

Editorial: N.M. unemployment isn't because of a job shortage

By Albuquerque Journal Editorial Board

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With the highest unemployment in the nation, you'd think job openings in New Mexico must be hard to come by. But a new study by the state Department of Workforce Solutions says there are plenty of jobs available in a number of occupations – from construction, retail and food service to professional services that require more education.

There are just too few qualified people to fill them.

And it isn't as if there are no opportunities to get qualified for some of these jobs. Associated Builders and Contractors and Associated General Contractors, as well as individual trades, have apprenticeship programs that pay students while they acquire skills. And like the jobs, there are always openings.

Now consider that nearly half of all New Mexicans are on Medicaid, and one in four receives food stamps – all of which are tied to a family's income. And that if a household earns too much, those benefits shrink or disappear, providing ample incentive to not work, or not work "too much."

Then there's the fact it can take weeks for an employer to find a job candidate who can pass a drug screening and/or background check. One staffing company official told the Journal last year that she has to find at least two qualified candidates for every open position in the manufacturing sector because one candidate is likely to fail either the drug test or the seven-year criminal background check.

All the job training and skill-boosting programs in the world are not going to bridge those gaps.

Real leadership and systemic changes would.

The study included responses from 4,665 of the state's employers in a wide range of businesses. Nearly three-fourths said they were having trouble filling job openings – mostly because people either didn't have the level of education or lacked the experience they felt the jobs required. The survey noted New Mexico employers often expect more education and more experience than employers nationwide, and while it didn't supply reasons one could surmise employers feel they have to ask for more because the quality of education and/or experience here just isn't up to par. While there have been reforms on this front, given the testy relationship between the state's Public Education Department and teachers unions, and the governor and the state's colleges and universities, further dialogue on the issue could be an administration away.

The survey also notes that neighboring states, particularly Colorado, pay higher wages for many hard-to-fill jobs, leading New Mexicans to cross state lines for work. That has contributed to another problem: New Mexico has led the nation in the loss of “prime working age” individuals since 2007, which translates into a huge drain of talent and taxpayers.

And without those workers and those taxpayers, forget economic expansion. Heck, forget economic survival.

Taken as a whole, the study paints an all-too-familiar and all-too-dismal fiscal portrait of our struggling state. New Mexico needs its elected officials to step up and change that picture by showing true leadership – starting with addressing the issues of drug use, criminal histories and over-reliance on entitlement programs – to get more New Mexicans working, and working in New Mexico.

This editorial first appeared in the Albuquerque Journal. It was written by members of the editorial board and is unsigned as it represents the opinion of the newspaper rather than the writers.