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Report Analyzes Inner Workings of Milwaukee's Workforce Development System

In a new report examining the functioning of Milwaukee's workforce development system, the Public Policy Forum cites a higher level of coordination and cohesion among key workforce development players since the establishment of the Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board (MAWIB) in 2007, but suggests a need for greater coordination between the region's economic development priorities and the needs of its unemployed.

"Our analysis shows that many of the individuals being served by (MAWIB)...may not have the education or skill levels to meet the requirements of area employers in sectors being targeted by economic development leaders, or to benefit from related technical diploma programs at MATC or WCTC," says the report. "As policymakers identify economic development goals, therefore, it is important to determine the extent to which those goals should influence workforce development policies and programs."

The report provides in-depth analysis of the resources, programming and priorities of MAWIB and the Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), widely considered the two most prominent workforce development entities in the Milwaukee area, and also summarizes the activities and spending of other key workforce agencies. In addition, it analyzes promising efforts to coordinate workforce development activities in the health care, manufacturing, and food and beverage sectors.

On the whole, it finds that sector-specific workforce strategies show considerable promise for the economy at large. It notes, however, that sectors like advanced manufacturing and water may be unlikely to provide a significant number of jobs for unemployed individuals with substantial barriers to employment – who comprise much of the population served by MAWIB – because of the level of education and training needed to qualify for many positions in those sectors.

“Given the education and skill levels of the individuals it is mandated to serve, it will be challenging for MAWIB to match up those clients with jobs in many of the sectors targeted by economic development leaders, such as water, financial services, and perhaps even advanced manufacturing,” says the report. “That is not to suggest the individuals MAWIB serves cannot advance beyond low-skill, entry-level positions through additional work experience and/or education, nor that the sectors targeted by regional economic development efforts should change. It does suggest, however, that MAWIB’s role as the entity serving those with the greatest barriers to employment demands a commitment to a broad array of services and strategies that respond both to the needs of key industry sectors and the needs of its clientele.”

Other key findings from “Pathways to Employment,” the Forum’s latest report on workforce development:

- MAWIB has made substantial progress in addressing several longstanding concerns that had surrounded its predecessor (the Private Industry Council), including improved coordination of local workforce development services and greater involvement of major area employers. Interviews with key stakeholders, however, indicate there is more progress to be made.
- MATC’s technical diploma program offerings seem generally attuned to the demands of the Milwaukee area job market, as estimated by the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. In tandem with those offered at Waukesha County Technical College (WCTC), most MATC technical diploma programs seem to be appropriately scaled in relation to job projection numbers, though in some cases retention may be a problem.

- The Milwaukee W-2 agencies' designation as the one-stop job centers for Milwaukee County, and the sheer size of their funding base, make those organizations major players in Milwaukee's workforce development system. Consequently, the education and skills levels of W-2 participants logically should play a prominent role in determining the metro area's workforce development priorities and strategies.
- Employment and training services in Milwaukee are largely supported by federal funding sources, which have been declining for many years. Consequently, local workforce development organizations must continue to pursue new revenue sources and improve efficiency in order to maintain existing service levels. The recent creation of the Milwaukee Area Workforce Funding Alliance to better leverage the funding contributions of local philanthropists and to pursue additional funding from national foundations has represented a positive start toward that effort.

The report concludes by asking whether “the region’s economic development vision – and the demands of specific area employers – (should) drive MAWIB funding priorities, MATC program offerings and overall workforce development strategies, or should the education and skill levels of the local workforce be the major factor in the development of both regional economic development planning and workforce development priorities?”

The goal, it suggests, should be to strike a proper balance between the two.

The full report can be downloaded from the Forum's Web site at www.publicpolicyforum.org.

Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, established in 1913 as a local government watchdog, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of government and the development of southeastern Wisconsin through objective research of public policy issues.

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