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MASS. APPEALS: ADVICE FOR THE GOVERNOR | ROBERT J. HAYNES AND WILLIAM J. TINTI

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Rebuilding the Massachusetts workforce

By Robert J. Haynes and William J. Tinti | January 3, 2007

HOW'S THE LABOR market? How's the progress on your job search? How's that hiring process going?

If you ask most business executives or working people any of those questions, the answer would probably be "not good." The worker would tell you about how hard it is to find a job that pays a living wage, and the employer would talk about how difficult it is to find workers with the skills his business needs. Employers and workers alike know from hard personal experience exactly how much Massachusetts is struggling. Now, a new study has translated this anecdotal uneasiness into an alarming statistical portrait of our workforce challenge, a challenge that Governor-elect Deval Patrick and we, as a Commonwealth of workers and employers, must address in order to retain our competitive advantage.

According to "Mass Economy: The Labor Supply and Our Economic Future" by MassINC and the Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies, from 2003 to 2005 the state's labor force shrank by 1.7 percent even as the US workforce increased by 3.1 percent. Massachusetts is the only state to see its labor force shrink for three consecutive years. It gets worse. While the labor force participation of working-age men in all educational groups declined, the drop for men without high school diplomas was a disastrous 10.3 percentage points. And the rate for those without secondary education fell by 6.7 percentage points.

The result is our current labor market, where 171,500 workers are unemployed even as 74,000 jobs remain unfilled. How can Massachusetts compete while this sort of labor market disconnect persists? We can't. If we are to maintain our position as a leader in skilled industries, if we are to reinvigorate companies and workers, Massachusetts has to make a commitment to rebuilding our workforce.

Training workers is not an overnight process. But there are three things Governor-elect Patrick can do as soon as he takes office that will begin to fortify our workforce.

First, Patrick should, as part of his first budget, make the \$21 million Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund, established by the Legislature in last year's economic stimulus bill, the state's first-ever permanent job training line item. This fund would bring together groups of employers, community organizations, unions, career centers, and educational institutions to train workers to fill the good jobs that employers are desperately trying to staff. This is a proven strategy. In the past, the state has given short-term support to a number of such programs, and a funders' consortium called SkillWorks is currently supporting programs along this model that are training 2,000 workers to fill jobs in healthcare, hospitality, and a number of other critical industries. If we want a fighting chance to compete with states like Pennsylvania, which invested \$91 million in new training programs in 2005, and North Carolina, which spent \$64.5 million on biotechnology workforce training alone, as well as our global rivals, this investment is a necessity.

Second, the governor-elect should move quickly to fill the Workforce Accountability Task Force, also one of the Workforce Solutions Act provisions of the economic stimulus bill, and encourage it to bring real accountability and alignment to our fractured workforce system. As long as workforce funds flow in uncoordinated and sometimes unaccountable streams across 12 state agencies, it will remain too difficult for most employers and workers to access effective training programs.

Finally, Patrick should fulfill his vision, offered at a forum hosted by SkillWorks last June, to build the Commonwealth's capacity for the Adult Basic Education and English for Speakers of Other Languages to the point where everyone who wants to learn English or get a GED has that opportunity.

In addressing workforce development on the campaign trail, Patrick told the story of his mother striving toward the GED that would get her off of public assistance and into the economy. Today, Patrick assumes the leadership of a state where there are tens of thousands of people like Emily Patrick struggling to get the

education and training that are rungs to a better life and there are thousands of employers, big and small, that want -- and need -- to hire them.

As employers and workers, we know the way to a stronger economy, the way to more education, and the way to better wages. What we now have in Deval Patrick is a governor with the will.

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