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Candidates forum to focus on skills training

Boston, June 19, 2006—Massachusetts gubernatorial candidates Chris Gabrieli, Kerry Healey, Christy Mihos, Deval Patrick, Tom Reilly and Grace Ross will take part in a forum on Thursday, June 29, that will address the critical need to develop and retain a well-educated and well-trained workforce in order to sustain economic development in the Commonwealth.

The forum, entitled *Building a 21st Century Workforce*, is sponsored by SkillWorks: Partners for a Productive Workforce and Workforce Solutions Group, a SkillWorks-funded coalition. It will take place at Roxbury Community College's Media Arts Center, 1234 Columbus Avenue, Boston, Thursday, June 29, from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. The forum is free and open to the public. During the forum, each candidate will have the opportunity to make a brief statement and then will answer three questions posed by Channel 5's Janet Wu.

SkillWorks is a national funding partnership including the Rockefeller Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, as well as the City of Boston, the State of Massachusetts and local foundations, dedicated to creating training programs for area residents. The goal of SkillWorks is to give training and education to workers, enabling them to move into careers that can sustain families and offer professional growth, while helping area employers meet their needs for trained workers.

"There is broad consensus across all sectors that a skilled workforce is essential for this region to thrive and that the current gap poses a real threat to the very industries that define Greater Boston—including healthcare, hospitality, and education," said Paul S. Grogan, President and CEO of the Boston Foundation, which catalyzed the SkillWorks partnership. "Now it is time for the candidates for governor to make clear they understand how important this issue is, and for each of them to tell voters across Massachusetts how they intend to address it."

The forum will be broadcast live over BNN, the Boston city cable network, which will also arrange to have it broadcast across the state over local cable networks. Transcripts of the forum will be provided on the SkillWorks website at www.skill-works.org after the program.

"Greater Boston has world-class assets in its hospitals and medical research facilities and healthcare continues to be an integral part of the regional economy," said Gary Gottlieb, President and CEO of Brigham & Women's Hospital and the chair of the Boston Private Industry Council, a business-led organization that helps connect youth and adults to employment opportunities. "But a shortage of skilled, trained employees has the potential to choke this growth. We need solutions that are thoughtful and long-term and can connect the people who live here with the jobs we need to fill here."

Paul Grogan and Gary Gottlieb will both speak at the forum along with Mike Fadel, Executive Vice President of SEIU 1199.

A lack of qualified workers has been identified as a threat to growth in many sectors, as well as healthcare. Recent research compiled by the Workforce Solutions Group uncovered the following indications of the increasing gap between employer needs and potential employee skills:

- 165,900 Massachusetts residents are currently unemployed, an increase of more than 62,000 over the last five years.
- Almost a third of Massachusetts' workers, approximately 1.1 million people, lack basic employability skills; three-quarters of a million lack a high school diploma and over 150,000 lack necessary English language skills.
- Employers cannot fill over 70,000 job vacancies; 4 out of 5 vacancies require a high school diploma or higher; 2 out of 5 require an Associate's degree or higher.

“Under these conditions, new businesses cannot grow, existing businesses will expand elsewhere or relocate, and a lack of workers will thwart efforts to recruit businesses,” says SkillWorks director Loh-Sze Leung. “If the state’s greatest economic asset is the quality of our workforce, fixing this crisis requires a substantial investment in the skills of our workers.”

The forum comes after the State Legislature’s recent passage of a landmark economic stimulus bill that includes new funding for workforce development programs.

“The legislature has committed to a \$24.5 million investment in the Commonwealth’s workforce proposed by the Workforce Solutions Group and its allies, which means the next governor has a rare opportunity to preserve the skilled workforce that is critical to Massachusetts’ competitive advantage,” said Lew Finfer of the Massachusetts Communities Action Network and Workforce Solutions Group. “This forum is an opportunity for the six candidates vying to be the next governor to present their ideas about the best way to build on this accomplishment and to strengthen a system that gives workers the skills they need for self-sufficiency and gives employers the skilled workers they need to prosper.”

The *Building a 21st Century Workforce* forum for the candidates for Massachusetts governor is sponsored by SkillWorks: Partners for a Productive Workforce in partnership with the Workforce Solutions Group. SkillWorks is funded by a collaborative of local and national funders, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation; the Bank of America Charitable Gift Fund and the Frank W. and Carl S. Adams Memorial Fund, Bank of America, N.A., Trustee; Boston 2004; the Boston Foundation; the City of Boston's Neighborhood Jobs Trust; the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; the Hyams Foundation; the John Merck Fund; the Paul and Phyllis Fireman Foundation; the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; the Rockefeller Foundation; State Street Trust Community Foundation; the William Randolph Hearst Foundation; and United Way of Massachusetts Bay.

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SkillWorks, the largest public/private investment in workforce development in Boston’s history, is an ambitious effort on the part of philanthropy, government, community organizations, unions, and employers to create a workforce development system that helps low to moderate income residents move to family-sustaining jobs and helps employers find and retain skilled employees.

The **Workforce Solutions Group** (WSG) is a SkillWorks-funded coalition led by The Women’s Union, the Massachusetts Workforce Board Association, the Massachusetts Communities Action Network and the Massachusetts AFL-CIO that advocates for an effective workforce development system that increases workers’ skills, advances families to self-sufficiency and promotes job creation and economic growth.