



# opportunityreturns

Creating more jobs for today and tomorrow

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

Rod R. Blagojevich – Governor

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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news

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## GOVERNOR ANNOUNCES IMPORTANT *OPPORTUNITY RETURNS* GRANT TO STRENGTHEN WORKER SKILLS IN EAST CENTRAL 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. Danville Area Community College will receive **\$158,000** under the Critical Skills Shortage Initiative (CSSI). The Critical Skills Shortage Initiative will be a vital component of the Governor's *Opportunity Returns* plan for the East Central region: to build a more dynamic and highly skilled workforce by strengthening education and job training. The region is comprised of six counties and includes three workforce investment boards that are partnering together in this initiative: the Vermilion County Workforce Investment Board, the East Central Illinois Workforce Investment Board, and the Crossroads Investment Board (Douglas County). The Governor's pro-active, comprehensive plan will be unveiled shortly to promote economic growth and create more jobs throughout the region.

“*Opportunity Returns* represents a new approach to economic development because it recognizes that the Illinois economy is really a collection of regional economies, each with unique strengths and needs, and responds by delivering state services on a regional basis. The Critical Skills Initiative is a great illustration of this concept at work because it identifies the particular needs and opportunities of the local labor market, and responds by giving workers the tools they need to capitalize on those opportunities. The net result will be a regional workforce with better, more secure jobs, and a business community poised to grow and prosper in the new 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 Governor’s Critical Skills Shortage Initiative is an invaluable tool in making sure we are training people for jobs that actually exist throughout our region. This strategic investment will pay important economic dividends for years to come,” said State Representative Bill Black (R-Danville).

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.

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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.

“The Critical Skills Initiative is a great example of how the Governor is changing the way workforce development functions in our state by making it more highly in tune with the needs of business and more farsighted and pro-active for today’s workers seeking high-quality jobs. By aligning workforce development with economic development, the hard work and enterprising spirit of East Central residents is being unleashed to act as a real force of growth for the region,” 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 is a product of significant outreach over several months with business, civic and labor leaders, and elected officials. *Opportunity Returns* contains tangible actions to make each region more accessible, more marketable, more entrepreneurial and more attractive to business.

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