

# North Adams Transcript

## **Massachusetts is at an economic crossroad**

By Daniel Bosley and Mary Lassen

**Friday, May 27, 2005** - Massachusetts is at a crossroad that will shape the well-being of families and the future of our economy. The challenges that lie ahead are serious and clear. But these challenges can be met. Creating the public will for policies that put the commonwealth on the path to family self-sufficiency and strong economic growth is the key.

Massachusetts is losing jobs and skilled workers at an alarming rate. It is the only state that lost population in 2004, and half of all those who left have a bachelor's degree or higher. During the recession, only one state has lost more jobs than Massachusetts. There has been a net loss of over 200,000 jobs since 2001 and only 6,200 jobs have been added since December 2003.

Even for those North Adams area workers with full-time, year-round jobs, only 27 percent of those with a high school degree (or equivalent) earned incomes above the Family Economic Self-Sufficiency standard for a four-person family.

There is a profound mismatch between the skills of the Massachusetts workforce and the skills employers need. Two in five employers say there are too few qualified applicants to fill job openings and that training resources are insufficient to prepare workers to meet employer needs. As a result, more than 160,000 residents are unemployed while employers cannot fill 60,000 job vacancies.

Despite this, many available workers cannot access education and training opportunities that help them gain skills needed to support a family, the very skills that employers need to create jobs and grow their business. It is time for the commonwealth to come together to create a forward-thinking strategy that is good for families, good for workers, good for communities, and good for business and industry.

We can no longer rely on maintaining a highly skilled workforce with people who come to Massachusetts from beyond our borders. We have to grow our own by building the knowledge and skills of under-utilized workers. The Legislature is considering two bills that do just that: An Act to Establish a Self-Sufficiency Standard in Massachusetts and the Workforce Solutions Act of 2005. Together these reform proposals will improve economic opportunities for underemployed workers and build a foundation for a strong economic future.

The Act to Establish a Self-Sufficiency Standard in Massachusetts will focus the workforce system on moving working families to self-sufficiency by adopting the Massachusetts Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Standard as the official benchmark of the cost of living and working in the commonwealth. Targeting the education and training system on high demand jobs leading to Self-Sufficiency is the best, and only, way to meet the needs of underemployed workers and employers facing a skills shortage.

This act will promote real career advancement by expanding career ladder programs that hire entry-level, low-skill workers and help them develop skills needed to advance to higher skill, higher wage jobs, the same skills that provide a foundation for a strong economic future. The Workforce Solutions Act of 2005 will provide real benefits to businesses, workers, families, and communities. And it will bring much-needed accountability to the Massachusetts workforce development system.

The Workforce Solutions Act has broad-based support from The Women's Union, Massachusetts Workforce Board Association, Organizing and Leadership and Training Center, Associated Industries of Massachusetts, Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education, and the Massachusetts Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives. Organizations working on behalf of many different constituencies recognize that an adequate supply of effective education and training, linked to the skills needed in local labor markets, is central to the interests of the people they serve and to the public good.

The bill is designed to help businesses fill 10,000 critical vacancies, provide flexible training funds that can be targeted to industry growth sectors; train 15,000 Massachusetts adults and older youth for high-demand jobs with high growth potential, reduce the long waiting lists for adult basic education and English as a second language skills programs by 80 percent, and increase access to higher education for at least 4,000 residents.

The Act to Establish a Self-Sufficiency Standard and the Workforce Solutions Act are the result of a highly inclusive process talking with and listening to people from all walks of life in cities and towns across the commonwealth. The bills are driven by the real problems and challenges that workers, families and employers face and by the barriers that keep them from moving forward. Together, they offer a clear public policy choice to put Massachusetts on the path to family self-sufficiency, thriving communities and a strong economic future.

It will take strong leadership by the governor, state Legislature, state agencies, and education and training programs to turn the challenges Massachusetts faces into opportunities. Most of all, it will take public will to make the choices that will put Massachusetts on the road the family economic self-sufficiency and economic growth.

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