



Chicago Jobs Council warns of skills gap

Group seeking additional funding for job training

By Julie Jargon
September 28, 2005

The Chicago Jobs Council plans to seek extra state and city funding to help train workers to avoid what it sees is a growing skills gap within the city's labor market – a potential obstacle to luring new businesses to Chicago.

In a report released Wednesday entitled *Big Shoulders, Big Challenges: Preparing Chicago's Workforce for the New Economy*, the nonprofit Jobs Council said that while the city's diverse economy and rich labor pool make it a prime location for sustained economic growth and job creation, there are "several converging economic and social factors (that) will likely jeopardize Chicago's future ability to attract and retain businesses, if left unaddressed."

Among the problems is the fact that about 41% of Chicago's workforce consists of baby boomers who will be retiring in the next decade. Employers will need to secure new skilled workers. However, 46% of the city's youth are not completing high school. A large number of prisoners, many of whom lack sufficient work experience, will also be returning to Chicago communities. And an increasing number of job seekers have limited basic skills and English proficiency.

"We can't induce corporations to relocate here without some kind of labor force agreement. It's not enough to have new employers bring their employees with them; we want to create jobs for Chicagoans," says Jobs Council executive director Robert Wordlaw. "We're facing a growing skills gap and the reason for that is that so many jobs now require a high school diploma or GED and a number of them require some post-secondary education."

To ensure that Chicagoans are employable, the Jobs Council is hoping to offer more vocational training through a program currently offered by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. The Jobs Council is evaluating that program, which, with \$1.2 million in funding, is offered to a limited number of people. If the study, which will be released this fall, shows the program to be beneficial, the Council will seek to expand it. Mr. Wordlaw says his organization already is asking the state to spend an additional \$10 million on vocational training. The amount it will seek from the city has yet to be determined.

The Council will meet next week with government, business, civic and educational leaders to share its report. From there, Mr. Wordlaw hopes the groups can figure out how to encourage more young people to attend college and improve job training for seniors, people with disabilities and immigrants.

Chicago Jobs Council is a city-wide coalition of community-based organizations, civic groups and individual to ensure access to employment and career advancement opportunities for people in poverty.
