



Need to groom next generation of workers draws attention at forum Impending retirements like ‘approaching cliff’

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DECATUR - Craig Coil, president of the Economic Development Corporation of Decatur and Macon County, said about 40 percent of the city's work force will retire over the next seven years, and employers do not know how they will replace those employees. Randy Prince, president of the Metro Decatur Chamber of Commerce, said one large company told him 85 percent of its workers are 55 or older and described the situation as "an approaching cliff."

As a result, they and other participants in a community forum resolved Wednesday that work force development must be the top priority in the Decatur area's economic plan.

Co-sponsored by the Economic Development Corp., the local Workforce Investment Board and the Decatur Jobs Council, the forum at Grace United Methodist Church drew about 60 people, including panelists representing the Decatur Building and Construction Trades Council, Spherion, the Community Foundation of Decatur/Macon County, the Good Samaritan Inn, Homeward Bound and Dove Inc.

Also on the panel were representatives of the Decatur School District, Richland Community College and the Macon-Piatt Regional Office of Education - all important players in helping job seekers acquire the skills they need to land one of these jobs.

Ralph Martire, executive director of the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability in Chicago, said education matters more than ever.

"There was a time when you could just graduate from high school and get a good job, but that time is gone," he said.

Among work force development efforts under way, according to Terry Robinson, dean of continuing and professional education at Richland Community College, is customized retraining at Richland of 15 employees of a company he declined to identify. "We want to do more of this," he said.

Robinson also said the college is developing an interactive Web site, to be maintained by about 10 employers, that will give high school students a new way to explore career options.

Robyn McCoy, director of Workforce Investment Solutions, said her Committee Linking People to Jobs plans a forum in late July or early August at which human resources directors can talk about the skills levels they are seeking.

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