

# RI Senate unveils workforce development plan

By David Klepper January 22, 2014

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — Saying Rhode Island cannot wait for a national economic recovery to reduce unemployment, leaders of the Rhode Island Senate on Tuesday unveiled a package of legislation designed to get more people back to work.

The series of proposals includes greater investments in job training programs and adult education, more internships and apprenticeships and better coordination of existing workforce training programs to make them more effective.

"This is the Senate's top priority — to get unemployed Rhode Islanders back to work," said Senate President Teresa Paiva Weed, D-Newport. "I am frustrated — as many of you are. It's critical that we take decisive action now."

Rhode Island's unemployment rate was 9 percent in November, the worst in the nation.

The series of proposals is called the "Rhode to Work" and includes several initiatives sought by the business community and organized labor. They include:

—A change to direct \$1.2 million in existing state funds to job training programs. Currently, businesses in the state contribute to a state Job Development Fund that supports training programs. But 10 percent of the \$12 million paid into the fund each year is diverted to the state's general

budget. The proposal would dedicate 100 percent of the funds to job training.

—Money to reduce or eliminate a waiting list for unemployed workers looking to enroll in English language literacy classes and other basic adult education programs. Currently 1,300 people are on waiting lists. It would take an estimated \$1.9 million to hire teachers and expand the programs.

—Better coordination of existing workforce development programs, which are now spread out over several state agencies, to make it easier for jobseekers to participate.

—An expansion of an existing tax credit for companies that offer apprenticeships.

—A long-term call for more funding for early-childhood education and all-day kindergarten to prepare the next generation of workers.

The proposals, which will soon be introduced as legislation, won praise from both state AFL-CIO President George Nee and Laurie White, president of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce.

"Workforce development has risen to the top of the agenda," White said. "It's difficult to recruit workers for high-tech manufacturing because you need very specialized training. It's an urgent situation."

Neil Steinberg, CEO of the Rhode Island Foundation, urged legislative leaders to move swiftly. The state's economy cannot wait, he said.

"Just do it," he said. "Don't wait until the end of the session."