

Solutions seen for state's lagging work force

By Mary Ellen Godin, Record-Journal business editor

MERIDEN - Most residents have probably heard by now that the state lags second to the bottom in job creation.

They may even know that the state has lost more 18- to 24-year-olds than any other state in the nation, and by 2020, 40 percent of those joining the work force will come from our cities.

Recently state economists, who several years ago touted the value of outsourcing low-end manufacturing jobs in support of high-end degrees, are taking a closer look at the state as a whole.

Now they say that unless we start creating more affordable housing, more educational opportunities and skill training, we're in for an aging service economy with even deeper chasms between the wealthy and the poor.

But what many people don't know is that it's not too late for the state to start turning the tide, said William Villano, the executive director of the Workforce Alliance.

One breakthrough is that the business and industrial community has come on board to lobby state lawmakers and help devise solutions.

Villano presented his report on the state of the work force 2006 "Connecticut's Competitive Challenge" at a meeting with work force representatives from New Haven and Middlesex County and Meriden.

Those attending included representatives from the cities' chambers of commerce, CT Works offices, alternative incarcerations programs, and various agencies.

"Our job is to continue to spread the message," Villano said. "Our future work force is going to move on. We're trying to get more communities to get on board."

Using graphs and research prepared by state and national economists and labor offices, Villano outlined educational trends that show that the lowest-achieving wealthier students have a better chance of attending college than the highest-achieving poor student.

Too many moderate and high-achieving students are not going to college because they can't afford it, and will remain in dead-end service jobs at low wages. For that reason, college must be made available to them, he said.

Part of the Workforce Alliance's plan is to give students who score a C or better on the CAPT test and whose families annually earn less than \$43,000, free tuition at a state university. He defended the C grade as a level that reaches the target generation of next workers.

Housing costs have risen 49 percent vs. 12 percent increases in wages, resulting in a disproportionate amount of income going to housing, which keeps newcomers and their employers out of the state.

In order to change that, Villano proposes more housing trusts that will allow municipalities to own land, build homes on that land and allow residents to buy homes on it. The arrangement brings taxes back to the town and keeps the homes affordable, even after a resale.

The state also should allocate \$5 million in job retraining to upgrade workers' skills. State chambers of commerce this year added the issue to their legislative agendas, and there is a push to have the funds reentered into the state's budget this year. In other action, the Workforce Alliance would like to require literacy training for prison inmates and increase the legal dropout age to 18. High school dropouts feed unemployment, the penal system and are stuck in substandard jobs.

Ron H. Luska, who works in the alternative incarceration program at The Connection in Meriden, said he was fairly aware of the points Villano raised but was glad to see some solutions.

"Some of the solutions are new to me," Luska said. "I think they are realistic. There's going to be some barriers."