

Jobs that remain vacant include those in health care, engineering, life and social sciences, community and social services, and sales — all positions that require education and training to be hired and remain successful.

ON THE ECONOMIC FRONT New bill aims to train workers for available jobs

William Tinti



The release of the most recent Massachusetts Department of Workforce Development job vacancy survey tells a mixed story about our economy and work force.

Simply stated, there is a skills gap and not enough education and training opportunities to prepare Massachusetts workers for the current and future job openings in our economy.

The fact that the number of job vacancies between June and December 2004 rose from 59,891 to 71,934 suggests that the economy is growing. In the Northeast region of Massachusetts, there are more than 10,345 job openings, giving us the highest job vacancy rate in the state.

But as has been recently reported, there are not enough skilled workers in Massachusetts and in the Northeast for businesses to grow and prosper.

Despite this period of modest job gains, we have a long uphill climb to create the 200,000 jobs lost since 2001. Today, we still have more than 158,000 people officially unemployed, with 27,006 residing in the northeast.

Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies recently reported that in addition to the official unemployed population, there were still 74,000 members of the labor force reserve who expressed a desire for immediate employment, even though they were not actively looking for work.

Combining these two groups with the 81,000 people considered underemployed, yields a total of 313,000 people in the state's underutilized labor pool during a typical month last year. This pool of underutilized workers, which excludes full-time employed low-wage workers, was equivalent to 9.4 percent of the state's adjusted resident labor force.

This is occurring at the same time that Massachusetts is losing population. Some 61,000 workers, most of them skilled, left the state between 2002 and 2003.

So with more than 300,000 underutilized or unemployed workers, 72,000 job vacancies would appear to be a great opportunity. But how does that bridge to opportunity get built?

A look at the occupations containing vacant positions points to the high-skill nature of the Massachusetts economy, particularly here in the northeast. Jobs that remain vacant include those in health care, engineering, life and social sciences, community and social services, and sales — all positions that require education and training to be hired and remain successful.

How do we respond? One major step was taken earlier this summer when the Massachusetts Legislature, at the behest of House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi and his leadership team developed a piece of legislation aimed at encouraging "economic investments to promote job creation, economic stability and competitiveness of the Massachusetts economy."

This bold and innovative bill will dramatically assist Massachusetts' workers, students and the unemployed or underemployed. It was drafted following a series of regional forums and aims to support local businesses by increasing the competitiveness of Massachusetts' companies and improving worker education, skills and employment options. If we want our economy to grow, our commonwealth to thrive, and families to prosper and remain in the Bay State, it is imperative that we invest in our workers.

This legislation is now being reviewed by the Massachusetts Senate. We are fortunate locally to have the leadership of Sen. Tom McGee, D-Lynn, who is spearheading its review and moving it quickly towards final passage.

The North Shore Workforce Board, a regional business, labor, educational and community partnership, applauds the House of Representatives and Senate for responding to this challenge in such a dramatic way. Its Workforce Solutions Group is advocating for an effective workforce development system that increases workers' skills, advances families to self-sufficiency and promotes job creation and economic growth.

This latest proposals making its way through the Legislature will allow for greater investment in workers, companies and families in our community and throughout the commonwealth, in a way that has not been done for several decades. Specifically the legislation includes:

- Funding for the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund to focus on worker skills in key industry growth sectors;
- Increased funding for Adult Basic Education and English for Speakers of Other Languages, with a goal of reducing the waiting lists of more than 25,000.
- Support for workplace-learning opportunities for in-school youth;
- Support for unemployed workers and job-seekers at one-stop career centers;
- A requirement that the commonwealth (without additional spending) maximize the use of the federal matching funds for employment and training programs for low-wage workers who receive food stamps;
- Establishment of clear lines of accountability and performance measures for the Massachusetts workforce development system through a Workforce Accountability Task Force;
- Investment in students who participate in programs that support careers in fields related to mathematics, science, technology, and engineering; and
- Providing higher education and technical training opportunities for dislocated workers in our communities.

When you look beyond the numbers and see the faces of families that are working two or more jobs or are out of work, you know that the Massachusetts Legislature is heading in the right direction for workers and businesses in the commonwealth.

William Tinti, a partner in the Salem law firm of Tinti, Quinn, Grover, and Frey, is chairman of the North Shore Workforce Investment Board.