



opportunityreturns

Creating more jobs for today and tomorrow

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

Rod R. Blagojevich – Governor

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 18, 2004

news

CONTACTS:

Cheryle Jackson	312/814.3158 (office)
Angelynne Amores	312/636.6148 (cell)
Abby Ottenhoff	312/814.3158 (office)
Rebecca Rausch	217/782.7355 (office)
Andrew Ross	312/814.7168 (Opp. Returns)

GOVERNOR ANNOUNCES CRITICAL PLANNING GRANT TO STRENGTHEN WORKER SKILLS IN THE SOUTHWEST REGION

SPRINGFIELD - Governor Rod Blagojevich today announced the awarding of an *Opportunity Returns* planning grant as a part of a program designed to arm workers with new skills and prepare them to fill jobs in industries facing critical shortages in skilled labor. Madison County will receive **\$172,000** under the Critical Skills Shortage Initiative (CSSI). The Critical Skills Shortage Initiative is a vital component of the Governor's *Opportunity Returns* plan for the Southwest region: to build a more dynamic and highly skilled workforce by strengthening education and job training. The Southwest region is comprised of nine counties and includes three workforce investment boards that are partnering together in this initiative: the Mid America Workforce Investment Board, the Madison Bond Workforce Investment Board, and the West Central Job Center Board.

"The Critical Skills Initiative is taking aim at one of the most pressing challenges of the new economy: matching the skills of the workforce with the needs of the workplace. The Southwest region is home to burgeoning businesses that are more technologically advanced than ever before. By first identifying the critical set of skills that those businesses will demand, and then teaching our workers to be fluent in those new skills, we can help place more workers in well-paying jobs and meet the highly-customized needs of business. The bottom line is one we all want to see: thriving businesses and a more robust regional economy," Governor Blagojevich said.

Through a group of local stakeholders, which includes the private sector-led Local Workforce Investment Boards, other area employers, economic development professionals, educators and service providers, the *Opportunity Returns* planning grant will be used to identify industry sectors, and specific occupations within those sectors, where there are current or projected shortages of skilled workers. Once these industries and occupations have been selected, the group will work to determine the root causes of these skill shortages and then develop regional solutions to address them.

The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) is administering the Critical Skills Shortage Initiative (CSSI). A second component of CSSI is a training phase, where DCEO will competitively award \$15 million over two years in federal Workforce Investment Act funds to help bridge the gap in training services available to fill these occupations. In addition, DCEO administers other workforce programs that might help in fulfilling regional solutions, including the Employer Training Investment Program, the Eliminate the Digital Divide Program, the Job Training for Economic Development Program and a School-to-Work Program.

(more)

“The Governor understands that for workforce development to be a true catalyst of economic growth, the training programs offered today must be more in tune with the needs of business and do a better job of acting as a comprehensive support network to help them reach their goals. The Critical Skills Initiative is acting as a model for how workforce development in the 21st century should function by identifying gaps in the labor market and providing a pipeline of specially skilled workers to fill those gaps and help businesses thrive,” DCEO Director Jack Lavin said.

In order to create more high-paying jobs and help businesses grow throughout the state, Governor Blagojevich believes that workforce development must be better linked with economic development. To meet this crucial goal, the Governor has consolidated several workforce programs into DCEO, the state’s economic development agency.

The *Opportunity Returns* regional economic development plan is the most aggressive, comprehensive approach to creating jobs in Illinois’ history. Since a one-size-fits-all approach to economic development just doesn’t work, the Governor has divided the state into 10 regions – finding areas with common economic strengths and needs, and developing a plan with specific actions for each region. This grassroots effort for the Southwest region was the product of significant outreach over several months with business, civic and labor leaders, and elected officials. The more than 50 specific projects that the Governor announced in December for Southwestern Illinois are designed to be flexible and effective. This plan is tailored to deliver real results that local businesses will see, feel, and, hopefully, profit from.

Interview will be available at www.state.il.us/iisradio/ori.htm

#####