What Will $500,000 Worth of Job Training Buy in Camden?

BY ALEXIS STEPHENS | FEBRUARY 26, 2015

Camden, New Jersey, has a well-documented jobs problem. The unemployment rate reported in December 2014 was 11.7 percent — almost twice the state average of 6.2 percent.

But with residents and local officials asking questions about how they will benefit from the recent state-driven flurry of economic development efforts — $614 million dollars in tax credits were awarded last year to lure companies to the city — the state of New Jersey has responded with $500,000 in workforce development training programs aimed at creating a pipeline between the city’s dislocated workers and its prospective employers.

Allocating that half a million will start with $10,000 in “Opportunity4Jersey” grant money given to Camden County College, which will provide 20 job seekers with career readiness, work ethics and vocational training. Another $150,000 is going to a pre-apprenticeship program called NJBuild, open to women and minorities seeking careers in the building trades. Companies and organizations can apply for the rest of the funding through an open, competitive process by contacting the Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

“I think it’s a step in the right direction,” says Raymond Lamboy, president of the Camden-based Latin American Economic Development Association. He adds a hint of caution, saying, “I think the challenge that I see, that a lot of my colleagues [see], is the reality that the workforce that’s in the city of Camden doesn’t necessarily align with the jobs that are being recruited into Camden.”
He points out that from 2003 to 2005, $1.5 million dollars in state money went to job training, but the results were unimpressive. In 2005, the Philadelphia Inquirer reported that a year after 41 businesses owners had enrolled in online business courses through the program, none had completed enough credits to earn a management certificate. Nineteen of the 53 people who had enrolled in a basic-skills training program for hospital workers had graduated and gotten a job by April 2005.

**Workforce development studies show** that low-skill, low-wage programs have mixed results for reasons that include: a time-consuming training process for workers who need immediate income, the lack of job guarantees, and a widening skills and preparedness gap between workers and prospective jobs.

“A large portion of our population here in the city has a high-school diploma or less,” says Lamboy. “When you look at the jobs that are brought to the city, they are already spoken for, and those that are not largely require an advanced degree.”

Chris Murphy, who’s with the state’s labor department, told me he wasn’t aware of the specifics of the state funds from the early 2000s, and that as for how this 2015 money is being doled out, the department has taken cues from Camden’s mayor’s office.

“A big focus of ours was the fact that with this is a work readiness training program for low- to no-skill job seekers for positions that they can go into,” says Murphy. “[Camden residents] don’t need a college degree. We understand that. That was a big focus of ours in putting together this program.”

Brandi Blessett, professor of public policy and administration at Rutgers University-Camden, says she hopes lessons from those previous years are being applied.

“First things first, Camden needs an investment in human capital. This is one opportunity to do that,” says Blessett. “I definitely think that since so much time has passed since those first initiatives, I would hope that a more strategic use of that $500,000 would be under the auspices of best practices.

“[Residents] need to understand logistically what’s at stake with regards to starting and completing the program and ... the short- and long-term benefits for them to participate. More than anything, I think the foremost strategy would be an effective outreach plan whereby program administrators went into the neighborhoods, tapping into those community institutions that have access to that population and have already built that level of trust.”

Lamboy points to the **Contract for Camden**, a policy platform focusing on poverty alleviation through jobs by Camden Churches Organized for People as a start for getting elected officials and community organizations on the same page.
Murphy says Department of Labor employees will be working through Camden's One Stop Career Center to get the word out about training opportunities. Residents and businesses who would like to participate can also call the mayor's office.

“[Before], the Department of Labor's philosophy was what we called, ‘Train and pray,’” says Murphy. “We would just train for positions we thought would be there and hope that people get the positions when they're finished training. That's not how we're going about it anymore. These jobs we're training for are specific positions that companies are looking to fill.”

PriceRite supermarkets, Camden Iron & Metal, and Comarco Quality Pork Products are among the first companies who have signed up to hire people who have completed training through Camden County College.

“Workforce development in a city like Camden can only be beneficial to the residents,” says Blessett.

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