

Apprentices eyed for host of industries

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In the construction trades, new recruits learn the job by working alongside veteran laborers. Their earnings are covered by negotiated contracts.

Workforce-development advocates say the same approach could benefit manufacturing and other high-wage industries, under a program that would subsidize the salaries of the apprentices with state funds. The goal is to encourage growing industries to create apprenticeship programs that would provide more Rhode Islanders with access to good-paying, high-skill jobs.

A bill that would introduce an apprenticeship program for nonconstruction industries, closely modeled after the apprenticeship program followed by the unionized construction sector, recently was approved by the full Senate.

Introduced by Sen. Majority Leader Dominick J. Ruggiero, D-Providence, the bill would establish a wage-reimbursement incentive for each apprentice of up to \$1,000 and provide employers with up to \$5,000 annually for hiring apprentices.

The program used in various construction trades is an outstanding training tool, and necessary to generate skilled workers, according to Ruggiero. The bill would expand the apprentice concept to other high-growth, high-demand fields. "Basically, it's a training period," he said.

The legislation has the support of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, the Rhode



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PATH TO SUCCESS: Edward Forero, right, a CNC intern at Hope Valley Industries in North Kingstown, speaks with the owner of the company, Tom Melucci. Hope Valley Industries manufactures and distributes automotive accessories, such as floor mats. The company has strategically embarked on training and apprenticeship programs.

Island Manufacturing Association and the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council.

In Rhode Island, entry-level, low-skilled manufacturing jobs generally have moved overseas. The jobs that are available require training, but the state has only one technical high school with a manufacturing focus, according to Bill McCourt, executive director of the R.I. Manufacturing Association.

"In manufacturing, there is only one high school program," he said. And that program graduated only 12 or so students last year in the machine technology program, he said, just one type of job that is difficult to fill in Rhode Island.

Among young people, and their parents, manufacturing suffers from an image that is outdated, McCourt said. "We're trying to educate the public," he said. "The old 'docks, dirty, dangerous' [image of] manufacturing is quite a thing of the past."

The manufacturing industry includes 1,500 employers in Rhode Island and 42,000 jobs, McCourt said. These are companies that made it through the recession and know how to compete. They have positions that pay \$45,000 and more, he said.

In general, an apprenticeship would begin after high school. It would likely include an education component.

In the past, some manufacturers have been reluctant to pay for similar programs on their own, such as tuition reimbursement, because the employee could then move to a competitor.

The incentive proposed under the state legislation would help reimburse employers for the cost of training or educating an apprentice. The program would be in addition to another for apprentices being developed from \$5 million in funding provided last fall by the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration. That program will cover advanced manufacturing, health care, information technology, marine trades and defense.

"We want to sell companies on why they want to do this," McCourt said.

In a statement to legislators, John C. Simmons, executive director of RIPEC, said by creating a wage-reimbursement program for businesses that employ apprentices, the state would encourage expansion of that form of skill-building.

"Apprentices are a proven method of increasing the skills and training of workers and have worked successfully in the construction trades for many years," he said. "Promoting the expansion of apprenticeships in industries outside of construction represents one way to improve the skills of workers in Rhode Island."

Under the legislation, the Governor's Workforce Board would identify the industries eligible for the reimbursement. Employers would not be eligible for the reimbursement until the apprentice completes the probationary period of employment. The source of the funding would be the workforce-development-services program of the state Department of Labor and Training.

Ruggerio said he had introduced the bill last year. Although it passed the Senate, it did not clear the House by the session's end. He is optimistic it will move this year.

"I think this dovetails with what the governor is trying to do with workforce development," Ruggerio said. "These are good-paying jobs. We're trying to give [employers] some kind of an incentive."

More than 40,000 people are employed in Rhode Island manufacturing, he said, and almost 25 percent are expected to retire in the next several years. The state needs to create more of a pipeline, he said. A similar program enacted in South Carolina led to an increase in the number of manufacturing positions, Ruggerio noted.

"We have 10,000 positions that need to be filled," Ruggerio said. •