



# opportunityreturns

Creating more jobs for today and tomorrow

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

Rod R. Blagojevich – Governor

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 11, 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 WEST 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. The Workforce Investment Board of Western Illinois will receive **\$170,000** 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 West Central region: to build a more dynamic and highly skilled workforce by strengthening education and job training.

"As we look to create better opportunities and build a more vibrant and diverse economy in the West Central region, we need to not only tackle the challenges of today, but prepare for those of tomorrow as well. It is paramount that the skills of the workforce match the needs of the workplace. The Critical Skills Shortage Initiative is designed to do just that. As new businesses emerge in the region, and jobs are created, this program is preparing workers with the critical set of skills to meet the needs of business and strengthen the economy," Governor Blagojevich said.

Through a group of local stakeholders, which includes the private sector-led Local Workforce Investment Board, 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 Workforce Investment Board of Western Illinois includes Adams, Brown, Hancock, Henderson, Knox, McDonough, Pike, Schuyler, and Warren Counties.

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.

"The Critical Skills Shortage Initiative is using an innovative method to build a more dynamic workforce in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While many job-training models tend to be reactionary, training workers for immediate job openings in positions with little opportunity for advancement, the Governor's new program uses a

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proactive, visionary approach to workforce development. By bringing a diverse group of area professionals together for detailed planning sessions and calling upon their expertise, we are able to target specific employment industries where there is a real demand for skilled labor, and then arm the regional workforce with the skills they'll need to thrive in those jobs now and in the future," 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.

Governor Blagojevich's *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 throughout each region, with business, civic and labor leaders, and elected officials. The 45 specific projects that the Governor announced in January for the West Central region are designed to be flexible and effective. Each 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](http://www.state.il.us/iisradio/ori.htm)

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