



THE KEY TO PROSPERITY: THE SKILLS OF THE AMERICAN WORKER

Labor Day celebrates the American worker upon whom our nation builds its prosperity. In boom times, the American workforce and the economy it fueled were the envy of the world and helped drive a thriving global economy as well. But the current unemployment rate of 9.6 percent sums up two key facts about the economic recovery. Obviously, it means that millions of Americans still cannot support themselves and their families. It also shows how much we are squandering the potential to generate future prosperity.

Workers, businesspeople, and politicians have a common goal: getting more people into productive work as fast as possible. While that's important, the same strategies that will put millions to work quickly can also lay a foundation for a sustainable thriving economy. And in communities across the nation, a wide variety of innovative new projects show the way forward.

In Detroit, a city struggling even before the deep recession, the Southwest Detroit Consortium for Green Jobs and the Henry Ford Community College are creating pathways to "green careers." Over the next two years, the project will train 360 high school dropouts, veterans, and individuals with a criminal record for jobs in green construction, retrofitting, energy efficiency, renewable energy technologies, and a variety of other green-related fields.

Detroit teaches us that even during the downturn, some industries will be key to our future prosperity and appear ready to grow rapidly.

Detroit is also one of a number of cities "targeting" other growth industries as part of the **National Fund for Workforce Solutions**. The National Fund's initiatives in 23 cities and states are putting the unemployed back to work.

Another growth industry is health care, with job growth projected to continue due to an aging population and the implementation of health care reform. And key to meeting the need for skilled workers will be upgrading the skills of the nation's nearly six million frontline health care workers, who have critical responsibilities in delivering the nation's direct care and public health services.

This is happening now in places like southeastern Massachusetts where Stanley Street Treatment and Resources (SSTAR), an addictions treatment and counseling center, teamed up with Bristol Community College to advance frontline workers' education and provide better care for patients. The program trained 51 SSTAR receptionists, administrative assistants, and other staff in new skills, with 20 becoming certified addictions counselors. Employees upgraded their skills and received pay raises and credentials. The partnership

designed a curriculum that offers training at the center rather than at the college, easing time and travel issues for students. Having more certified counselors on staff has enabled SSTAR to receive higher health care reimbursements from the state. SSTAR is now more stable financially, resulting in better care, a healthier community, and more family-sustaining jobs.

SSTAR is one of 17 **Jobs to Careers** projects across the country that is enhancing career advancement for frontline health care workers. Such partnerships not only benefit frontline health care workers and their families, but they also help employers retain a talented and driven workforce.

Health care is also a growing industry in Arkansas—and one community college is helping low-literacy adults access these jobs. Southeast Arkansas College has launched a Fast Track program to help these students move through developmental education and into college-level courses that lead to health care jobs. So far, 96 percent of participants have completed the program. This effort is part of the national **Breaking Through** initiative, focused on getting low-literacy adults into and through college.

Target the right industries. Build on the roles of community colleges in workforce development. Include workers with few marketable skills. These are the key ingredients for prosperity.

The workers in Michigan, Massachusetts, and Arkansas are all eager to succeed in careers that will enable them to support their families and secure their futures. These cutting-edge programs demonstrate innovative ways that—despite the economy—the public and private sectors can find solutions and get people to work. While numbers they reach may be small compared to the millions of unemployed and underemployed Americans, initiatives such as these need to be supported nationally and in every state to unlock the potential of the American workforce.