO YOU get people into hot jobs? These are the jobs with high numbers of predicted openings, such as software engineer, physician assistant, and forensic science technician, that could enrich individuals and the economy -- if people can get enough training to win these positions.

Hot jobs typically require considerable skills. And as MassINC, a local think tank, points out, one-third of this state's workforce, about a million people, lack the basic skills needed to function in the new economy.

The challenge is to increase training.

One good example is a collaboration between NStar and Bunker Hill Community College to train the line workers who climb poles and repair electrical wires. Students who complete the two-year program, which started in 2004, get an associate's degree and a job offer from NStar. It's demanding, physical work. Only five men made it through the first class. (Eighteen more will start in the fall.) But entry-level pay is \$55,000 to \$65,000, more with overtime. And there should be a lot of openings since half of utility workers are approaching retirement.

The Crittenton Women's Union, a local nonprofit organization, is mixing training and research, asking its clients a key question: Which jobs are *really* hot? The goal is to find out which high-demand jobs actually pique the interest of poor and underemployed women. Understandably, many shy away from being a line worker or from hazardous materials removal, another hot job, according to Crittenton. But two have enrolled in a five-month appliance repair program and others are pursuing higher-paying jobs in healthcare. The strategy is to have women consider a range of options and help them overcome barriers to getting these jobs. Crittenton plans to bring these options to women in various settings, including homeless shelters.

Crittenton is part of SkillWorks, a local partnership of employers, government, foundations, and community organizations. This team approach is essential. It brings in more resources and ensures that training is firmly linked to actual jobs.

Planting more seeds, the US Department of Labor announced last week that it will invest \$125 million to fund 75 grants for community and technical colleges to close the skills gap with training programs for high-growth local and regional industries.

Unfortunately, Governor Romney vetoed an \$11 million workforce trust fund that would invest in workforce training. It was part of the economic stimulus bill.

Despite this, the need is clear. Good examples of training programs should be forged into public/private systems in every state that move people into the most dynamic parts of the economy. ■

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