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## **Chicago, Cook County create Skills for Chicagoland's Future jobs program Not-for-profit will tailor job-training efforts to specific needs of individual corporations with positions to fill**

By Kathy Bergen

In an effort to chip away at the area's persistently high unemployment rate, Chicago and Cook County officials this week will formally launch a not-for-profit that will tailor job-training programs to the specific needs of individual corporations with positions to fill.

The program, called Skills for Chicagoland's Future, will try to speed placement of some of the area's 240,000 unemployed residents into local job openings, which number more than 200,000, according to the announcement by Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle.

"This is a real bridge," said Chicago businesswoman Penny Pritzker, noting it is the first regional adaptation of a similarly focused national effort called Skills for America's Future. Pritzker, the politically active investor and member of one of Chicago's wealthiest families, helped shape the national program, which was initiated by the Obama administration and is run by the Aspen Institute. Pritzker is chairwoman of the local organization's board.

The initial effort is modest in scale. The organization will have a \$3.2 million operating budget, with two-thirds coming from the city and county and one-third from private donors. In its first year, it will attempt to place 1,700 to 2,000 unemployed workers with as many as 85 companies, said Marie Trzupsek Lynch, president and chief executive officer of the organization, which has been gearing up during the late spring and summer.

In addition, it is hoping to steer up to \$3.5 million in government workforce training money to some of the companies to offset training costs.

"We're hoping by the third year to place 5,000 to 6,000 people a year," Lynch said, noting the numbers will depend on the availability of workforce training money.

Jobs programs tailored to specific companies raise a number of questions, including whether the training will be too narrow to be useful in subsequent jobs and whether it's fair for public money to benefit one company but not another, said Ross Eisenbrey, vice president at the liberal Economic Policy Institute.

Lynch said many of the skills will be transferable, and that providing training to match a specific company's hiring needs should reduce the time it takes to get an unemployed person back to work.

"So there is economic benefit to the city, a return on investment," she said. "To get someone back to work quickly benefits the whole region."

Lynch formerly ran the city's Chicago Career Tech training program, another not-for-profit, which will be phased out this fall. That program provided middle-income Chicago residents with training

mainly in health care and information technology, and it tested the waters for programs tailored to specific employer demand. About 600 people a year went through its training programs.

The new program will be driven strictly by employer hiring plans, and it will be open to unemployed residents throughout Cook County. It is the latest in a series of efforts to retool the area's job training, including the merger of the primary programs run by the city and the county, the latter having been marred by scandals, and revamping the city colleges to focus on training for specific job sectors. SCF will work with those programs, as well as with local universities and other education providers.

Several companies participated as the program was gearing up this spring and summer, including Allscripts Healthcare Solutions Inc., a software company headquartered at the Merchandise Mart. "Skills for Chicagoland's Future found candidates they felt had the right skills for us," said Joe Carey, the company's chief of staff.

The company whittled the preliminary pool to 16 from about 30, and then that group received four weeks of health care tech training at Malcolm X College, under a state-funded program, and another four weeks of training at the company.

All 16 were hired into customer support roles, among them South Side resident Daphne Jemison, a network administrator who had been unemployed for close to a year after her former employer eliminated about 40 jobs in a cost-cutting move.

"Many family members and friends also were out of work — it felt like doomsday," she said. "I didn't think this (opportunity) would ever happen. ... I was pretty ecstatic."