

# Testimony to House Commerce and Economic Development

Hugh Bradshaw-Employment Services Manager-VocRehab Vermont

## **MIDDLE SKILLS GAP**

Many Vermont employers with middle-skills jobs are having difficulty filling them. Middle skills jobs are those that require less than a Bachelor's degree, but more than a high school diploma. These jobs often require industry-recognized credentials and/or certifications, or a 2-year Associate's degree. Much of Vermont's available labor pool is made up of individuals who face barriers to employment and who often have low skills, limited education, and little or no work history. Vermont does not have the benefit of in-migration of workers, many young people leave the state for more urban centers, and our overall workforce is the second oldest in the nation. For this reason, it is imperative that the Vermont workforce system develops education and training partnerships that offer individuals the opportunity to build skills and become more competitive in the labor market.

## **ADDRESSING THE SKILLS GAP**

### ***Career Pipelines***

Identifying sectors of the economy where there is growing demand for middle skills jobs and building "pipelines" into those sectors should be a priority for the workforce system. Creating these "bridges" to higher-wage jobs will not only benefit Vermont businesses, but will also help lift individuals out of poverty and into sustainable careers, thus reducing the strain on public benefits.

The key to building these pipelines is understanding that there is no "one size fits all" approach that will work for everyone. Establishing multiple "on-ramps" to education and training based on where a person is at will be critical to the success of establishing these pipelines. For some individuals, remedial math and English courses may be needed to prepare a person to successfully complete industry certification or credentials, so having those resources (in this case, adult education through Vermont Adult Learning and others) will be vital to success for those individuals.

### ***Progressive Employment***

VocRehab Vermont, through the Creative Workforce Solutions initiative in the Agency of Human Services, has been very successful introducing candidates to businesses in "no-risk" "low-risk" options such as internships, work experiences, job shadows and other strategies. We know that employers have fears about hiring certain individuals, and Progressive Employment offers them a way to meet and assess a candidate without making a commitment to hire. We have found this model works very well for individuals who would otherwise struggle to even be considered for a position. Progressive Employment has shown to be an effective strategy for

individuals with disabilities, including youth, for ex-offenders exiting the correctional system, for New Americans who may have cultural and/or language barriers, for ReachUp participants and for individuals who have spotty work histories.

### ***Local Labor Markets***

Another important consideration in building these career pipelines is understanding that the labor market varies in communities across the state, as does the available educational and training resources available in each labor market. For this reason, a demand-driven approach, where business is the end-user, is the critical first step to developing appropriate, effective training programs.

### ***Business as Part of the Solution***

Training and certification is important to build skills, but hands-on application of those skills is just as important. Training programs that include business as a pivotal partner are highly successful. Business can inform the content and delivery of training programs, ensuring that what is being learned in the classroom is relevant and applicable in their workplace(s). As the “end user”, business can also help in the delivery of training, including offering paid internships to participants so that they can hone the skills learned in the classroom in real-world environments.

## **ADULT TECHNICAL EDUCATION**

Vermont Technical College, the Community College of Vermont and local Technical Education programs offer a range of certifications and credentials to Vermonters looking to become more competitive in the labor market. The more these systems are built around the needs of the business community, the more effective they will be. Funding can often be a barrier to implementing demand-driven models. The state should be considering ways to increase access to industry recognized credentials and certifications by addressing some of the inherent funding issues faced by the various delivery systems.

## **CAREERS VERSUS JOBS**

When a person remains in the low-skill segment of the employment world, they tend to rely more on public benefits and often cycle from one entry-level job to the next, without improving their skills or financial stability. By investing in an individual’s skills, and connecting them to employers offering higher wages and better benefits, we can move many Vermonters away from the cycle of poverty and toward self-sufficiency for themselves and their families.

There has been much talk about addressing the benefits cliff and ensuring individuals have a “soft landing” into employment. While this is admirable, we believe one of the most effective ways to address the benefits cliff is to invest in training programs that up-skill workers into jobs that pay a livable wage and that offer opportunities for career advancement. Livable wage

employment can often be the key to breaking cycles of benefits dependence, generational poverty, Corrections involvement, and other challenges facing Vermonters.

### **WHY NOW?**

Vermont is at a critical juncture when it comes to workforce development. Unless we find ways to “up-skill” workers to meet the needs of the business community, we will be faced with the very real threat of an economic downturn due to businesses not being able to expand or take on new business, or even worse, leaving the state to go where the labor is skilled and available. Quite simply, Vermont cannot overlook any segment of our working population, including the individuals with disabilities we serve in VocRehab Vermont every day, mature workers who are interested in supplementing retirement, and young adults who are not going on to college and who need to start their careers here in Vermont.