

A shrinking labor force creates new problems

By TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

It will become harder to raise future employment in a Michigan economy that is already short of workers, several experts agree.

There will be fewer new workers, and the hard-core welfare cases will be more difficult to bring into the workforce.

"The demographic reality is that baby boomers have fewer kids. There will be no growth in the labor force," said Lou Glazer, executive director of Michigan Future, an Ann Arbor-based think tank.

Growth of the labor force had been 2 percent a year in the 1970s; now, it's 1 percent, he said, and in the near future it will be zero.

"Today, there are 20 percent fewer 16-24-year-olds than in 1980. That has a lot to do with why employers can't find workers. Employers who expect people will show up at the door - it's not going to work," Glazer said during a Sept. 12 panel in Oakland County.

John Almstadt, who heads the county's employment and training division, agreed. He cited a University of Michigan forecast that "economic development can only be arrested if enough skilled workers aren't available."

Bias alive

And it's going to be tougher to pull workers from the shrinking welfare rolls, several agreed.

Jennifer Phillips, a project manager for the C.S. Mott Foundation in Flint, said racial minorities are still discriminated against in retail hiring.

Added Glazer, Welfare reform is working among whites, but "Welfare is increasingly concentrated among blacks and inner cities." He cited a Detroit high school where 80 percent of kids live in a household where no adult works. Thus, no one at home can show them good work habits.

"That's an inner-city issue. This thing's going to go on for a substantial period of time," Glazer warned.

Almstadt of Oakland County was more optimistic. He cited an



Speaking: Philip Power told the panel that, "As the tight labor market continues to suck folks on welfare into employment, a larger and larger percentage of those that are left are big-time substance abusers - booze and drugs."

Oakland Community College program aimed at welfare recipients where most graduates were hired by EDS and Kelly Services - and are African-Americans.

The daylong conference, in the Northfield Hilton in Troy, was

called "Untapped Resources: National Solutions to a Tight Labor Market." Speakers concentrated on matching workers to available jobs, and training them for promotions and raises. Sponsors were Oakland University's political science department and Public Policy Associates of Lansing.

Employers looking

There was wide agreement that employers don't know how to tap public resources.

Panel moderator was Paul Hillegonds, the last (1993-96) Republican speaker of the state House and now president of Detroit Renaissance. Hillegonds said the Legislature developed MEAP statewide testing and endorsed diploma laws in response to top corporate executives.

But business wound up sending the Legislature a mixed message. When parents criticized the MEAP tests, Hillegonds said, "the human resources people said 'we don't care what you do because we do our own testing.'"

Glazer agreed. "Colleagues let

parents know what students have to do (to gain admission). Employers haven't. It's like pulling teeth to get employers to define the work skills they need."

Several employers in the audience complained they didn't know how to tap the available labor pool and weren't afraid to hire blacks, former welfare recipients or even ex-convicts.

Oakland's Almstadt said the Michigan Jobs Commission has worked mightily to get out its message. Its Internet Web site is <http://michworks.org> and allows work seekers to post their availability and employers to examine candidates 24 hours a day.

Issue: promotion

Luncheon keynote was Phil Power, chairman of HomeTown Communications Network, the company that owns this newspaper, and former chair of the Michigan Job Training Coordinating Commission.

"The big issue," said Power, "is not entry-level jobs at a low level of worker skills and employer expectations. The big issue is how these people will move from

the first job to the second or third one, with greater skills, better productivity, higher income."

He advocated spending 1 percent of payroll on training and promoting a company's existing workforce - "and it's the best investment we make."

Power also agreed that bringing more welfare recipients into the workforce will become harder in the future because public transportation is wedded to fixed routes.

"As the tight labor market continues to suck folks on welfare into employment, a larger and larger percentage of those that are left are big-time substance abusers - booze and drugs," he said. "It may be that substance abuse counseling and treatment need to be blended with traditional employment and training activities of public agencies."

Power said employers in general aren't interested in reducing welfare rolls, public transit or providing family support services. Those tasks are best left to public agencies.

Anniversary Genealogical society donates

In celebration of its 26th year, the Farmington Genealogical Society is donating reference books useful in genealogical research to the Farmington Community Library.

FGS President Sue Cromwell and Past President Peggy Brann presented the volumes to Farmington Public Library Director Beverly Papai Sept. 9 at the downtown library branch before an exhibit assembled by FGS members.

Three of the volumes offer up-to-date addresses for sources of birth, marriage, and death data and also for documentation of ancestors' land ownership, occupation, farm or business output, military service, religious and

political affiliations, and migration routes. Also part of the gift is a genealogical resource that the local society helped compile: the five-volume "Michigan Death Index 1867-1882," which gives date and cause of death, birthplace, and parents' names and birthplaces.

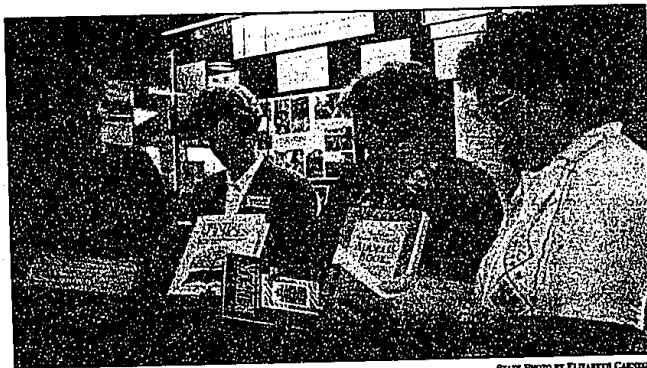
Items in the exhibit range from an ornate marriage certificate issued in 1873 to Elliot Sprague and Eva Heath of Farmington, to a computer-aided seven-generation family tree compiled by an FGS member. The exhibit will be in a display case on the library's street level for about a month and will then go to the Hills branch.

The society meets 7-9 p.m. on

the third Tuesday of each month September through May at the downtown Farmington library. The topic for the Sept. 15 meeting is "Western Migration on the Oregon Trail."

Subsequent meetings will cover genealogical research using various local resources and the Internet. Meetings are open without charge to anyone interested in researching ancestry and family history.

In addition to its monthly meetings, the society is co-sponsoring with the library a free half-day workshop for beginners in genealogy Oct. 3. Seating is limited and advance registration is required. Call 474-7770.



STAFF PHOTO BY ELIZABETH CALDWELL

Donation: Peggy Brann (from left), past president of Farmington Historical Society, Marilyn Smith, senior librarian, Bev Papai, library director, Sue Cromwell, president of Farmington Historical Society, talk about a series of books about genealogy presented to the library.



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