

Career Services Are Everyone's Business

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Opinion *By Steven Kravetz and Patricia Crosby*

The news will tell you the unemployment rate is down just about everywhere, and Massachusetts is no exception. Currently, the official rate in the state-designated Franklin Hampshire workforce-development area, which includes the two counties plus the North Quabbin region, is 2.7%, a level economists call 'full employment,' since there is always a certain amount of churn in the labor market, with some people leaving jobs and other people entering them.

A cause for celebration, right? And why not save some state and federal dollars by reducing funds now for public employment services and using them to address some more urgent critical need?

There are many good reasons we should be more guardedly optimistic and cautious in our response to those labor-market numbers.

First, if you're one of the 3,659 local citizens in that 2.7% — someone abruptly laid off through no fault of your own, unable to find a job even roughly equivalent in pay — then you're not celebrating. Or if you're someone who's been unemployed for a long time due to inadequate skills, education, transportation, or childcare, then you're not celebrating. In fact, a significant portion of both those groups of people eventually give up and don't even identify themselves as looking for work anymore, getting by somehow, but barely. When they do that, they're not represented in our official 'low' unemployment rate at all. They fall instead into an uncomfortably large and too-often-invisible portion of our population called 'discouraged workers.'

Then there are the 'under-employed' and 'mal-employed,' people working two or even three low-wage jobs to hold a family together, or multiple part-time jobs when they'd rather be working full-time, or working in positions far below their appropriate skill and wage levels, representing a tremendous waste of talent in our economy. Bureau of Labor Statistics research suggests that the Massachusetts unemployment rate is as high as 7.4% if you factor those people in.

All these people need help — good, solid, professional employment assistance from experienced people with employment expertise, using a continuously-evolving array of strategies that keep up with the times and show people how to prepare for, search for, secure, and hold onto jobs that will support them and their families. With that kind of help, these dislocated, unemployed, under-employed, or discouraged workers get beyond those labels and become taxpaying contributors to the systems that once helped them.

It happens every day at places like the Franklin Hampshire Career Center in Greenfield and at 30-plus other career centers across the state. Even in 'good' times, there are people — as the above indicates, probably many, many more than one might think — who use these services successfully and gratefully.

But those services must be funded, in good times as well as bad. The Commonwealth has not increased its funding substantively for public one-stop career centers since the 'stimulus' year of 2008. The system receives less funding now — to support a much higher level of service, expertise, technology, and facilities — than it did in 2010. It cannot continue to provide the quality service that citizens across our region and others have a right to, without the state recognizing and appropriately supporting these career centers as the critical regional economic assets that they are.

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