$7 Million Education Grant For Displaced Workers

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MILWAUKEE (AP) — A $7 million federal grant program to help train laid-off autoworkers and other unemployed people for new careers may not seem like much, but Education Secretary Arne Duncan said it was money immediately available and more help will be on the way.

"This is a starting point. We want to do this now," Duncan said Thursday. "We want this money to hit the streets Oct. 1, so we're trying to move absolutely as quickly as we can and we're going to continue to do more."

Duncan called the nationwide program a "piece of a much bigger puzzle" to invest in higher education after his announcement at Milwaukee Area Technical College. A program is already in place there for laid-off workers who are training for another career or expanding their abilities in their current industry.

The Education Department expects to hand out about 28 three-year grants by funding innovative programs that are proven to put people back to work. The grant applications will be due Aug. 7 with awards handed out in September.

"We have to educate our way to a better economy," he said. "It's so important that everyone be involved and that we be as creative as we can to reach out to folks who may have lost jobs and give them that second chance."

The grants will provide initial funds for community colleges and other organizations that help adults develop new career skills. The Education Department urged groups to work together on programs.

The programs can provide services like tutoring, academic and career counseling or could remove financial constraints for adults returning to school by taking care of child care, transportation or textbook costs. They must be self-sustaining after the grant expires.

Duncan said the measure of success would be easy.

"Are these programs leading to real jobs? This is a very simple one to measure, to track and hopefully to count," he said.

Duncan, Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle and Manpower Inc. chief executive Jeffrey Joerres spent more than an hour discussing the grants and the economy to unemployed workers and students preparing for new careers.

Several other cabinet secretaries and Obama administration officials are visiting

Midwestern communities this week that have been affected by layoffs in the automotive industry.

Kathleen Montey is a student in the MATC program. The 61-year-old West Allis woman was laid off from her job at Wisconsin Die Casting after 15 years because of a lack of training in March 2008. After scouring the market, she is in the first year of a retraining program that she hopes will lead to a new position.

"I've been very lucky," Montey said. "Like a lot of us, I stayed at my job for a long time and we really weren't taught anything else than what we were doing and when you lose it, you need more skills."

Larry Norwood, a 52-year-old from Milwaukee, said he was cut from his job at Delphi Corp., an automotive parts supplier, in April after three years. He was looking for a chance to learn a new trade.

"It's rough," said Norwood, who is willing to take the time to train for a new career versus a fast track program that may leave him vulnerable to cuts in the future. "Jobs have really left manufacturing now. I want to change gears and probably go into technology or health care, one or the other."

While the grants would be up for grabs nationwide, education officials said that they want to focus on communities especially hard hit by job losses.

According to Milwaukee-based Manpower, the three toughest jobs for U.S. employers to fill this year are engineers, nurses and skilled or manual trade laborers. Out of the top 10 toughest jobs to fill, all but one are within reach of community college graduates, and Duncan said community colleges will play a big role.

"Nine of the 10 areas of critical need where there are jobs available, we can't export those as a country, we need trained workers. Community colleges can provide the skills that can get people back into the world of work," Duncan said. "There's a real opportunity here."

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