

Investing in low-income workers makes sense

Last month, the national unemployment level reached its highest level in nine years, and America is suffering its worst period of job decline since the end of World War II. But getting our country back on the road to prosper-



THOMAS M. MENINO

AND

PAUL S. GROGAN



ity skills beyond 8th grade. For them, the dream of welfare to work is turning into an endless nightmare of dead-end jobs.

Our nation's failure to develop effective job training and job promotion opportunities is putting workers and employers in a double bind. Despite the sluggish economy, thousands of manufacturing, health care and financial services companies cannot find good midlevel workers. And millions of low-income workers are stuck in entry-level positions paying \$6 an hour. This means industries with the power to rally our economy cannot

expand operations, and workers who could invest in inner-city revival by buying homes and raising families are struggling to make ends meet.

To confront this challenge, we need opportunities that offer clear stepping stones to employees who want to learn new skills, get advanced certification, take on greater work responsibilities, and eventually secure good jobs with good salaries.

This is exactly what we're doing in Boston. The Boston Workforce Development Initiative — a \$14.1 million comprehensive, community-based effort — is a model job development effort working with employers and educational institutions to custom design training programs for low-income workers at Boston's hospitals, science research firms, universities and other key industries.

Science and medicine will power Boston's knowledge-driven economy, and these institutions and others offer low-income Bostonians opportunities to become legitimate stakeholders in the American Dream.

A pilot project started in 2000 brought together the hospitals and medical centers that hire a sizable portion of the city's health care and research workers.

Businesses that normally compete for talent have developed integrated "career ladders" for entry-level workers. Motivated employees seeking to upgrade their skills get referrals to job openings in other organizations.

With the launching of the Boston Health Care and Research Training Institute, a nurse's aide with a GED can take college courses, participate in on-the-job training and make strides toward obtaining nursing certification and a job that pays up to \$30 an hour.

Employers involved in the program say that the system works because it gives low-paid employees strong motivation to succeed even in entry-level jobs and provides a pipeline of workers with proven track records

and unlimited performance potential. The initiative is funded entirely by a public-private partnership between the city and local and national foundations — a partnership that can serve as a model for other cities asked to do more with less in the face of mounting fiscal pressures and declining revenue from the federal government. This is how career advancement programs for low-income Americans should work, and the lessons of the Boston Workforce Development Initiative can help Congress design more effective work force training programs as it moves to reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act this year.

A soon to be released survey of 1,000 low-wage employees conducted by the nonprofit Jobs for the Future, which helped design the initiative, reveals that while 67 percent of workers believe opportunities to increase their skills would help them get ahead, only 14 percent are currently participating in job-advancement programs. So strong is the desire of some workers to advance that 23 percent of them have footed the bill for their own training, despite obvious financial constraints.

To get America moving again, we need job-training partnerships that do more than meet the mandatory job-placement requirements of welfare reform. If lawmakers are serious about enacting economic stimulus plans that kindle the American spirit of entrepreneurialism and move beyond the deadening bureaucratic disasters of the Great Society era, they will study the innovations of the Boston initiative and craft job-training partnerships that really work. Programs like these build futures for workers and families and save employers millions by reducing job turnover and improving productivity.

THOMAS M. MENINO is mayor of Boston and president of the US Conference of Mayors. **PAUL S. GROGAN** is president and CEO of the Boston Foundation.