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New Study Pushes Better Job Training

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Cooperation between agencies would lead to better training of low-income workers and welfare participants for higher-paying jobs, according to a study by the Wisconsin Council on Children & Families and the Bay Area Workforce Development Board.

The Bay Area Task Force on Low-Wage Work determined that Northeastern Wisconsin agencies are doing a lot that is effective and could be a model for improved training statewide.

"There's no single magic bullet to improving outcomes for W-2 participants or other low-skilled workers or the unemployed," said John Keckhaver, author of the report and analyst for the council. "However, there are several positive steps that the Bay Area Task Force identified -- based on evidence-based research -- that could be taken by key work force development partners."

Jim Golembeski, executive director of the Bay Area Workforce Development Board, said organizations need to work together, pooling funding and other resources, to provide training for higher-skill, higher-income jobs.

He said welfare reform that led to formation of the W-2 program succeeded in changing behaviors -- a lot fewer people applied for welfare -- but it didn't improve education or job training.

"We got a lot of people off the roles. We didn't get them out of poverty," he said.

Bay Area Workforce Development has worked closely with Forward Service Corp., the W-2 administrator in 10 counties, to provide more effective programs.

"This is an unusual partnership. It isn't happening around the rest of the state," said Charity Eleson, executive director of the Council on Children and Families.

Golembeski said employers' needs have changed significantly since the late 1990s, when a worker shortage mitigated the shortcomings of W-2. There is a growing worker shortage in the state now, but not for poorly trained, poorly educated workers.

"There is a class of people who are working very hard, Sometimes they are working two or more jobs and they can't afford the necessities. That is a shame, especially when there are jobs out there that will pay well," Golembeski said.

As an example, Golembeski said, companies such as The Manitowoc Co. have a growing need for \$16-an-hour welders. Agencies were able to compress the initial training program to 10 weeks, with 10 more weeks coming on the job. The challenge was making it possible for low-income workers to receive 10 weeks of full-time training.

"The question was how can we invest in people for 10 weeks so they can get that training?" he said.

By working together, the agencies were able to train workers for The Manitowoc Co. and are developing a similar program in Door County.

The next step in the process is to implement recommendations, here and in other regions.

"Because the economy is constantly evolving, a program such as W-2 needs to change with it and be well connected to the economic and education factors that are driving it," Golembeski said.

Better training

"Toward a Better Design: New-Economy Challenges Require a Better W-2 Program in the Bay Area "includes 14 recommendations for improving cooperation between worker-training agencies.

The full report is available at www.wccf.org/pdf/towardbetterdesign_bayareaproj.pdf.