Counties key players in growing the economy

Creating jobs becomes a regional priority

The economy will likely be on many voters minds when they go to the polls in about two weeks. How could it not be? Nationwide, unemployment sits at 9.6 percent.

Counties, trying to balance budgets in a down economy, have been cutting their workforces as revenues have declined. In the past 10 months, local governments — counties included — have lost 231,000 jobs, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“The local governments are key in this recovery, and what they have to do is create jobs. It’s everybody’s job right now,” said Jane Oates, assistant secretary, Employment and Training Administration, U.S. Department of Labor. “And local governments, even in these tough budget times are uniquely positioned to talk to businesses.”

Those conversations have been ongoing in counties with strong workforce and economic development programs. In many cases, they have for years been engaged in talks — and actions — to help businesses to meet their staffing needs, a key to combating unemployment. Such efforts won’t lower counties’ jobless rates overnight. But, successful job-creation programs leave counties better positioned to rebound from the recession.

Experts say those localities that take a regional approach to skill building and job creation improve their chances of success. There’s a growing body of evidence that places innovation at the heart of U.S. economic growth, and the best place to do that is at the regional level, according to the report Building Regional Partnerships for Economic Growth and Opportunity, issued by Jobs for the Future.

The regional level is “where firms, economic development organizations, investors, education and training providers, research institutions and government can collaborate most effectively…,” the report said. Such collaboration can take many forms, including helping companies develop new products and processes, and training workers with needed skills.

Entities like the Peninsula Council for Workforce Development in Virginia and the CCAC-Allegheny County Workforce Alliance in Pennsylvania are doing just that. And county elected officials are an integral part of their workforce and economic development efforts, working hand in hand with the private sector and nonprofits.

The Peninsula Council (www.penworkforce.org) is a regional economic development organization serving seven localities in southeastern Virginia with a population of 600,000, including Gloucester, James City and York counties. Among its more than 140 members are county supervisors and administrative staff, and private sector and community leaders.

Despite this, counties are still playing a role in the economic recovery, working within their communities to help private employers to fill a slowly growing number of new jobs.

“How can workforce development support county economies?”

Q: How can workforce development support county economies?

A: The direct economic effect of increased, skilled local employment is obvious: more people working leads to increased revenue, greater local economic activity and decreased need for public services. While plenty of unemployed workers may be applying for local jobs, many companies are reporting a mismatch between the kind of skilled workers needed and the abilities of the unemployed.

This is one key issue workforce development services can address. Workforce development can develop the skills of the locally available workforce to match the needs of not only current, local businesses and industries, but also non-local businesses that may be considering locating in the area, further supporting the local economy.

A locally available, skilled workforce is often cited as a strong reason businesses choose specific locations to either expand current operations or locate new operations. While tax breaks are often the most powerful incentive counties can offer to attract these types of investments in the local economy, the workforce resources available can be the distinguishing addition that secures the investment.

“Q: Why support a regional approach to economic workforce development?”

A: Individual businesses, especially small and mid-sized businesses, are finding it increasingly difficult to conduct all of the research and development, planning, marketing and training needed to stay ahead of global competition. As a result, the ability of businesses to create local jobs is more and more dependent upon whether assistance for these critical business activities is available, and how well that assistance is organized.

There is growing evidence that the best way to organize this assistance is at the regional level. Regional collaboration with key leaders from the public, private and nonprofit economic workforce development sectors can make the best use of the competitive assets of the region as a whole. Specific localities may not be able to provide all of the assistance that is needed to support local businesses or attract new businesses to the area. However, resources available at the regional level may be sufficient to develop these businesses, bring new jobs to the area and support the economies of all involved localities.

See FAQs page 10
Model county programs grow jobs economy

Detroit Region Aerotropolis Initiative

Wayne County, Mich. (NACo 2010 Achievement Award Winner)

The Detroit Region Aerotropolis Initiative uses the region’s air system and transportation assets as an economic development and job creation engine. The goal of the program is to create a preplanned aerotropolis (or airport city) between Detroit Metropolitan and Willow Run airports that will attract new businesses and jobs to the region. An aerotropolis is an emerging type of airport hub composed of aviation-intensive businesses and businesses that need to be readily connected to their customers. Communities and stakeholders across the region have banded together to move this economic development concept from vision to reality.

