

The Rhode Island Workforce Alliance

Advocating for a skilled, productive and prosperous workforce

Investing in Rhode Island's Workforce for 21st Century Jobs

A skilled workforce is key to Rhode Island's economic recovery and future competitiveness. Workers must have some level of post-secondary education or training to fill the middle-skill occupations that comprise the majority of Rhode Island's jobs. A vibrant workforce training system is responsive to employer needs and ensures that workers have opportunities to enhance their skills.

Rhode Island's system supports basic workforce skills training (literacy, English language skills and GED attainment), gaining industry-approved credentials, and worker training that employers identify as necessary to their competitiveness. In addition to federal funds for workforce development that flow to the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) and the Department of Labor and Training (DLT), the system is supported by some general revenue and the Job Development Fund (JDF) funded by employers.

In FY12, resources for workforce development were reduced by \$2.3 million (19 percent of total funds) when this amount of general revenue was withdrawn from RIDE's budget. While the General Assembly directed that JDF funds replace this revenue to fund basic workforce skills training, this significantly decreased resources for other important workforce development services including incumbent worker training, industry-based training and job skills for youth.

To strengthen Rhode Island's workforce for 21st Century jobs:

- Support the restoration of \$2M of general revenue to RIDE for basic workforce skills training, as proposed in the Governor's FY13 budget.
- Support **H7642 (Ferri)** and **S2621 (Pichardo)**, appropriating \$2M in general revenue to the Governor's Workforce Board to supplement the Job Development Fund.

Rhode Island needs to close the skills gap. To increase its economic competitiveness, Rhode Island needs more workers with higher skills. Close to half of the jobs in Rhode Island (48 percent) are in middle-skill occupations (those that require more than a high school, but less than a four-year degree). But only 37 percent of Rhode Island's workforce has the skills to fill these jobs. Middle-skill jobs pay well, cannot be outsourced, and exist in many sectors including health care, construction, information technology, advanced manufacturing and marine trades.

Increasing the income of Rhode Islanders through workforce training benefits workers and boosts the state's economy. Approximately 86,000 working-age Rhode Islanders do not have a high school diploma, and 36,000 adults at all education levels lack English proficiency. Adults who earn a GED have earnings that are 44 percent higher than those without a high school diploma (\$28,854 vs. \$20,035). Adults who obtain an associate's degree earn almost 70 percent more than those without a high school diploma (\$33,739 vs. \$20,035). As workers' earnings improve, tax revenues increase, and workers' need for public benefits decreases. Workers with higher education are also better protected from unemployment. In 2010 the unemployment rate for workers who lacked a high school diploma was double that of people with an associate's degree (14.9 percent vs. 7 percent).

New state investments in workforce training are vital for employers and workers alike. The Job Development Fund supports grants to employers to increase the skills and productivity of their workforce. In FY2011, 58 companies that qualified for these employer-matched grants were unable to be funded because of insufficient JDF funds. Community-based agencies provide basic workforce skills training to over 6,000 Rhode Islanders, 35 percent of whom are working. There is a current waiting list, however, of at least 539 people for the "adult education" services offered by these providers. Cuts in federal funding for workforce development further threaten the capacity of Rhode Island's system to meet worker and employer needs.

The Rhode Island Workforce Alliance is facilitated by The Economic Progress Institute (formerly The Poverty Institute).

For more information contact Judy Jones, 401-847-0307 or judykjones@cox.net

Industry Partners: Linking Employers with Skilled Workers



Jessica: Many years ago, Jessica attended Boston University but was unable to graduate due to financial hardships. She worked at a good company where she started as a bagger and was eventually promoted to store supervisor. In 2010, after working for fourteen years at the company, she was laid off when the store closed. In 2011, Jessica enrolled in the Stepping Up Health Care Career Exploration Program at Connecting for Children and Families in Woonsocket which included an internship at Homefront Health Care. At the end of the program, Jessica was hired by the agency as a Medicare billing specialist. ***“Many of us in the program had travelled bumpy roads in life. The program helped me learn about different jobs in the health care field and which path I wanted to take in my life.”***

Stepping Up is a health care career ladder program that provides seven weeks of career exploration classes and a five week internship in an entry level position at a health care facility and connects participants to jobs. A partnership among the UNAP/Rhode Island Hospital Health Care Education Trust and Women and Infants’ Hospital, Rhode Island-based hospitals and health care organizations, education and training providers, and labor unions, Stepping Up is one of a number of industry partners supported by the Governor’s Workforce Board. Like Stepping Up, industry partners bring together a variety of stakeholders to collaborate on strategies to reduce and eliminate identifiable skill gaps in high-growth, high-wage areas including IT, bioscience, defense, marine technologies, construction, hospitality tourism and health care.

Career Pathways Begin with Basic Skills Training

Mariuxi: In 1999, Mariuxi came to the United States from Ecuador with her oldest daughter because she wanted a better life for herself and a better education for her daughter. Her first job in 2000 was working as an assembler in a jewelry factory. She started taking English classes in 2003 because she wanted to obtain her citizenship and get a better job. After taking English language and citizenship preparation classes, Mariuxi became a citizen in 2005. She went to work in a nursing home as a way to work toward her career goal of becoming a nurse. Mariuxi says, ***“I am so thankful for the English classes I have been able to take because they have helped me to increase my involvement in my daughters’ schools as well as obtain better jobs over the course of the last 10 years.*** When I first came here, I could not speak with my daughters’ teachers and they had to act as my translators. I also could not communicate very well with my supervisors. I am proud to say that I no longer need my daughters to act as translators, and I am currently working in a school and can communicate in English without any problems with my co-workers and my supervisors. Now that my oldest daughter has been accepted into the University of Rhode Island, I plan to return to my own education and am looking forward to starting a GED course in the fall.” Mariuxi currently attends adult education classes sponsored by the Rhode Island Family Literacy Initiative at the Weaver Library in East Providence.

