

QUEST News and Highlights

Jobs Going Begging in Some Fields

By Sheila Maguire
Special to CNN

NEW YORK (CNN) -- As President-elect Barack Obama plans for his administration, the economy tops his list of priorities. The Dow has been down, unemployment rates are soaring, and companies announce more layoffs each week.

It may come as a surprise, then, that some employers are desperately searching for workers with the right skills.

Hospitals looking for X-ray technicians, manufacturers looking for machinists, and energy suppliers looking for people to service rigs and keep them safe are all facing real worker shortages.

These jobs require specific technical skills that can only be gained through focused training that is closely linked to the needs of local businesses. In fact, the largest portion of jobs in our labor market (nearly half) require some kind of technical training beyond a high school diploma, and these "middle-skill" jobs are experiencing the greatest shortages of skilled workers.

Over the past decade an innovative approach to workforce development, known as sectoral employment, has created industry-specific training programs that prepare and connect unemployed and under-skilled workers to employers desperate to fill skilled vacancies.

P/PV's report, Targeting Industries, Training Workers, Improving Opportunities, documents the efforts of several community-based organizations pursuing this approach, and the results have been impressive: Program participants' hourly wages increased by \$2 -- for advanced training participants, \$3 -- over their earnings in the previous two years, moving many families out of poverty.

Take Lina Rosales, for example. Rosales, a single mother, came to **Project QUEST**, a sectoral program in San Antonio, Texas, where she was able to choose from among a range of

professions identified by local health care employers as in demand: medical laboratory technician, medical transcriptionist, radiography technologist, and registered nurse, to name but a few.

Rosales chose registered nurse and, with the help of **Project QUEST**, has graduated from San Antonio College RN program and is now earning \$22 an hour at a local hospital. Not only are Rosales and her son better off, but she is filling a critical need in our healthcare system, a sector where skills shortages are acute.

Similar efforts in other sectors -- involving employers, community groups, community colleges, and the public workforce system -- are gaining momentum in some states and cities around the country. With benefits for both businesses and workers, sectoral programs have great potential to be a part of the solution as we rebuild America's economy.

But it won't happen unless policymakers make sectoral employment a priority. Organizations using the sectoral approach have faced challenges -- ones that we are uniquely positioned to solve right now.

First, it has been difficult to find people, many of whom had worked for years in low-wage jobs, who could support themselves and their families while they participated in longer-term training programs. Our current financial and economic crisis seems to have solved that one by putting many Americans out of work: Let's take advantage of it.

Second, it is hard for sector programs to work with public systems developed for the high employment days of the '90s, which provide short-term resume and interview prep and focus on immediate job placement, not training. Let's revamp these systems so that we invest our scarce public workforce resources in the skills our economy needs.

Third, sector programs have had difficulty finding people with the math and English skills necessary to master technical skills quickly. This is perhaps the trickiest challenge.

As soon as we talk about basic literacy skills, the conversation turns to K-12 education, and while improving our schools is critical, with 60 percent of the 2020 workforce already working (or temporarily and suddenly unemployed), our efforts can't be limited to primary and secondary schools: We also need immediate and targeted investments in basic education for lower-skilled working adults.

If one of the fundamentals of the economy is America's

workers, we need to invest in them, something that we have failed to do over the past two decades. If we don't, we will all feel it as we try to get cars, trucks and elevators repaired; build and operate new alternative energy plants; and wait to have tests run at our hospitals.

Sens. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, and Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, have taken the lead by introducing legislation that would fund sector-based partnerships that train workers for emerging and understaffed industries. Americans should urge their senators to support this bill.

In addition, the Obama administration should look to the Skills2Compete campaign, which is advocating for strategic investments in workers' skills. The experience of sectoral employment programs can -- and should -- help shape that investment.