Wayne County led the development of a regional economic development corporation with representation from nine partnering governments, the Detroit Region Aerotropolis Development Corporation (ADC). Since 2007, almost 6,000 jobs and $1 billion in capital investment have been created through private-sector projects that seek the advantages of being in the aerotropolis. This initiative has the potential to create more than 60,000 jobs, $10 billion in annual economic impact for the state, and a diversified industrial base that will stabilize the value of personal and commercial investment assets.

Contact: Marsha Ennis; 313.224.6002; www.detroitregionaerotropolis.com.

Subsidized Training and Employment Program (STEP)

San Bernardino County, Calif. (NACo 2010 Achievement Award Winner)

The increase in unemployment in San Bernardino County has led to more families needing assistance, significantly straining the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) system. During 2009, 30,000 families received financial assistance, amounting to $19.83 million in assistance anually, an unsustainable burden in the long term.

The Subsidized Training and Employment Program (STEP) is a subsidized employment and training wage program that provides a reimbursement of 130 percent of wages to businesses for a period of six months for hiring and training a CalWORKs participant. STEP also provides free applicant referral and screening services to supply the most qualified candidates to participating businesses. STEP placed 148 participants in full-time employment between Aug. 1, 2009 and Jan. 31, 2010. These placements lead to a reduction in CalWORKs payments of $1.2 million over a one-year period, and strengthened the county’s economy by injecting $2.4 million in new income.

Contact: County of San Bernardino Department of Workforce Development; 909.387.9859.

FIRST Initiative – Financial Incentives for Recruiting Strategic Targets

Lee County, Fla. (NACo 2010 Achievement Award Winner)

The Lee County FIRST grant is a negotiated, performance-based incentive used to attract and grow high-value business projects that promote broad-based prosperity in the community.

Companies must submit an application before making a decision to locate or expand in Lee County, demonstrate that the incentive will make a material difference in the company’s decision to locate or expand in the county, create at least 75 new, full-time equivalent jobs within a three-year period of paying an average wage of at least 125 percent of the Lee County private-sector annual average wage, and make a three-year cumulative capital investment in the project in an amount equal to or greater than the FIRST incentive award, and generate a 10-to-1 return on investment to county revenues over a 10-year period.

If their application is accepted, they may qualify for payments as high as $6,000 per job created. A second round of negotiated incentives kicks in based on a company’s capital investment and ROI. This payment can range from $300,000 to $10 million.

Pueblo County Economic Gardening Program

Pueblo County, Colo. (NACo Publication: Growing a Green Local Economy: County Strategies for Economic, Workforce and Environmental Innovation)

The Pueblo County Geographic Information Systems Department offers consulting services for local businesses to help them find optimal locations and enhance their growth in the community. This program provides advanced, corporate-level tools, free of charge, for any business inside the Pueblo County limits. Services include market research, competitor intelligence, industry trends, marketing lists, strategy development, Web optimization and other customized research.

Christopher Markuson, GIS manager for Pueblo County, and his team help business owners analyze and map demographic data and find valuable sources of information to improve local business models.

When last studied in September 2009, Markuson said, “We’ve tracked 58 new jobs emerging from the businesses we’ve helped grow, bringing in over $2.8 million of new revenue into the county.” Markuson also noted that most of the new jobs paid livable wages ($45,000 per year each on average), offered benefits, and had little potential to move out of the community.

Contact: Pueblo County Economic Gardening Program; www.pueblobusiness.org.

Eastern Maine Development Council (EMDC)

(NADO 2010 Innovation Awards)

In July 2009, the Eastern Maine Development Council (EMDC) became the first integrated economic and workforce development area in the state of Maine. Under this new model, EMDC retains its traditional economic and development responsibilities. However, EMDC now has operational responsibility for the Tri-County Workforce Investment Board as well as the region’s service delivery for all Workforce Investment Act programs and services.

Locating economic and workforce development functions together provides the region with a single portal for business and workforce services. This approach supports higher levels of services to the region’s job seekers, including youth and dislocated workers in need of skills that are currently in demand from local employers.

The workforce services have improved in the number of workers served, higher job placement rates and increased wages. Furthermore, this integrated model has increased business participation in EMDC’s economic development and community services. The integration process positioned the region to secure additional resources for new investment, particularly for skills development in new and growing industries such as green construction and healthcare.

Contact: Michael W. Aube; 207.942.6389; mauce@emdc.org; www.emdc.org.

