

OneKC WIRED supports training needs

By JASON GERTZEN

The Kansas City Star | January 8, 2008 | Page 10

Biotechnology backers strive to add to the growing list of new and expanding lab complexes in the region. They know, however, that this economic development will not occur, or be successful if it does, without also devoting substantial attention to the people required to work in those buildings.

OneKC WIRED is a centerpiece initiative addressing the work-force needs of the region's biotechnology, health-care and advanced manufacturing industries. It is supported by a \$15 million grant through a **U.S. Department of Labor** program with the ambitious aim of transforming regional economies.

The WIRED initiative here began in 2006, and area leaders report growing momentum. They have devised a series of efforts intended to educate and inspire scientists, engineers, health-care workers and technicians now and for decades to come.

"A highly skilled, educated and trained work force is an essential foundation of a strong regional economy," said Paul Scianna, executive director of the Kansas City area's WIRED program.

The economy here and across the country continues to shift from reliance on metal-bending manufacturing industries that require few workers with advanced skills or training.

While this trend is far from new, the pipeline providing workers with the right skills has yet to fully meet the new needs, Scianna said.

The mismatch between the most promising types of jobs and the workers able to fill them is a growing problem, Scianna said. Some forecasts call for national worker shortages of 10 million or more in the coming years if this mismatch is not sufficiently addressed.

Officials are using the WIRED money in this region to support several practical approaches toward overcoming various training obstacles.

Nursing programs, for example, grappled

with a bottleneck created by regulations limiting the number of students one teacher can supervise in the clinic.

A program supported through the WIRED initiative allows hospital nurses to spend part of their time as clinical faculty members.

"In essence, the hospital becomes an extension of the classroom," Scianna said. "It extends the number of people who could do clinical rotations."

The effort has already surpassed the goal of increasing area nursing school enrollment by 10 percent, Scianna said.

Another WIRED-supported effort involves reaching out to high school students, workers considering retraining and others about biotechnology. An interactive Web site will show what it's like to work in a lab, what type of training is required, and some of the programs available through area schools such as **Johnson County Community College**, said Luanne J. Wolfgram, an associate professor and a leader of the community college's biotechnology program.

Educators working with the WIRED program also have banded together in pursuit of a **National Science Foundation** grant of more than \$800,000 to enhance and improve coordination of high-tech training programs offered by area community colleges.

These programs are important because the worker-shortage trends Scianna described could emerge in this region. And soon.

In a 2006 study commissioned by the **Kansas City Area Life Sciences Institute**, four companies said they planned to hire more than 100 employees over the next three years. More than a dozen others expect to add 25 to 100 employees each during the same time frame.

"OneKC WIRED is providing tools to ensure that we have a work force competent in math and science skills to fill those jobs," said Keith Gary, director of program development for the institute.