

Jobs study: Invest in immigrant work force

01:00 AM EST on Monday, December 24, 2007

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PROVIDENCE — The gap between the haves and have-nots in Rhode Island has widened in recent years and the bulk of new jobs in the years to come will be “low-wage, low-skill service-sector occupations,” such as food service industry workers.

The troubling outlook for the state’s job market was summarized in a 16-page report from The Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College released last week called “State of Working Rhode Island 2007.”

The report points out that the state’s labor force of 578,000 is more diverse, older and better educated than it was two decades ago. Census data shows that, contrary to popular belief, there is no evidence of a “brain drain” of new college graduates leaving the state. Still, the report says that the state’s “changing job market” calls for a need to invest more time and money into its growing immigrant work force.

Although the state population is better educated, about 13 percent of the labor force never graduated from high school and 41 percent of the state’s adults never attended college.

A major problem facing Rhode Island is the loss of manufacturing jobs. Between 1990 and 2006, 42,000 manufacturing jobs disappeared, the sharpest decline of any state in the nation, the report says.

Those jobs were replaced by the growth of jobs in construction, finance, health, education, hospitality and other service industries.

“The Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training projects that the fastest-growing jobs over the next decade will require a college degree or other specialized training, while the bulk of annual openings will be in lower-skill direct service jobs that require fluent English,” the report states.

The report says that Hispanic workers are the fastest growing segment of the labor force, having increased their share of the work force six-fold over the past 20 years. It emphasizes that new arrivals from Spanish-speaking countries must learn English if they want to land better paying jobs.

“Lack of fluency in English among Hispanics severely depresses the earnings potential of this growing population and contributes to relatively high poverty rates in the Latino community,” the report says.

The report says that it's essential for the state to offer more opportunities for native and foreign-born residents to earn high school diplomas, including education programs that meet at night.

A troubling trend in the report shows that, since 2000, Rhode Island is the only New England state to experience a decline in median wage. About one-fifth of all jobs in the state pay less than \$20,000 annually, the federal poverty level for a family of four in 2006. Wage increases for the top 10 percent of workers exceeded national averages, while wage increases among the bottom rung have been modest.

Further troubling is the fact that Rhode Island's unemployment rate, 5.2 percent or 28,000 people, has exceeded the national average and has been higher than in the neighboring states of Massachusetts and Connecticut.

Among the unemployed, Hispanics and African-Americans suffer from lack of work at nearly twice the rate of whites. During the years 2000 to 2005, the percentage of Rhode Islanders without health insurance jumped from 6.9 percent to 13.3 percent. Today, the report says, there are more than 119,000 state residents under the age of 65 without health insurance.

“As the report shows, Rhode Island is a relatively low-wage state and an increasing number of workers no longer have access to health insurance on the job,” said Kate Brewster, executive director of the Poverty Institute. “Until workers are able to earn sufficient wages to support their families and we come to a consensus on how to get to universal health care, Rhode Island must continue to provide Rite Care and subsidized child care to protect working families from falling further behind.”

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