



opportunityreturns

Creating more jobs for today and tomorrow

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

Rod R. Blagojevich – Governor

news

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GOVERNOR ANNOUNCES INNOVATIVE *OPPORTUNITY RETURNS* GRANT TO STRENGTHEN WORKER SKILLS IN THE SOUTHEAST REGION

SPRINGFIELD - Governor Rod Blagojevich today announced that he is awarding a **\$170,000** *Opportunity Returns* planning grant to the Southeast region as part of a program designed to prepare workers with the training necessary to fill jobs in industries facing critical shortages in skilled labor. This grant will be a part of his *Opportunity Returns* program for Southeastern Illinois – the Governor’s pro-active, comprehensive plan that will be unveiled shortly to promote economic growth and create more jobs throughout the region.

Lake Land College in Mattoon will receive **\$170,000** under the Critical Skills Shortage Initiative (CSSI). CSSI is a vital component of the Governor’s statewide plan to build a more dynamic and highly skilled workforce by strengthening education and job training. This grant will benefit all 13 counties in the Southeast region, which includes Clark, Clay, Coles, Crawford, Cumberland, Edgar, Effingham, Fayette, Jasper, Lawrence, Marion, Moultrie and Richland. The Crossroads Workforce Investment Board, which represents the entire region, is playing a key role in this initiative.

“Good companies and talented workers are found throughout the Southeast region,” said Governor Blagojevich. “But sometimes the needs of companies and the talents of employees don’t match up perfectly, and this *Opportunity Returns* grant seeks to address this problem. The Critical Skills Shortage Initiative will prepare employees in the Southeast region to take advantage of good jobs in industries with the greatest available positions, and that will make a tremendous difference in the region’s economy.”

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.

“This is what *Opportunity Returns* is all about. The Governor’s innovative program will help workers from across the region move into better jobs and help our employers continue to expand. This is exactly how economic development is supposed to work,” State Rep. Bill Grunloh (D-Effingham) said.

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“This Critical Skills training grant fills a vital need in the Southeast region. It will help us fill high-need jobs with skilled employees. This is an excellent example of the region and the state working together to create better opportunities for the hardworking men and women throughout this region,” said Charleston Mayor Dan Cougill.

“This *Opportunity Returns* grant is particularly important because it benefits companies and employees alike. And this initiative is particularly responsive to our needs in the Southeast region because it relies on local community and business leaders to identify the sectors most in need. If we can continue working together, I know we can reach our economic potential,” said Effingham Mayor Robert Utz.

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.

“Governor Blagojevich understands that a well-educated, highly trained workforce will be the key to a strong economy in the future,” DCEO Director Jack Lavin said. “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 pro-active, 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.”

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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