



opportunityreturns

Creating more jobs for today and tomorrow

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
Rod R. Blagojevich – Governor

news

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GOVERNOR ANNOUNCES IMPORTANT FUNDING FOR PLANNING GRANT TO STRENGTHEN WORKER SKILLS IN THE NORTHWEST 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. Rock Island County will receive **\$180,000** under the Critical Skills Shortage Initiative (CSSI). The Critical Skills Shortage Initiative is a vital component in the Governor's *Opportunity Returns* plan for the Northwest region: to build a more dynamic and highly skilled workforce by strengthening education and job training. The Northwest region is comprised of ten counties and three different workforce investment boards: the Northwest Illinois Workforce Investment Board (4), the North Central Illinois Works (12), and the Workforce Investment Board of Rock Island, Henry and Mercer Counties (13).

"As we strive to prepare our workforce to excel in a rapidly changing 21st century job economy, we need to adopt training methods that are pro-active instead of reactive. This *Opportunity Returns* grant is vital to this effort because it brings a cross section of the most knowledgeable and experienced professionals together, from business, labor, and education, to discuss the landscape of the regional labor market, identify industries with gaps in skilled labor, and set a course to train workers with a special set of skills to fill those gaps. This will allow the workforce of a today and tomorrow to act as a real force of growth for the 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.

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“The Critical Skills Initiative is successfully promoting economic growth in the Northwest region because it helps address the needs of the region’s businesses while creating real opportunities for area workers. Through this planning grant and the subsequent skills training, we are helping ensure that skilled workers can go into professions where there is a demand for their services, and that business can rely on a pipeline of qualified workers to help them meet their customer demand today and in the future,” said DCEO Director Jack Lavin.

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 Northwest region was the product of significant outreach over several months with business, civic and labor leaders, and elected officials. The more than 30 projects that the Governor announced last October for Northwestern 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

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