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An eager but untapped work force

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The robber's bullet that dramatically altered Joseph Dixon's life pierced his spine and left him paralyzed from the waist down.

He scrapped his plans to enter the Air Force and worked various jobs as an electronics repairman during the past two decades. But the 44-year-old Springfield man has been out of work for five years following what he says was a rotten streak of luck that included a bad fall, a divorce and depression.

That all may change soon.

Dixon recently enrolled in a special technology training program for people with disabilities offered at the New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark.

The 18-week program, called "EmployME!" is the kind of public-private partnership that state officials and business leaders say is desperately needed to help people like Dixon get good jobs and contribute to the economy.

"I feel like the program will help me get back into the work force," said Dixon, one of several wheelchair-bound students in the class. "It's making me dream again."

The program was among several initiatives highlighted at Gov. Jon Corzine's first Conference on Employment for People with Disabilities in New Brunswick last week, where hundreds of business owners and people with disabilities gathered to tackle vexing workplace issues faced by a population economists consider an untapped resource.

"The unemployment rate for people with disabilities in New Jersey is 70 percent," said Jennifer Velez, the state human services commissioner. "It's a number that is truly a crisis in a community where so many people are able to work, willing to work, but cannot find, or take advantage of, an opportunity to work."

The obstacles they face include a poorly equipped transportation system in New Jersey; the loss of public health benefits in exchange for lesser ones at a new job, and workplace myths about the value of disabled employees.

"Call it stigma, call it misunderstanding, or call it something in between," Velez said. "Clearly these issues represent barriers."

DIGNITY AND HOPE

John Sobocki, a co-organizer of the governor's conference and manager of the EmployME! program at NJIT, said keys to successful placement include matching skills to in-demand jobs, offering career counseling and access to business owners.

EmployME! is funded with a \$946,000 two-year grant from the Henry H. Kessler Foundation of West

Orange. The program aims to train about 120 students to become specialists in Web technology and offers career skills and mentoring through a business advisory board. The grant picks up the full tab for students, whose disabilities include blindness and deafness. Some are recovering from an accident, stroke or life-altering medical condition.

Classrooms are equipped with special "assistive" technology like software programs that help the visually impaired read a computer screen, and graduates receive a certificate.

Having grown up with a disability himself, Sobecki, who has crooked ankles, knows the program means a whole lot more than a good job.

"We're not just talking about livelihoods," Sobecki said. "We're talking about lives. We're talking about dignity. We're talking about hope."

Pearl Murray, a 44-year-old mother from East Orange, has been wheelchair-bound since her legs began to weaken more than a decade ago. She's worked as an office clerk, a cashier and a substitute teacher over the years but sees the program as a "second chance."

"I came to this program because I wanted to better myself," Murray said last week as she typed on a computer keyboard. "I know I'm limited, but I won't let that stop me."

But Murray knows she'll also have to overcome employer's misconceptions.

"When they see you coming with crutches," Murray said, "they think, 'Oh she's going to try to file a lawsuit.'"

Richard Schatzberg, CEO of Aequus Technologies in Pearl River, N.Y., who sits on the 40-member business advisory council for EmployME! said employers sometimes mistakenly believe people with disabilities are going to cost the company money, because they'll take more sick days or won't perform as well.

But studies show people with disabilities tend to stay at jobs longer than other employees, have lower absenteeism, are more loyal and can boost moral.

"They're a huge untapped market," Schatzberg said. "Historically, public perception has been that hiring people with disabilities is an act of charity, when, in fact, it's the exact opposite. Hiring people with disabilities, especially those who have the right skills, is an absolute value to the institution."

Schatzberg is part of the newly formed New Jersey Business Leadership Network of some 90 companies planning to help disabled people get jobs.

State officials announced at the conference they are trying to enroll more people in NJ Workability, a program that allows working disabled adults to keep their Medicaid benefits. And the state has two new Web sites: www.njfindaride.org with details of public and private transportation and www.njdb101.org to help disabled people calculate pre- and post-employment benefits.

Among those wheeling around the job fair at the conference last week was Dixon. He's hoping to turn his new Web technology skills and passion for sports photography into a job to get back on track.

"I feel like I have a purpose in life," Dixon said, "a reason to get up in the morning."

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