



## An Important Area Challenge

There has been a lot of positive momentum building in the Biddeford & Saco region over the past few years. What's the biggest impediment to continued economic growth we face right now? An argument can be made that continuing to develop and grow our workforce to fill critical open positions with local companies and organizations is the most important issue.

Workforce Development is a major state and local initiative, with many agencies, educational providers, and non-profit organizations specifically prioritizing this economic need. Our "human capital" – our people – are and always will be our most important asset. Workforce Development encompasses high school and career training, community and four-year colleges, governmental agencies, staffing and training companies, and many organizations in the non-profit sector. Many for-profit businesses spend a lot of time and resources on recruiting new workers as well as maintaining their existing employee base, since their ability to grow is contingent on having enough qualified staff to move their business forward.

In the Biddeford & Saco region, we are fortunate to have a diverse workforce development infrastructure – great local high schools along with Biddeford's Center of Technology, nearby higher education institutions, adult education options, governmental and non-profit resources and programs, and more. Even so, we still have hundreds of job openings locally that need to be filled.

Maine is on average the oldest state in the country with a flat and aging population. At the state level, many efforts - such as the Live and Work in Maine campaign – are being made to attract people to our great state and quality of life. While our region is blessed to have a younger median age profile, we still need more people to fill open positions. In this tight labor environment, it's crucial that efforts be made to give everyone who wants and can work an opportunity to do so.

A particularly encouraging trend in Southern Maine is the effort being made to give people second chances at getting their lives moving forward again with gainful employment after a setback such as substance abuse or a prison sentence. A recent Recovery Job Fair locally included many companies willing to hire folks who have gone through a substance abuse challenge and are now in recovery. Also, local companies and educators such as UMA's Saco Center devote considerable resources towards training programs for prisoners to give them specific marketable skills. When they are released, these inmates are more likely to successfully transition back into the workforce.

Workforce Development specialists know that it's not just a candidate's qualifications that influence their ability to both get and keep a job. Affordable and stable housing, reliable transportation, and the ability to overcome short-term financial setbacks are also critical factors in employment. Locally, Seeds of Hope leads a novel lending program designed to help people access funds for security deposits as a means of addressing homelessness. On the transportation front, the recent Shuttlebus route enhancements were designed in part to make it easier for more people to use public transportation to get to work each day. And innovative non-profit groups like York County Community Action have outreach workers that help coach people and access available resources to help them navigate short-term financial and other crises without it impacting their employment status.

The Chamber of Commerce participates with a coalition of local stakeholders who meet monthly to discuss ideas and opportunities to enhance our region's workforce. If you'd like to learn more or participate in this coalition, or contribute to help fund these Workforce Coaching Outreach efforts, please give us a call.