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TOP STORY

COMMUNITY MOBILIZING TO RESPOND TO LAYOFFS

By Britta Arendt Herald-Review Dec 20, 2017

“It’s the TAA golden ticket.”

That’s how Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce President Bud Stone describes Minnesota’s On the Job Training (OJT) program available through the federal Trade Adjustment Assistance Act (TAA) and administered by the state.

While the community still copes with Magnetation layoffs and prepares for the shutdown of Blandin Paper Company’s No. 5 paper machine, local leaders are looking for opportunities for positive response - ways to find these displaced workers new employment.

On Dec. 11, during the regular meeting of the Itasca County Township Association, Itasca County Commissioner Terry Snyder explained that the main objective will be to match unemployed employees with jobs in the community that align with their skill sets. Snyder said an emergency response group has been created to discuss reaction to the 150 laid-off former Magnetation workers who haven’t been called back yet and deal with what’s been estimated at 150 employees who could be affected with the Blandin downsizing.

As Snyder stressed, the big thing will be to train displaced workers for businesses that have jobs available, “so these individuals don’t leave the community - that’s so important for us.”

To help make that happen, the community can access the TAA “golden ticket.”

In a message to chamber members, Stone explained a letter from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) that is being distributed to workers facing unemployment outlining the OJT Program.

“If you are considering adding to your workforce, the OJT Program is a great way to develop employees with the unique skill sets your business needs,” writes Stone.

The letter clearly states that OJT is an incentive program for employers to hire trade-affected workers over other applicants. It further details the benefits to employers who participate in OJT.

Using their own training systems, employers will teach newly hired workers the knowledge and skills necessary for successful, permanent employment within their companies. OJT employers will make all hiring decisions, determine the job performance standards and identify which skills the employee would need to develop. As incentive, DEED says OJT participating employers will receive “prompt reimbursement payments” of up to 50 percent of the trainee’s wages during the training period.

OJT participants must be pre-approved and the displaced worker and employer cannot be approved or funded after the employee starts work.

As Stone explained, OJT was designed to help workers dislocated and laid-off because of global competition. Stone views the program as a great thing for local employers to be able to fill open positions with workers trained in the skills needed for the job. The chamber is helping to connect employers interested in OJT with job seekers.

DEED’s overview of TAA programs state that workers impacted by increased foreign trade activity may be eligible for training services like OJT as well as job search allowances, relocation allowances and other reemployment services.

The length of time OJT participating employers may utilize the program can be a few days, weeks or up to two years as determined by the training agreement. Each situation is customized according to the experience of the employee and the needs of the employer.

“It really depends on the skill sets of the employee that comes into the job,” explained Marla Beaty, senior Rapid Response Project Manager and TAA Liaison with DEED’s Office of Adult, Dislocated and Trade-Impacted Worker Services, who also confirmed that there is no cap to the number of employees an employer can hire with OJT.

Beaty said the training agreement is developed through TAA staff in St. Paul, together with the dislocated worker and a counselor at the workforce center. The Northeast Minnesota Office of Job Training has been awarded funding to serve the former Blandin employees. A training plan is submitted to TAA for approval to OJT before the employee is hired. TAA requires lay-off confirmation.

With the Blandin lay-offs expected, but not official until sometime in early 2018, Beaty said workers can start to access benefits through TAA such as job search and resume assistance.

“They can access services up to six months prior to their termination date,” added Beaty. “The whole point is to get them employed.”

For more information about TAA or the On the Job Training Program, visit <https://mn.gov/deed/job-seekers/recently-unemployed/layoff/> or call 1-888-234-1330 or email deed.taa@state.mn.us.

Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce is collecting a list of employers interested in possibly hiring workers for the OJT Program. The chamber will then be able to notify OJT Program job seekers of the list. Local employers are encouraged to contact Bud Stone at the chamber at 218-326-6619 or email him at bud@grandmn.com.