RLF Front End Financing for Emerging ‘Green’ Companies

Franklin, Granville, Person, Vance and Warren counties, N.C. (NADO Innovation Awards)

The Kerr-Tar Regional Council of Governments consists of the member-county governments of Franklin, Granville, Person, Vance and Warren counties; as well as the municipal governments within these counties. Their program addresses a financing gap for small companies struggling to get off the ground. Companies often incur extensive front-end costs for prototype development and testing, evaluation, and government approval for the development of innovative, environmentally beneficial products. Standard venture capital funds are often not interested in these small companies with large front-end financing needs.

In response to these needs, the Kerr-Tar Regional Council of Governments developed special financing arrangements that allow front-end financing for emerging green companies. Interest-only payments are due regularly until government approval is obtained and production begins. At this point, full principal and interest payments must be completed.

Contact: Rick Seeks; 252.436.2049; rseeks@kerrtar.org.
NACo affiliates weigh in on key workforce and economic development issues

NACo asked its workforce and economic development affiliates, and partners to present their thoughts on the key issues in their members’ workforce and economic development activities, and the opportunities for collaboration with county governments to help address the current economic environment.

National Association of Workforce Boards (NAWB)

Terri Bergman
bergman@nawb.org

In September, the national unemployment rate was 9.6 percent, the same as in August. Across the country, data from August (the latest available by state) revealed states with much higher unemployment rates: California, 12.4 percent; Michigan, 13.1 percent; and Nevada, 14.4 percent. The nation’s Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) are in the business of helping residents secure employment, and with the Conference Board calculating 3.51 job seekers for every available job opening in August, this is a hard business to be in.

Our nation’s WIBs are rethinking and redesigning their service models. They are fashioning quick fixes to help people find jobs that will “get them through” the recession, while linking them with government and charitable social services. They are looking at long-term economic development and employment strategies and providing training that will prepare individuals for the jobs of tomorrow.

They are providing training in entrepreneurship and fashioning a variety of subsidized employment programs that put people into public, private and nonprofit jobs by covering between 50 and 100 percent of the wages.

WIB members are appointed by local elected officials, and most WIB actions must be agreed to by both the board and the local elected official. In places where WIBs operate within a single county, the county government serves as the local elected official and, as such, can set policy direction and establish priorities. But even in areas where the WIB does not report to a county government, counties can play a role in WIB activities.

Counties should meet with WIBs and discuss their visions of the region’s economic development. They should connect their economic development and planning staff with WIB staff so that WIB workforce development activities align with the county’s economic development initiatives.

As the nation confronts its worst economic recession since World War II, with its concomitant reduction in public funds, all government entities need to pull together to ensure that resources are being used most productively in the pursuit of economic development, workforce development and employment.

National League of Cities (NLC)

Katie Seeger
seeger@nlc.org

City officials, like their county counterparts, are grappling with how to help their citizens bounce back from the recession and, for many, unemployment. According to NLC’s recent State of America’s Cities Survey (84 percent) of city officials report that unemployment has worsened in their city in the past year. More than one in two says that local workforce development and training is either a moderate or major challenge for their communities.

Although many city governments do not have a policy-mandated role in workforce development, more than one in three report that their local government’s involvement in workforce development has increased since the recession. The key ways local governments report supporting workforce development within the last year is communicating with local businesses, attending and participating in meetings of their local workforce investment board and connecting constituents to public workforce services.

Additionally, the most often cited partners for workforce development, according to city officials, are chambers of commerce, community colleges and local businesses.

For many NLC members, collaborating with county governments present opportunities for workforce development. First, cities and counties often share workforce investment boards and collaborating between the two can mean more productive services for citizens and regional businesses alike.

Second, economic development rarely stops at a city and county border. By collaborating for workforce development, cities and counties have only $163 million.

At a recent meeting in Washington D.C. I was told that in 1980 the United States ranked No. 1 in investing in job training among the 28 OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) developed countries; today we rank 22nd.

Unlike many components of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the workforce system spent its emergency funds quickly. President Barack Obama signed ARRA into law Feb. 19, 2009 and by mid-July the workforce system had $340.000 economically disadvantaged young people at work in summer jobs.

Given the federal deficit, it is unlikely we will see increased investment in job training for a few years. This means that new opportunities for collaboration must be found in our counties. Linkages between workforce development and economic development will need to be strengthened.

