

## Local workers 'ill-prepared' for good jobs

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If higher paying jobs ever come to Merced County, it might not be local residents who get the paychecks.

The county's work force is "woefully ill-prepared" to qualify for the types of jobs that are growing around the nation, including the fields of medicine and technology. The work force is underskilled, undereducated, poorer and younger than the work forces in other California counties.

That was the conclusion drawn in the 2004 State of the Workforce report recently released by the Merced County Workforce Investment Board.

The board, affiliated with the Merced County Department of Workforce Investment, is a coalition of public officials and business leaders that aims to promote economic development in the county.

The Department of Workforce Investment operates the county's 5-year-old Worknet centers in Merced and Los Banos. Between July 2004 and January, 2,664 job seekers visited the centers to access services from local agencies such as Merced College, Merced Adult School and the California State Department of Rehabilitation.

"We'll help them develop a map to get from where they are in their skill development to where they want to go," said Andrea Baker, director of the Department of Workforce Investment. "All the partners help in making that happen."

Several of those partner agencies are part of the Workforce Investment Board, which created the work force report.

The report offers some alternatives to alleviate stress on the work force, such as setting up a task force to promote more affordable housing, or encouraging businesses to work with schools to teach job skills.

"What we're trying to say in terms of the state of the work force is, 'this is what's going on in our community, and we need to have a regional approach to bring good jobs to our community,'" investment board Chairwoman Nellie McGarry said.

While the county's work force is still rooted in unskilled labor -- mainly agriculture, as well as service and retail jobs -- investment board officials said that could be problematic as new development brings new types of jobs.

For example, University of California, Merced, and new businesses at Castle Airport Aviation and Development Center will probably bring jobs that require more education or skills than most county residents have.

But increasing the number of skilled workers in Merced County is easier said than done.

Age, income and education all affect the skills of the work force, McGarry said.

For example, younger workers tend to lack the focus of older employees, as well as basic work ethics such as arriving at work on time, the report says. And Merced County's work force is the youngest in the state -- 28.8 percent of the county's population is younger than 15 years old, according to the report.

The report also shows that the county's young people are less educated than their peers elsewhere in the state. County students had lower scores on the SATs, posted lower API scores and were more likely to fail their high school exit exams than average California students.

The county's most educated demographic, the 45-to-64 age group, will soon be exiting the work force in large numbers, the report said.

Nationwide, 42 percent of new jobs require post-high school education. However, only 23.6 percent of Merced County high school graduates are eligible to attend a California State University school or UC, and of those, only 12 percent actually enroll.

Meanwhile, poverty prevents many county residents from either getting good jobs or continuing their educations. The report says 27.9 percent of county residents live below the federal poverty line of \$19,350 a year for a family of four.

A lack of money affects more than just the ability to pay for college.

"If they don't have a car, how are they going to get to work?" McGarry said.

As it is, the county's work force fits the local economy, which is based in agriculture, manufacturing and retail.

"Those tend to be lower-paying jobs," Baker said. "Frankly, these don't always tend to be full-time jobs."

It will take a large-scale effort to remedy the problems facing the county's work force, she said.

"I don't think they're insurmountable," Baker said, "but we need to start working on them as the community is going to grow really fast in the next few years."

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