

Bay State jobs program goes national with \$50M fund

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A public-private workforce development initiative that has been a quiet success story on the local front in the past five years gained national attention this week with the launch of a \$50 million fund that will replicate the Massachusetts model in other states.

Spearheaded by the Boston Foundation in 2003 along with 16 partners, including the city of Boston and private foundations, the SkillWorks model focuses on helping workers gain the skills they need to get hired and promoted. SkillWorks also provides financial incentives and creative solutions so that Boston-area employers are encouraged to train and educate frontline employees, many of whom are immigrants and low-wage workers.

SkillWorks takes a giant leap in credibility and attention with the creation of the \$50 million National Fund for Workforce Solutions, a five-year effort with a goal of placing at least 50,000 people in career-oriented jobs nationwide and helping 1,000 employers recruit, train, hire and promote employees.

Already, the national fund has \$15 million invested by the Annie E. Casey, Ford and Hitachi foundations and the U.S. Department of Labor. Additional commitments are expected from foundations, businesses and the public sector so the fund total reaches the \$50 million mark.

Eyeing 30 cities across the country that need help with workforce development -- including Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, and Washington, D.C. -- the national fund also has committed \$450,000 over the next three years to the Boston-based SkillWorks, which planted the seeds for the idea of taking the program national.

To date, more than 3,500 Boston-area job seekers and existing low-wage workers have participated in training and career-advancement programs offered by SkillWorks, and more than 40 employers have joined workforce partnerships to help educate and advance lower-wage workers.

"The kind of impact that SkillWorks has had in Boston and Massachusetts has caught the attention of these national foundations and the government," said Angel Bermudez, senior director for grantmaking and special projects, The Boston Foundation, and the architect of the SkillWorks program.

With Boston's health care and hospitality industries showing the strongest growth and potential, SkillWorks has viewed these sectors as critical areas for its work.

Partners HealthCare, for one, has been part of SkillWorks since 2003 and has helped 456 workers get ahead, both recruiting new hires from communities throughout Boston and also training and promoting workers from within its hospitals.

"This effort has been part important for us because, through it, we've had a lot of success in designing ways to respond to labor shortages and to the interest people have in health care careers," said Matt Fishman, vice president for community health at Partners HealthCare.

In the past four years, the entry-level wage for Partners HealthCare workers has risen from \$11.39 to \$13.40 as more hospital departments that pay higher starting salaries have observed the success of the SkillWorks program and have asked to become part of it.

Jessica Gayden was hired in 2005 at Brigham and Women's Hospital as a program coordinator after attending Skillworks' 2 1/2 weeks of classroom training and an internship. Eleven months after she was hired into her first job at Brigham and Women's, she was promoted to a supervisory position within the hospital, with 11 people reporting to her.

"It's an excellent program, especially if you're looking to better your career and you're in a job like I was, where there was no room for growth," said Gayden, who is now planning to go back to school so she can qualify for another promotion.

"I'm going to stay in the administrative field, but I'm looking toward a managerial position," she said. "It's a step higher than where I am now -- but, hey, if it takes me further, all the better."