

Apprenticeship program targets manufacturers

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Hope Valley Industries in North Kingstown, which makes automotive accessories such as floor mats and mudflaps, could use a few more CNC programmers.

To that end, says Julie Zito, the firm's director of human resources, the company plans to apply for an apprenticeship grant in the coming year through a new program that will dedicate \$400,000 of a \$5 million federal award to the manufacturing sector over the next five years, according to Andrew Cortes, director of Building Futures, a program within The Providence Plan. He helped obtain the funding for the state.

Zito estimates up to four of five new hires could be computer numeric control programmers. The firm has doubled employees, to 200, in the past two years, she said.

"We've been experiencing large growth in our industry so we've increased our CNC machines from seven to 11, with two on order," she said.

Awarded this past fall, the \$5 million in funding provided by the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration will cover four other sectors besides advanced manufacturing: health care, information technology, marine trades and defense, Cortes said.

Cortes and Bill McCourt, executive director of the Rhode Island Manufacturing Association, which has hundreds of members, say RIMA will administer the manufacturing programming by identifying providers to run apprenticeship programs at least a year long.

"Overall, this grant is going to provide a wonderful opportunity to help both employers and individuals who want to get into the manufacturing industry," said McCourt. "It makes the state more attractive to companies expanding or relocating here."

About 30 employers have expressed interest in the program, he added.

Cortes, who is also director of the Apprenticeship Rhode Island initiative through The Providence Plan, trained for four years as a carpenter's apprentice in California at age 17, and found his credentials to be portable.

"It has provided me with nothing but opportunity," he said, describing why he tuned in to President Barack Obama's call to fund apprenticeships.

Cortes thought, "Why not develop those talented workers yourself. I've just wondered why other sectors don't utilize this system. ... We can't afford to have [employment] solutions that work to be hidden."

Since the funding has been obtained only recently, the program in advanced manufacturing and the other sectors is still being designed. Besides CNC operators and programmers, likely apprenticeship occupations will be tool and die makers, machinists and, possibly, quality-assurance managers on production lines, said Cortes.

The latter is under review, he added.

In manufacturing, about 200 apprentices could get hired for on-the-job training, which includes a classroom training component, said McCourt and Cortes. The Community College of Rhode Island will be one such classroom provider, they said.

Modeled on apprenticeship programming in the construction industry, Apprenticeship Rhode Island was in fact created in direct response to the grant opportunity, Cortes said, as well as the work in Building Futures, which focuses on construction.

"All we have to do is make sure there is demand for apprentices," said Cortes. "The trick is, it is structured employment. [Apprentices] advance and receive a raise. It is structured, on-the-job learning, along with related technical instruction in a classroom, so it's a very flexible model for an employer to bring someone up to competency."

To design and implement the apprenticeship programs, McCourt said, RIMA may bring in outside consultants. The organization could use pre-existing apprenticeship models from other states or create a program from scratch, he said.

There may be fees for those workers who get hired to apprentice or who are already working and are selected to apprentice at their current jobs, McCourt and Cortes said. If a job pays \$30 an hour, for instance, when the worker is at the desired level of competency, an apprentice will start by earning half the wage, or \$15 an hour, Cortes explained.

Employers who seek grants will be responsible for paying their apprentices' wages, Cortes added.

As RIMA structures apprenticeships, the goal is to defer employers' costs through grants, and for RIMA to administer the programs, Cortes said.

"I would envision workers being able to move laterally, for instance, from a vocational workforce program into a job as a registered apprentice," he added.

Hexagon Manufacturing Intelligence at Quonset Point in North Kingstown is in need of a few machine tool operators that make components for a so-called "coordinate measuring machine," said Steven Ilmud, vice president of operations.

The CMM is used by other product manufacturers to verify form and fit of a product, or its quality control,

for everything from cars and submarines to sneakers and space shuttles. A global firm, Hexagon employs 300 people at its Quonset headquarters, Ilmud said.

He anticipates applying for a grant through the apprenticeship program.

"The hope is it ... will help us to fill positions we have here," he said. •