

Partnerships, policies help us increase Alaska Hire



By Heidi Drygas
Commissioner

Governor Walker strongly supports Alaska Hire, and it is my top priority at the Department of Labor and Workforce Development. Creating more job opportunities for Alaskans requires coordination across a range of industries and use of many different public policy tools. Alaska Hire also demands consideration of labor market conditions, from the availability of affordable housing to the supply of skilled workers in particular industries.

Our department's Job Center staff has been on the front lines of our Alaska Hire efforts for many years. I intend to implement policies and partnerships to both support and enhance their direct work with employers and employees.

June *Trends* examines the Juneau housing market and young workers in Alaska. Like many Alaska communities, Juneau has an acute shortage of affordable housing. Business groups caution that an adequate supply of affordable housing is critical for effective workforce development.

Our Alaska Workforce Investment Board members agree, and recently discussed the nexus between housing availability and workforce development at the board's May meeting. Here's the bottom line: insufficient affordable housing exacerbates shortages of skilled workers in our communities, and that makes it harder for companies to hire locally. Lack of affordable housing also discourages highly skilled young workers from staying in Alaska, and we can't afford a brain drain to the Lower 48.

In some cases, the Department of Labor can work with employers to address this challenge. For example, I recently met with representatives of several large seafood processors to talk about how we can increase Alaska Hire in that industry. The Department of Labor has rented AVTEC dormitory rooms to processing employees in Seward to address the housing shortage during limited periods when dorms aren't being used by AVTEC students. We have also worked in partnership with seafood processors and the Department of Corrections on work release programs that allow supervised, low-risk inmates to work in processing plants. These work release pro-

grams increase the rate of Alaska Hire and help train inmates in the kind of employment skills they'll need once they're released. We are also working closely with processors to hire returning citizens after they complete their sentences.

With the current budget situation, Alaska simply can't afford the ever-rising costs associated with increased incarcerated populations. Every year, roughly 6,000 Alaskans are released upon completion of their prison sentence. They are our neighbors, and in many cases, our family members and friends. If they can't get a job, and find meaningful work to provide for themselves and their families, they are more likely to return to a life of crime. My department is committed to working closely with employers and the Department of Corrections to ensure former inmates can achieve financial independence and stay out of prison. Recidivism reduction is an important element of our Alaska Hire efforts.

Apprenticeships are another key policy tool to meet Alaska Hire goals. Construction apprenticeships have created great career paths for decades in Alaska, but apprenticeship isn't limited to the trades. We're also using registered apprenticeships as a tool to expand the supply of skilled, credentialed workers that employers demand. From advanced manufacturing to IT to health care, registered apprenticeships can help train our next generation workforce. We're working with the federal Department of Labor to expand our Job Centers' capacity to assist employers with development of apprenticeships. Of course, apprenticeships will continue to be the bedrock of developing our construction and resource development workforce. They are also an important tool for our evolving, technologically sophisticated labor market, and smart use of apprenticeships will ensure more Alaskans get hired for jobs in their community.

Alaska Hire is good for our families, good for local businesses, and good for our state's economy. From seafood employment to local housing solutions to the use of registered apprenticeships, we're using every tool in the toolbox to create more job opportunities for Alaskans.



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