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Worker-training gets renewed emphasis under Strickland realignment

Strickland beefs up Dept. of Development in effort to fill jobs

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Gov. Ted Strickland is heeding the call of businesses desperate for more talent.

Strickland on Thursday ordered the shift of some \$30 million and two dozen staffers to better serve the worker-training needs of Ohio's companies.

Despite an unemployment rate hovering above the national average, Ohio still has thousands of jobs in manufacturing, information technology and other fields that go unfilled for lack of skilled workers, officials say.

"The skills of Ohio's work force often do not match the current demands of the state's employers," said an executive order Strickland issued Thursday.

As a result of the order, \$31 million in worker-training programs and 29 staffers will move to the Ohio Department of Development, from the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

The move shifts worker training from Job and Family Services' human-services focus to Development's job-growth aims.

Business leaders like the move.

Worker-training money "will now be controlled by the agency that best knows what employers are looking for," said Baiju Shah, chief executive of BioEnterprise, the bioscience development organization.

"Before, there was a complete disconnect."

Too many employers looked on the Job and Family Services-funded programs as welfare reform that wouldn't deliver highly skilled workers, said Randell McShepard, past chairman of the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Workforce Investment Board.

"I applaud the state for stepping out and making it happen," said McSheperd, vice president of public affairs for RPM International Inc. in Medina.

State officials said the heightened focus on worker training means Ohio will no longer leave millions of federal dollars "on the table." Job and Family Services had access to the money but was not plugged into employer demand, so chunks of money have gone unused, officials said.

Other changes under Strickland's executive order include:

Shifting \$2.7 million in Targeted Industries Training Grants to the Development Department, from the Ohio Board of Regents.

The reimbursement program covers up to 75 percent of training for companies with fewer than 100 workers, or 50 percent of training for companies with more than 100 employees.

Shifting the Ohio Skills Bank program and its four employees to the regents board, from Job and Family Services.

The fledgling skills bank calls for 12 regional teams of educators, business experts and others to identify skill shortages and tackle them through high school, college and worker-training programs and curriculum.

"It gives us a significant capability that was missing," said regents Chancellor Eric Fingerhut. "We've heard frequent concerns from business over whether we are producing the right mix of talent and skills."

Business leaders said Strickland's moves integrate the state's far-flung worker-training programs.

"We know the Ohio Skills Bank is where we should shout out the demands for the Northeast Ohio work force," said Joe Roman, president of the Greater Cleveland Partnership, the region's largest chamber of commerce.

Linking companies' talent needs with the Development Department and higher education creates "a very powerful triumvirate that can build over time and be much more efficient," said Roman, whose organization has made work force development a priority.

Lt. Gov. Lee Fisher, who's also head of the Development Department, said, "We are realigning state and federal funds to better serve our customers - the businesses who need workers and the workers who need jobs."

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