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Center at UWM to link workers, jobs

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The Center for Workforce Development at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee today is kicking off an effort to prepare workers for the employment demands of the region's leading industries - a campaign aimed at boosting those industries and the area's economy.

Along with the Helen Bader Foundation and the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City and with an initial grant from the Private Industry Council of Milwaukee County, the UWM center has formed the Workforce Enterprise to coordinate customized training between businesses and educational institutions in southeastern Wisconsin.

The effort begins this morning with a presentation to about 90 community and business leaders on the successes and flaws of a similar strategy already under way in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Alyson Getty Cole, a consultant for the Pittsburgh-based Hill Group, will be one of the presenters. She said the similarities between southwestern Pennsylvania and the Milwaukee area include aging populations, outdated images and an attractive quality of life. "We weren't touting the assets we did have," Getty Cole said. "The feeling was either we were going to change or get left behind."

The plan is to convene industry clusters and educators to figure out how to recruit, train and advance the workers needed to sustain the region's economy. Focusing economic development through regional industry clusters has been a theme running through each of the three Wisconsin Economic Summits. Development experts have reasoned that such a strategy provides bigger bang for the buck by coordinating and building on an area's strengths.

"We've been talking about clusters in Wisconsin for some time, but there's been really little action or results so far," said Jennifer Riggerbach, program manager for the Center for Workforce Development.

One example of the power of cooperation has been the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative, a 7-year-old collaboration of more than 100 businesses, labor unions and community groups, set up to train needy workers based on employers' needs. So far, the program - funded in part by the Annie E. Casey Foundation -

has connected more than 1,500 Milwaukee residents to full-time jobs starting at an average \$10.65 an hour with full benefits.

Such experience gives the Milwaukee area a leg up on linking employers with training institutions, said Linda Stewart, director of the Center for Workforce Development. "We don't want to re-create the wheel. We want to build on what's out there already," Stewart said.

One barrier to overcome is political boundaries, Getty Cole said. To consider problems and policies and resources on a regional basis has been challenging in the 10-county Pittsburgh area, she said, but it makes sense when addressing labor needs. "The work force doesn't know a boundary line from county to county," she said. Stewart agreed: "Work force issues and economic development issues are regional," the former secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development said. "We want to work together to attract resources on a regional level."

A regional approach allows employers outside of Milwaukee County to avail themselves of workers in central Milwaukee, described by Stewart as the area's "fastest-growing potential work force and also the most untapped."

An October survey of job openings by UWM's Center for Employment & Training Institute showed 10 job seekers for every want ad in Milwaukee's poorest neighborhoods vs. fewer than two lookers for each opening in the suburban counties.

The Workforce Enterprise hopes to raise \$10 million in funds from private foundations and federal grants to finance the initiative as well as to create an electronic clearinghouse on industry-specific training resources in the region, Stewart said.

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