

## **Work force development at risk AS I SEE IT**

**By Rosalie P. Lawless**

The economic downturn has sent over 200,000 workers in Massachusetts alone searching for their next jobs. Many of these workers find their skills are outdated for today's extremely competitive labor market. One of the few places they can turn to for free assistance and retraining is the public work force development system.

This system, anchored by Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding, is slated for elimination under the continuing resolution passed by the House of Representatives to fund federal government operations through the end of the current fiscal year. WIA funds are eliminated from next year's House budget as well. The Senate will now weigh in on this shockingly misguided strategy of disinvesting in America's workforce.

While it's important to rein in long-term deficit spending, we cannot grow our economy without a highly skilled workforce. Cessation of WIA funding would result in the dismantling of 3,000 one-stop career centers in the United States, including the three local Workforce Central Career Centers in Worcester, Milford and Southbridge. Last year, these local career centers alone provided over 17,000 job seekers with skills training, workshops, and other services to help them get back to work. Elimination of WIA funding also decimates the national network of local business-led Workforce Investment Boards which guides local workforce efforts.

The WIA created career centers to replace unemployment offices. The result is that these centers help all job seekers understand a confusing and constantly changing job market, and learn the skills that are unique to finding a job. Executive-level job seekers can be connected with the executive-level positions, youth can be introduced to the world of work, and entry-level workers can get assistance in reaching that first rung on the ladder of success.

I myself have benefited from utilizing the services provided at no cost by the Workforce Central Career Center, having been laid off from my previous senior-management position after 23 years. I'd spent many years interviewing hundreds of people and yet did not know where to start my own job search. The career center helped me focus, and put together a road map and the tools needed to successfully navigate the new job search process. Through my hard work and the supportive help from the career center I was able secure my current position as director of human resources at Fairlawn Rehabilitation Hospital.

Through WIA funds last year alone, over 1,100 laid-off job seekers in Central Massachusetts were trained in dozens of occupations with bona fide job openings ranging from certified nurse aide to Microsoft certified engineer. In fact, the majority of the WIA training funds are used to directly fund training at our region's top schools and training providers, both public and private.

Over 1,500 local businesses utilized the career centers last year alone to access the region's largest pool of well-qualified, prescreened applicants available. Employers also partnered with boards to build the skills of their current employees.

Our business-led Workforce Investment Board guides and oversees the public workforce development system for Worcester and 37 surrounding communities. This volunteer board helps connect businesses, economic development efforts, and education/training providers to ensure scarce training funds are preparing Americans for real jobs. Over the past two years, the Central Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board has helped directly secure over \$5 million in additional funding to support workforce training for local residents.

This budget action not only ignores the needs of the American workforce, it is exactly what our international competitors will love to see. While China, India and others are investing billions in the skills of their workforces, the Senate is now considering the proposal to zero out our nation's investment. And that would simply be a disgrace.

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