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Black Caucus seeks job development

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The head of the state commerce department spotlighted the state's 4.6 percent unemployment rate at a hearing here Monday, but black state lawmakers were more focused on the 20 to 33 percent rates found in some largely black Chicago neighborhoods.

The hearing was called by the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus to look for means to ensure economic development and work force development dollars are going to communities that need them the most and that they are providing pathways to good-paying jobs.

In addressing the group, Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity Director Jack Lavin noted since January 2004 the state has added more than 166,000 jobs, more than any other state in the Midwest. He also pointed to programs including the state's critical skills shortage program, which focuses on ensuring workers are trained for jobs for which there is high demand; the challenge grant program, which has provided funds to 446 businesses in the state -- 180 of them in the Chicago metropolitan area and 30 percent of which went to African-American-owned businesses.

He said federal rules dictate how federal work force investment funds are distributed statewide and noted local work force investment boards oversee how those funds are allocated, although the state plays a monitoring role.

Chicago Urban League Policy and Research Director David E. Thigpen told legislators that as unemployment rates across the state have fallen, they refuse to budge in many African-American communities, where the unemployment rate for blacks averages about 12 percent, more than double that of whites, and ranges between 18 and 33 percent in communities including Austin, Robbins, North Lawndale and Washington Park.

He noted graduation rates, which in some communities lag the state average by 30 points, "are sending a steady stream of young people out in the communities with low skills and extremely bleak employment prospects."

Some 39 percent of the eligible population of African Americans in the state have, for one reason or another, given up looking for work, he noted.

The "myriad impediments faced by this population warrant special, focused attention and untraditional solutions," he said.

Robert Wordlaw, head of the Chicago Jobs Council, said there's a need for greater funding for bridge programs that enable job seekers to raise their basic skill levels and attain credentials that place them on career paths to high-demand jobs.

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