

Job-seekers need to be even more mobile

Labor market plan includes Hampden with Franklin, Hampshire counties

By RICHIE DAVIS February 20, 2018

Recorder Staff

A new draft Labor Market Blueprint for the region doesn't have any surprises when it comes to planning for the key industries that will need help attracting and training workers: health care and social assistance, advanced manufacturing and educational services. Where the new plan differs is that it's for the entire Pioneer Valley rather than for the Franklin-Hampshire-North Quabbin area typically under the jurisdiction of the Franklin-Hampshire Employment Board.

"We're doing this with a broader lens, because people need to be even more mobile, and to know what's happening outside Franklin and Hampshire counties," said Patricia Crosby, the executive director of the Franklin-Hampshire board. "This recognizes our larger labor-market area, and we made room to highlight things that are important to us."

The draft plan, submitted by the Hampden as well as Franklin-Hampshire regional employment boards for public review and comment by March 2, reaffirms the priority industry sectors, and points to a second tier in food service and accommodations — driven perhaps by the planned September opening of the MGM casino in Springfield, but extending into Hampshire and Franklin counties as a tourist and hospitality destination with appeal for outdoor, museum and other attractions.

The plan also points to "a burgeoning agriculture and sustainable food systems eco-system ... creating jobs and new business development at a steady rate, providing opportunities to increase the region's strong concentration in this industry sector." The strategic plan, required every four or five years, helps to guide workforce development, education and economic development grants to initiatives like the Advanced Manufacturing Pipeline- Computer Numerical Control program that equips Pioneer Valley students to get skilled machining jobs.

Manufacturing is a case where not only valleywide, but even FHREB-wide data fails to pick up what's been happening in Franklin County specifically. And since at least 70 percent of residents don't (or can't) commute out of the region to work, local opportunities are critical.

Manufacturing still accounts for more than 13 percent of Franklin County jobs, making it the second highest source of private-sector employment, and third highest overall, with average wages that outstrip average wages overall by 22 percent, said Crosby. She pointed out that between 2013 and 2016, employment in machine shops and threaded product factories here increased from 97 to 159, with corresponding average wages rising 36 percent, to \$1,136 per week.

"The small but growing, niche precision machining shops offer great opportunity to dislocated workers," few of whom are willing to start all over again at minimum wage if they've reached successful points in their career, said Crosby. "We can continue to secure the extra resources needed to help them make a transition."

The plan includes commitments by schools, employers and other contributing agencies, including the state, to align programs and grants toward goals that include providing opportunities to train for entry-level jobs and for job advancement in the key sectors as well as access to wage increases accompanying promotion to help employers attract and keep workers.

In addition to trying to provide training and other “pathways” for more workers to enter advanced manufacturing and health care work and know that there will be opportunities for advancement — say, from certified nurse aide to licensed practical nurse positions, with commensurate pay increases — the employment board hopes to continue addressing the need stated by employers for improved “job readiness” skills, like knowing how to prepare for an interview, search for a job and dress for work. The 20 page plan was drafted with help from participation from the Franklin Regional Council of Governments, the Massachusetts Office of Business Development, and school superintendents like Mohawk Trail Regional’s Michael Buoniconti, Gill Montague’s Michael Sullivan and Franklin County Technical School’s Richard Martin, along with representation from Greenfield Community College and other area colleges.

Comments on the plan must be submitted in writing, no later than March 2 to Christine Abramowitz, vice president of planning and workforce systems at the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County, 1441 Main St., Springfield, MA 01103 or christine@rebhc.org On the Web: franklinhampshirereb.org
bit.ly/2EoDSMF

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View of Pioneer Valley from Mount Sugarloaf in South Deerfield. A draft labor market plan would look even farther south for career opportunities.

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