Workforce Investment Boards and One Stop Career Centers will need to work in new ways with the adult education system and local community colleges to give workers the skills to compete in today’s 21st century economy. Even when unemployment rate was at 10.2 percent in 2009, employers in the U.S. had 2 million jobs they couldn’t fill.

There will continue to be a greater emphasis on a sectored approach; targeting limited funding to a specific sector, like health care, with defined career ladders, labor shortages, and wages that will enable a person to lead a middle-class life.

National Association for County Community and Economic Development (NACCED)

John Murphy
jmurphy@smithbacklin.com

Members of NACo’s affiliate, the National Association for County Community and Economic Development (NACCED), are very focused on the impact of the nation’s economic crisis. The crisis began with the collapse of the housing market and the resulting escalation of abandoned and foreclosed properties creating neighborhoods of blight.

NACCED members, who principally administer core programs funded through the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, have been the recipients of substantial amounts of new resources, first through the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008 (HERA), the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) and most recently the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010. HERA provided $3.92 billion in Neighborhood Stabilization Program funds (NSP 1) formula grants to urban counties, metropolitan cities and states for the acquisition, rehabilitation and disposition of abandoned and foreclosed properties across the nation. Grants were given 18 months to obligate their funds, a deadline that expired at the end of September. HUD estimated that 95 percent of these funds would have been obligated by the deadline. ARRA provided an additional $1.93 billion Neighborhood Stabilization Program funds (NSP 2) through a national competition.

The Wall Street Reform Act provided an additional $1 billion in formula-based Neighborhood Stabilization Program funds (NSP 3) to continue the effort.

ARRA provided additional resources to counties, cities and states in the form of funding including $1.5 billion for homeowners prevention and rapid re-housing of those who are homeless, and an additional $1 billion in formula funding under the Community Development Block Grant program. The purpose of all of this funding was to respond to pressing needs but also to create or retain jobs.

National Workforce Association (NWA)

John Twomey
jtwomey@nyatep.org

Many believe that this current recession is the worst since the Great Depression. At its worst, there were eight jobseekers for every one job opening. Even today, as we slowly recover, that ratio is five to one.

The workforce system’s response has been robust. Although traffic in the country’s one-stop career centers has doubled and tripled, job placements, even in this labor market, have been impressive.

In a good economy in 2000, federal funding for the nation’s largest workforce program, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) was cut 25 percent. While the economy was good at that time, this decision had inevitable consequences when the economy downturn hit. In my state of New York, in 2000 we had $304 million in WIA funds. This year we have only $163 million.

Given the federal deficit, it is unlikely we will see increased investment in job training for a few years. This means that new opportunities for collaboration must be found in our counties. Linkages between workforce development and economic development will need to be strengthened.

Workforce Investment Boards and One Stop Career Centers will need to work in new ways with the adult education system and local community colleges to give workers the skills to compete in today’s 21st century economy. Even when unemployment rate was at 10.2 percent in 2009, employers in the U.S. had 2 million jobs they couldn’t fill.

There will continue to be a greater emphasis on a sectored approach; targeting limited funding to a specific sector, like health care, with defined career ladders, labor shortages, and wages that will enable a person to lead a middle-class life.
Bank lending changes hurt small businesses

**FAQs from page 7**

**Q:** What are workforce development opportunities outside the federal workforce investment system?

**A:** A significant portion of human capital spending is done outside of the publicly funded, federal workforce employment and training system. Post-secondary education, employer-provided training, programs offered by community-based organizations, and for-profit education and training providers are all key providers of local workforce development services.

As recent as 2007, the top 250 foundations spent $1.3 billion in employment-related grants. Numerous post-secondary education institutions and community colleges have received large amounts of federal funding for workforce training programs in both the health care and “green” industries.

**Q:** How have changes in bank lending affected county economic development?

**A:** Because small businesses are the nation’s primary job creators, encouraging local small business growth is a critical piece of economic development and recovery. However, small businesses cannot grow without credit. Figures from the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation found that bank loans to small businesses are down nearly 4 percent from last year. New loans guaranteed by the Small Business Administration dropped 66 percent in June to the lowest level in at least two years. As the economy has slumped, many banks greatly reduced lending, leaving small businesses unable to secure necessary loans.

