

Column: Help the underemployed find better, more lucrative work

By Tonja Mettlach

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Two years ago, local resident Jack Morris was working multiple jobs at all hours. His resume included stints as a pool boy, delivery driver and boat detailer, among others. He had plenty of jobs, but he didn't have a career.

Despite a booming economy, it has become harder for many young people in the Merrimack Valley to find good, sustainable jobs that offer the promise of a bright future. Some don't have the resources to continue the education needed to qualify for job openings, while others lack the skills required to compete in the 21st century economy.

The problem isn't employment, it's underemployment.

In Massachusetts, the unemployment rate remains under 3%, a historically low number. That includes people who are either working or not working but looking for more sustainable work. Not included in that number are the thousands of underemployed workers, currently about 129,000 across the state.

Morris was one of those who wasn't necessarily looking. But when he was laid off from a seasonal job he was required to attend a workshop at the MassHire Lowell Career Center. There, he met career advisor Amy Veillette.

She introduced him to opportunities through the Northeast Advanced Manufacturing Consortium, which is a collaboration of four regional MassHire workforce development boards that provides free, grant-funded advanced manufacturing skills training. NAMC is led and

organized by employers who are seeking a new, highly-trained workforce. This means that graduates of the program are more likely to be hired after completing their training.

Morris studied manufacturing through NAMC, which led to him getting hired at Allegheny Technology Inc., one of the commonwealth's largest manufacturers. He now has one full-time job that is paying him more than \$60,000 annually. He has a career that enables him to sustain himself today, and a path that will enable him to grow and support his family in the future.

Morris is one of many success stories that could and should be replicated throughout the commonwealth.

MassHire career centers across the state serve as the vital link between workers and employers to bring about economic opportunity. For example, in the Merrimack Valley, the major industries include advanced manufacturing, health care and information technology. These sectors have the jobs and they're looking for workers with the skills to fill the talent needs of their businesses.

That is where our commonwealth's workforce development system fills the gap.

One of the top challenges to serving more folks like Morris is insufficient funding. The MassHire system relies on state and federal grants and appropriations to provide skills training, and the federal revenue stream diminishes sharply when unemployment is low and the economy is seemingly strong.

Over the last five years, for example, the MassHire Lowell Career Center's federal funding dropped 28%. And federal dollars often don't actually support folks like Morris, who held multiple jobs, none of which provided the wages and benefits he needed to succeed.

More underemployed workers should have the opportunity to learn lucrative skill sets, like the ones offered through NAMC, in order to stave off the possibility of unemployment if and when a recession hits.

We have been fortunate in Massachusetts to have political leaders and policy experts recognize the importance of upgrading workers' skills for a modern economy. The lessons learned point to the need to continue to invest in training and education, even when times are good, so more people can get the skills needed for a better future for themselves and their families.

Workers who are underemployed or not working at all likely face significant barriers to success in the labor market and are most in need of our workforce system's support. With another recession possibly looming, it is crucial that we continue to invest in job training.

Jack Morris turned a constellation of jobs into one sustainable career thanks to the folks at the MassHire Lowell Career Center and NAMC.

We want to and need to do the same for the thousands like Morris all across the commonwealth.

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