

Pa. seeks to pair up workers with jobs

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In economic downturns, those with the fewest job skills can be most at risk.

With the support of a national work-force initiative, Pennsylvania hopes to blanket the state with a work-force funding collaborative to connect low-skill workers to jobs in the future.

The National Fund for Workforce Solutions (NFWS), which is devoted to creating opportunities for lower-skilled workers, has awarded the state \$500,000 in grants which will be used to help build the collaborative. Four regions in the state are already participating in the Pennsylvania Fund for Workforce Solutions, a partnership of the state and 10 philanthropic organizations, including Philadelphia, which expects to launch its effort in September.

"The idea is to create a fund that will invest in connecting lower-skilled workers to career ladder opportunities," said Matt Bergheiser, Philadelphia program director of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which has formed a partnership with the state, the United Way of South-

eastern Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board to establish Job Opportunity Investment Network (JOIN).

The founding partners of JOIN have raised \$1.6 million and have close to another \$2 million in the pipeline from other entities that are in the process of submitting requests for funding to their board of directors, Bergheiser said. In addition, JOIN applied last month for \$450,000 over three years from NFWS—the maximum grant support it can receive — which will have to be matched 25 cents on the dollar. With or without the grant support, JOIN will roll out, he said.



Bergheiser

"I think it's critical; our target audience is people marginally attached to the work force," Bergheiser said. "A lot of times they are the very first to go in an economy like this."

Pennsylvania has an advantage in that it has 90 active industry partnerships, consisting of 6,200 employers in key industries, that can be leveraged in the effort to

connect lower-skilled workers to jobs, said Stephen Herzenberg of the Keystone Research Center, the nonprofit technical assistance partner of the state in the project.

"They have already engaged employers in a body of knowledge about job opportunities and career paths," Herzenberg said. "We are now going to focus our resources in funding that sweet spot where we are still helping businesses meet their needs but also the needs for low-skill workers for better jobs."



Glickman

JOIN will seek to link low-skill workers to job opportunities in the 13 key industries that the industry partnerships focus on, focusing initially on between three to five industries, Bergheiser said.

While only a pilot, the hope is that JOIN will have a lasting impact and improve work-force system practices, PWIB CEO Sallie Glickman said.

"Ultimately, we want the whole work-force system to operate in a way that is supportive of advancement for workers," Glickman said. ■