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Untapped Talent

By Bob Herbert

At a time when the American dream has moved all but completely out of the reach of low-paid and poorly educated individuals comes a modest but promising joint effort by business, government, union and nonprofit leaders in the greater Boston area to open new doors to good jobs and higher standards of living.

We waste human potential in this country the way some people waste toilet tissue. For example, a person who is a part-time janitor is generally thought to be going nowhere. There's no upside to the job, and it certainly won't pay for the basic needs of a family. But what if that janitor could be trained and guided into work as a painter, an electrician, a groundskeeper or a custodial supervisor?

Why shouldn't someone who changes sheets in a hospital, or delivers meals to patients, be offered the education and training necessary to become a surgical technician, or radiologic technologist, or registered nurse?

In Boston and other parts of New England where the population is not growing, employers are increasingly being confronted with a shortage of skilled workers. The jobs are there, but the workers able to do them are not.

Example: Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital, a Harvard teaching affiliate, sits just across the border from affluent Brookline, Mass. The hospital is thriving, and the demand for its services is great.

On the other side of Brigham and Women's is a Boston neighborhood with myriad challenges, including unemployment, violence and what Dr. Gary Gottlieb, the hospital's president, described as "extreme risk for adverse health outcomes."

There are good jobs with good benefits at Brigham and Women's. If a substantial number of those jobs could go to residents in the struggling Boston neighborhood, the benefits would spread throughout the area, like a cool front on a muggy summer afternoon. All parties would benefit.

"Our mission is to bring the best and the brightest people to the sickest and neediest," said Dr. Gottlieb, and that means deriving "a substantial component of our labor base from all the communities around us."

To that end, Dr. Gottlieb has made his hospital an enthusiastic participant in a program that has been given the jargonish name SkillWorks. It's a collaborative effort, organized by the Boston Foundation, to improve the skills

and career opportunities of the low-wage work force in a number of industries.

History has shown that this is much easier said than done. The historical landscape is littered with the rusted, rotting shells of job training programs and full-employment initiatives that never succeeded.

But SkillWorks may be on to something. For one thing, the demographic changes in Boston and much of New England (perhaps coming to a neighborhood near you, as baby boomers begin retiring) are making employers more interested in developing the skills of a new generation of workers.

"The baby boom folks are beginning to leave the work force," said Paul Grogan, president of the Boston Foundation. "And we won't get any net increase in workers from women entering the work force, because that revolution has happened and now as many women are going to be leaving the work force as entering it."

What SkillWorks is attempting to do is merge investment commitments from foundations and the government (Mayor Thomas Menino is solidly onboard) with a willingness of business leaders to actually provide meaningful employment and promotion opportunities to the kind of men and women whose talents have long been overlooked, and thus wasted.

"This is the way to go," said Mayor Menino. He mentioned the housekeeping jobs at hospitals, which might pay \$10 an hour. "In the past that was a dead-end job," he said. "But because of our involvement with Brigham and Women's Hospital, we were able to put a program together, with some of our funds, to train these individuals to become radiologists. They're making \$40,000 to \$45,000 a year."

The employment situation in the United States is complicated and extremely dynamic. In many parts of the country, highly skilled workers are watching in dismay as their jobs, for a variety of reasons, disappear. In some areas, employers are struggling to find workers qualified for the jobs that are available.

SkillWorks is a serious attempt to address at least one aspect of this complex picture in a way that is beneficial to employers while keeping the best interests of the workers in mind.