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A commonwealth growing, but growing apart

Andrew Sum and Don Gillis

After three years of job losses and rising levels of unemployment, the Massachusetts workers have a reason to feel hopeful.

Our economy has generated renewed growth in aggregate output and employment, as well as a rising level of available job vacancies. Over the past 18 months, the number of wage and salary jobs on the payrolls of the state's private and public employers has risen by 50,000. The economy is clearly heading in the right direction and state labor markets are improving.

The challenge we face now is in connecting our work force to the jobs that are available. As of July, Massachusetts still had more than 165,000 people officially unemployed. Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies recently reported that, in addition to the official unemployed population, last year there were still 74,000 members of the labor force reserve who expressed a desire for immediate employment, even though they were not actively looking for work.

In the past 20 years, wage, earnings and income inequality rose considerably among Massachusetts workers and families. Among year-round, full-time male workers, Massachusetts now ranks in the top 10 most unequal states in the nation, and among women workers we tend to rank above average on every measure of inequality. In fact, there are no earnings or income measures where Massachusetts doesn't rank among the most egalitarian in the nation. The term "commonwealth" has become a cruel irony for many of our workers.

The Massachusetts House took a big step toward addressing this issue by passing the economic stimulus bill. Their plan was designed after a series of regional forums on work force development throughout Massachusetts. In other words, the people most affected by this problem weighed in on the solution. Consequently, the legislation is less about traditional tax breaks and credits and focuses more on supporting local businesses by increasing the competitiveness of Massachusetts' companies by improving worker education, skills and employment options.

The Workforce Solutions Group, a partnership of economic, work force development and community-based worker advocates, has proposed a blueprint for doing this. This includes providing funding to develop worker skills, increased funding for Adult Basic Education, maximizing the use of federal matching funds for employment and training programs for low-wage workers who receive food stamps and developing clear lines of accountability and performance measures through a Workforce Accountability Task Force.

When one looks beyond the statistics on the unemployed and underemployed, we can see the faces of those who will benefit from these changes in work force development. A renewed commitment to strengthening the employment and earnings position of the state's workers would seem an ideal way to help bridge the gap.

Andrew Sum is the director of Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies. Don Gillis is the executive director of the Massachusetts Workforce Board Association.