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A new timeliness to job training

Study shows that skills will be in demand as big part of labor force marches into retirement

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There was a time when a volunteer job preparing meals at a Salvation Army shelter gave David Burbridge--himself homeless--a reason to get up every morning.

These days, he's up before 4 a.m. to commute to an automotive supplier on Chicago's South Side, where he recently landed a paying job with help from an employment program.

"I took it, grasped it and ran with it," the 49-year-old said of the program. "They opened that door for me and I just jumped in."

Chicago's future economic prosperity will depend in part on the success of programs such as The Employment Project that move more workers into the mainstream of a competitive global economy, a new study reports.

The study by the nonprofit Chicago Jobs Council, to be released Wednesday, is intended as a wake-up call to the fact that an estimated 41 percent of the area's labor force will reach retirement age over the next 15 years, fueling demand for new skilled workers. Yet an increasing number of job seekers have only limited basic skills.

The report is part of a broader awakening about the importance of workforce development in an era in which companies need better-educated workers to compete globally, business leaders said.

"If you had to look for the single least sexy and most complicated topic out there, this is it," said Paul O'Connor, executive director of economic development group World Business Chicago.

"But there has been a movement here of true believers for five or six years that have been doing the nuts-and-bolts work to identify where there's real demand for workers, which jobs have a future and what the barriers to them are.

"We need to develop skills across the whole spectrum," O'Connor added. "The hope is, we can beat the Chinese and the Indians at moving our lower-income citizens into the mainstream."

The report, funded by Bank One JPMorgan Chase and the Rockefeller Foundation, is the first comprehensive look in a decade at the area's workforce development programs, from basic adult education to vocational training and job readiness.

Collectively, such programs received \$282 million in federal, state and local funding last year. The city contributed about \$14 million, the largest amount based on per capita spending of any large U.S. city except Philadelphia, which spent more relative to its size, the report found.

Yet the study notes that little of the total government spending was allocated specifically to immigrants, refugees, senior citizens, veterans and the homeless, even though all those populations are expected to grow.

"While we know that more money is needed, even more important at this juncture is to sit down and make sure, through a coordinated planning effort, that we're getting the maximum out of our current investment," said Chicago Jobs Council Executive Director Robert Wordlaw.

Several of the report's recommendations stress the need to coordinate job training with economic development.

One of the area's success stories is a job training program that city officials developed in conjunction with Ford Motor Co.'s recent makeover of its Torrence Avenue plant on the South Side, Wordlaw and others said.

The program placed more than 1,200 workers at the Chicago Manufacturing Campus, a supplier park where Burbridge works.

The Mayor's Office of Workforce Development contracted with City Colleges of Chicago and community-based organizations to screen and train workers.

"No longer is our mission just to place low-income individuals into jobs," said Mayor's Office of Workforce Development Commissioner David Hanson. "Our job now is to ensure those are good jobs, and that we can work with other entities--business, government and community organizations--to make sure we're keeping and attracting businesses that have good jobs to offer."

His office is making an effort to gear services toward employers, not just workers, he added. "We're listening to what businesses tell us they need today and especially what they're going to need tomorrow."

Among the specific programs the report recommends for expansion is TIF Works, which allows tax-increment financing to be used to prepare workers for jobs in the city's 43 TIF districts. City officials have given priority mainly to manufacturing companies.

The report suggests targeting other high-growth industries, from health care to logistics, while allowing TIF money to be used to support training development with small businesses.

"This (report) fuels that conversation among business and government about the role we must all play in preparing the workforce of tomorrow," said Gerald Roper, president and chief executive officer of the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce.

He said the chamber would encourage members to help implement some of the report's recommendations.

Burbridge, the formerly homeless worker, said The Employment Project, which is part of nonprofit Inspiration Corp., helped him turn his life around after he lost his job and home three years ago because of drug and alcohol abuse.

The program taught him computer skills, helped him apply for jobs and provided clothes and transportation to interviews. It took him more than two years to land a permanent full-time job.

Now he works at Facil LLC near the Ford plant, where he inspects shipments of screws, nuts and other fasteners.

The high school graduate earns \$30,000 annually, allowing him to rent a room in Wrigleyville while saving for a car and an apartment. On Sunday evenings, he volunteers at a downtown church serving meals to the homeless.

His next step? "I want to get an apartment and get settled," he said. "Then I'm thinking about going back to school" to get a better job.