**Q:** How has the federal workforce investment system for workforce development for the college, said Erie Community College (ECC), in Buffalo, N.Y., recently started a free weatherization technician training program consisting of 24 hours of classroom training and 40 hours of hands-on field study. Participants receive the OSHA 10-Hour Construction and EPA Lead Certification, and ECC assists with job placement for those who successfully complete the program. It is sponsored by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Grant for Green Job Training. A new associate’s degree in Green Building Technology prepares people to work on LEED-certified buildings.

Carrie Kahn, executive dean of workforce development for the college, said Erie Community College was the only one of 20 New York community colleges that has a One-Stop Center. The center is a career and job skills counseling operation that has partnerships with organizations including the New York State Department of Labor, Supportive Services Corp., and Buffalo and Erie County Workforce Development.

“We know, through the Department of Labor, the number of [workers] who have been isolated,” she said. “We know immediately when they apply for services and receive individual training accounts, and we can react in terms of course offerings.” Kahn said in addition to the green building and medical records programs, pharmacy technician programs have been popular.

Bob Moffatt, department chair of career technical education at Cowley County Community College in Kansas, said that his program’s offerings were based on consultation with the state and in observance of a rule that prohibits duplication of programs at schools within a geographic area.

“The job market was bad for a long time; losing manufacturing overseas is terrible because it’s our most important industry,” he said. “But, when one industry takes a hit, another one picks up. Automotive has been strong, and welding. Machining has slipped a bit.” He continues to see strong job markets in Dallas, Texas and Tulsa and Oklahoma City, Okla. attracting his graduates.

**Economic and Workforce Development Resource List**

- U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration
  - ETA administers federal government job training and worker displacement programs; federal grants to states for public employment service programs, and unemployment insurance benefits. Visit the ETA site for current workforce data, research, ETA programs and news, and current grant opportunities.
  - www.doleta.gov

- U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration
  - EDA partners with distressed communities throughout the United States to foster job creation, collaboration and innovation. Visit the EDA site for program and funding opportunities, current news, and an array of research and tools for economic development.
  - www.eda.gov

- U.S. Small Business Administration
  - SBA helps Americans start, build and grow businesses through a nationwide network of field offices and partnerships with public and private organizations. The SBA’s programs include financial and federal contract procurement assistance, management assistance, and specialized outreach to women, minorities and armed forces veterans.
  - www.sba.gov

  - This site supplies detailed information about dozens of different kinds of industries including educational services, health care, motor vehicle and parts manufacturing, and many others. For each industry, the Career Guide describes the occupations in the industry, training and advancement, earnings, expected job prospects and working conditions.
  - www.bls.gov/oco/cg

- Jobs for the Future
  - Jobs for the Future (JFF) identifies, develops, and promotes new educational and workforce strategies that help communities, states and the nation compete in a global economy. JFF has numerous research reports, case studies, newsletters and policy briefs that offer insight on local, state, and national practice and policy in education and youth development, workforce development, and economic opportunity.
  - www.jff.org/publications

- The National Fund for Workforce Solutions
  - Involving nearly 200 foundations and 500 employers, the National Fund for Workforce Solutions (NFWS) is working to evaluate and bring to national scale new ways to prepare workers, without the needed skills, for careers that will support them and their families. NFWS has resources available for policymakers, funders, and groups working with employers and employees.
  - www.nfwsolutions.org

**Intergovernmental Organizational Cooperative**

- NAACo and the following intergovernmental organizations currently have funding from the Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration to help provide workforce development information and assistance to their respective memberships:
  - National Association of Workforce Boards (NAWB)
  - www.nawb.org
  - National Governors Association
  - www.nga.org
  - National League of Cities
  - www.ncl.org
  - United States Conference of Mayors (USCM)
  - www.usmayors.org
  - National Association of State Workforce Agencies
  - www.naswa.org
  - National Conference of State Legislatures
  - www.ncsl.org

**National Economic and Workforce Development Affiliates**

- National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) – www.nado.org
- National Association for County Community and Economic Development (NACED) – www.nacced.org
- National Workforce Association (NWA) – www.nwonline.org

**Financial Solutions**

- The National Fund for Workforce Solutions (NFWS) is working to evaluate and bring to national scale new ways to prepare workers, without the needed skills, for careers that will support them and their families. NFWS has resources available for policymakers, funders, and groups working with employers and employees.
  - www.nfwsolutions.org

