

BUSINESS

Legislative action is just the tonic for jobs, skilled workers

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. There's 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 of 2004 rose from 59,891 to 71,934 suggests the economy is growing. But as has been recently reported, there are not enough skilled workers in Massachusetts 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. 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



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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 Massachusetts is losing population — 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?

One major step occurred in August, when the Massachusetts

Legislature, House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi, Chairmen Michael Rodrigues, Dan Bosley and David Torrisi and members of the three key committees developed legislation entitled, "Economic Investments to Promote Job Creation, Economic Stability and Competitiveness of the Massachusetts Economy."

This bold and innovative legislation, drafted following a series of regional forums, supports local businesses by increasing the competitiveness of Massachusetts' companies and improving worker education, skills and employment options. It will dramatically assist workers, students and the unemployed or underemployed.

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.

The Greater Lowell Workforce Investment Board — a regional business, labor, educational and community partnership — applauds the House of Representatives for responding to this challenge in such a dramatic way. The

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.

The proposals by the Legislature will invest 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;
- increasing funding for adult basic education and English for Speaker of Other Languages to reduce the waiting lists of more than 25,000;
- supporting workplace-learning opportunities for in-school youth.
- supporting unemployed workers and job seekers in one-stop career centers.
- requiring the commonwealth (at no additional cost to the state)

to maximize use of the federal matching funds for employment and training programs for low-wage workers who receive food stamps.

- developing clear lines of accountability and performance measures for the Massachusetts workforce development system through a Workforce Accountability Task Force.
- investing in students who participate in programs that support careers in fields related to mathematics, science, technology and engineering.
- providing higher education and technical training opportunities for dislocated workers in our communities.

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

Kevin E. Coughlin is the chairman of the Greater Lowell Workforce Investment Board and vice president of the Saints Memorial Medical Center Foundation.