

Leaders: Stronger education in Rockford leads to better jobs

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Officials from Illinois Works for the Future were in town today to get input from community leaders on the challenges facing Rockford's work force and economic development.

They left with a range of views, from needing rail service to attracting a young, educated work force. But the point hammered home time and time again was the need for educated and trained workers — a familiar cry from local work force professionals.

“There's lots of clamoring for jobs, but what we need first isn't jobs but training,” said Steve Haight, president and chief executive officer of Careers Etc., a job search agency specializing in hard-to-place clients. “We need to educate our population. More jobs out of the chute isn't the long-term answer.”

Illinois Works for the Future is a campaign created by the Chicago Jobs Council, the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability and the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law to work with private and public partners statewide to integrate work force and economic development.

The community meeting held at the EIGERlab was the first of several such meetings scheduled around the state and are designed to help Illinois Works develop the year's legislative priorities.

The 60 attendees broke into small groups to discuss the area's challenges and assets from an economic and work force development angles. Mark Podemski, vice president at the Rockford Area Economic Development Council and a facilitator for the session, urged the attendees to think about developing jobs that not only would attract upper-level workers but also ones that would serve the entire population.

“If we don't think about jobs on the lower end, you can never have all the high-end jobs,” he said. “If you don't address both sides, you'll never address all these issues like crime and poverty that we're dealing with today.”

Rich Gocken, associate dean of engineering and technology at Rock Valley College, said many students are leaving the area's schools without a basic understanding of math and reading skills. Many of the college's offerings, therefore, have to be focused on bringing students up to par before they can move forward.

“So many high school students are totally unprepared for college,” he said.

Robert Wordlaw, executive director of the Chicago Jobs Council, said the results of all the community meetings would help Illinois Works for the Future in its advocacy efforts in Springfield.

“We need to have work force development leaders giving us good information. We need to have information from Rockford to properly represent Rockford,” he said.

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