**Growing a Green Local Economy: County Strategies for Economic, Workforce and Environmental Innovation**

- National Association of Counties
  - The issue brief highlights strategies for counties to assess local resources and existing green economic development efforts and outlines potential action steps to promote green employment opportunities through workforce training initiatives and green business development.
  - www.naco.org/greenjobs

**Publications**

- County Economic Development and Green Jobs: The Role of Elected County Officials
  - National Association of Counties
  - The issue brief highlights strategies for counties to assess local resources and existing green economic development efforts and outlines potential action steps to promote green employment opportunities through workforce training initiatives and green business development.
  - www.naco.org/greenjobs

- Growing a Green Local Economy: County Strategies for Economic, Workforce and Environmental Innovation
  - National Association of Counties
  - The issue brief highlights strategies for counties to assess local resources and existing green economic development efforts and outlines potential action steps to promote green employment opportunities through workforce training initiatives and green business development.
  - www.naco.org/greenjobs

- Jobs for the Future
  - Jobs for the Future (JFF) identifies, develops, and promotes new educational and workforce strategies that help communities, states and the nation compete in a global economy. JFF has numerous research reports, case studies, newsletters and policy briefs that offer insight on local, state, and national practice and policy in education and youth development, workforce development, and economic opportunity.
  - www.jff.org/publications

- Building Regional Partnerships for Economic Growth and Opportunity
  - Jobs for the Future
  - The most effective way to grow the U.S. economy is to promote innovation, and the best place to promote innovation is at the regional level. Within regions, economic development efforts need to put greater emphasis on identifying a region’s competitive assets, and on investing public and private resources in ways that fully exploit those assets. This report summarizes the key lessons the authors have learned about what regions are doing to put these partnership structures in place.
Community colleges have seat at workforce issues table

Community college representatives. Its 17-member executive committee includes seven local elected officials, one from each member jurisdiction. The council also serves as staff for the area's Workforce Investment Board.

Unlike many economic development organizations, the council doesn't do business attraction but rather focuses on business expansion and workforce development.

“We actually have sort of a unique animal here,” said James Icenhour Jr., the James City County supervisor who represents his county on the council. “We actually are quite often held up as the example in the Commonwealth of Virginia on how to go about doing this.”

Matthew James is the council's president and CEO. “I think the role of the elected officials is very critical,” he told the audience for a recent NACo webinar entitled Partnerships to Support Your Local Workforce Investment.

“What we had in our system — and I think this was the glue that brought us about — is even though the elected officials had the fiscal responsibility for the federal funding, they were able to carve out a partnership with the private sector in which we basically put all of our organizational egos on the sidelines and joined in to say that ... we really have regional problems, therefore we should have regional solutions, and I think that was the key.”

As with the Peninsula Council, other regional workforce coalitions reserve a seat at the table for community colleges, which in some states are run by or receive major funding from counties. According to Oates, the question counties need to ask themselves is how to make these learning institutions “more vibrant, more attractive to businesses.”

One strategy being used by the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) is to tailor its curriculum to meet the needs of an emerging industry in the region — extracting natural gas from the Marcellus Shale. CCAC through the Workforce Alliance is developing a number of degree and certificate programs to prepare workers for the industry.

The alliance has been working with Allegheny County Economic Development and the Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board to assess workforce needs and training opportunities in this new (for this region) energy sector.

CCAC has developed or updated several courses and certificate programs to better prepare potential gas industry workers.

For example, a welding associate's degree program has been adapted to teach the pipe-welding techniques used to connect natural gas long-distance pipelines. Another program is being developed to equip technicians with the skills needed to treat the wastewater that's a byproduct of the drilling method known as hydrofracking.

“This whole business of job creation and restarting the economy is extremely complex,” said Charles Blockidge, executive director of the alliance. “But what we’ve tried to do from a training perspective is to be as close as we possibly can to that economic development component and workforce component — to be in tune with what the workforce demands are going to be so that we’re able to train and supply appropriate individuals to meet those needs.”

This strategy may pay off over time, but more pertinent to the recession at hand, CCAC has created The Career Transition Center for Dislocated Workers that waives tuition and fees for laid-off workers (see story on page 8). The program has enrolled more than 325 individuals since its launch in the spring of 2009.

Programs like these enable counties to be responsive to the needs of industry and of workers, and Oates says they require a shift in thinking for local governments. “If they started to think, how do we do business, starting today, to be more attractive — keeping our businesses that are here, helping them grow and attracting new businesses — I think that would pull us out of the recession in lighting speed,” she said.