

Shortage of skilled workers looms in U.S.

By Teresa Watanabe

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With baby boomers preparing to retire as the best educated and most skilled workforce in U.S. history, a growing chorus of demographers and labor experts is raising concerns that workers in California and the nation lack the critical skills needed to replace them.

In particular, experts say, the immigrant workers needed to fill many of the boomer jobs lack the English-language skills and basic educational levels to do so. Many immigrants are ill-equipped to fill California's fastest-growing positions, including computer software engineers, registered nurses and customer service representatives, a new study by the Washington-based Migration Policy Institute found.

Immigrants – legal and illegal – already constitute almost half of the workers in Los Angeles County and are expected to account for nearly all of the growth in the nation's working-age population by 2025 because native-born Americans are having fewer children. But the study, based largely on U.S. Census data, noted that 60% of the county's immigrant workers struggle with English and one-third lack high school diplomas.

The looming mismatch in the skills employers need and those workers offer could jeopardize the future economic vitality of California and the nation, experts say. Los Angeles County, the largest immigrant metropolis with about 3.5 million foreign-born residents, is at the forefront of this demographic trend.

"The question is, are we going to be a 21st century city with shared prosperity, or a Third World city with an elite group on top and the majority at poverty or near poverty wages?" asked Ernesto Cortes Jr., Southwest regional director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, a leadership development organization. "Right now we're headed toward becoming a Third World city. But we can change that."

How to respond to the inexorable demographic trends is a question sparking a flurry of studies, conferences and new programs. This week, a USC conference featuring Cortes, former federal housing secretary Henry Cisneros and other community leaders will explore ways to help immigrants better integrate into career-oriented jobs and civic life.

The Los Angeles Community College District has launched a workforce development committee of city officials and community leaders to figure out how to better prepare students for skills needed in the region.

Last week, more than 500 people gathered at Crenshaw High School at a conference sponsored by One LA-IAF, a network of more than 100 churches, unions and community groups. The network has launched a collaboration with community colleges and employers to recruit low-wage workers, many of them immigrants, and train them for jobs as nursing assistants and solar-panel installers.

“Our vision is to create a seamless program that takes undereducated, underemployed and underskilled workers and puts them into education and job training that will connect them to career ladders that pay well and offer benefits,” said Yvonne Maria Jimenez, a One LA leader. “It’s really rebuilding the middle class.”

One of the current trainees is Wendy Estrada, a 30-year-old Honduras native and naturalized U.S. citizen who aspires to move from her current work as a house cleaner to a certified nursing assistant and ultimately to work as a licensed vocational nurse.

Estrada first learned about the program at her parish, St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church in Los Angeles. One LA organizers came to recruit members for the pilot program, funded by the state community college system, offering free classes to upgrade English and math skills to levels required for a certified nursing assistant course.

Estrada used to dream of becoming a doctor in Honduras before marriage, motherhood and work struggles in Los Angeles waylaid those plans. She learned English soon after legally arriving in Los Angeles to join her mother in 1998, so determined to master the language that she went to classes morning and night, five hours a day, for a year.

When the recruiters came to her parish, Estrada immediately applied.

“I loved the slogan, ‘Building a bridge to a new and brighter future,’ ” she said. “I knew that education can improve your life, but it was like I fell asleep having to work, pay the rent and just survive. This program has reawakened my dreams.”

For four months, she received training at Los Angeles Valley College in basic math and English skills geared toward healthcare work – calculating a baby’s head measurement, for instance – along with skills in time management, meeting goals, interviewing and job hunting.

In February, Estrada began her certified nursing assistant course, where she has gained both practical skills and academic knowledge. On a recent afternoon, she huddled over another student posing as a patient while trying to figure out which way to turn him to remove a protective bed pad. Instructor Dory Higgins strode over, took a quick glance and showed Estrada the right technique.

“You change the soiled pad immediately, before you do anything else, because of skin damage,” Higgins said as students took notes.

The growing import of immigrant workers is reflected in Higgins' class. Among 21 students in class that day, 17 were immigrants from a range of countries: Mexico, India, Guatemala, Egypt, Honduras, Indonesia, Cuba, Congo, Ukraine and the tiny West African nation of Burkina Faso.

One of them was Maria Reyes, 30, a Guatemala native who signed up for the program through her church. Reyes, who came to Los Angeles at age 5, graduated from high school and got pregnant at 18; she began working as a waitress to bring in money for her new family. Her minimum-wage job, however, was leading nowhere.

"I wanted to keep doing something better," Reyes said. "This way I'm helping my family and other people with needs too."

The class practices with mentors at the Center at Park West nursing home in Reseda. On a recent Sunday, Estrada showed up at 7 a.m. to make the rounds with Beatrice Bustamante, a veteran nursing assistant from Colombia. The pair chatted and joked with the elderly residents as they helped them with massages and shaves, bathing and denture care.

The job isn't easy. On her first day, Estrada cried at the shock of seeing residents coughing up their food, suffering loneliness and isolation. But she said she loved helping the residents – and they seemed to enjoy her as well.

"They're the best," said Edna Berry, an octogenarian who is bedridden with a gangrenous leg. "These people are as much family to me as my own family."

Park West administrator Carrie Marks estimated that 90% of her 110 staff positions are filled by immigrants, who she said make up the "vast majority" of job applicants.

"It's in the self-interest of the older generation to have immigrants here," said Dowell Myers, a USC urban planning and demography professor and author of the 2007 book "Immigrants and Boomers: Forging a New Social Contract for the Future of America."

"Even if you don't like it, you have to ask the question: Who's going to fill your jobs, buy your homes and pay the taxes for old-age support programs?" Myers said.

Nearly one-third of all Americans – 76 million people – were born between 1946 and 1964. Boomer retirements are projected to open up nearly 1 million jobs in Los Angeles County and 3 million in California in the next decade.

The ratio of seniors to workers is expected to double in the next 20 years in Los Angeles – a more rapid pace than is expected for the state or nation, Myers said.

The new Migration Policy Institute report, however, noted promising opportunities in Los Angeles for better integrating immigrants into mainstream economic and civic life. The region has a more settled immigrant population; new immigration to Los Angeles is at its lowest level in more than 30 years.

An expanding and more culturally integrated population of immigrants' children and increasing naturalization rates among immigrants could also help ease the transition, said Michael Fix, vice president of the institute and co-author of the study.

"L.A. is probably better equipped than in the past to deal with this, but still faces pretty big obstacles," Fix said.

The challenge of filling boomer jobs has prompted several firms and public agencies to start their own training programs. The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power projects that one-third of its 8,300 workers will be eligible for retirement in the next five years. It is teaming up with unions to recruit new apprentices for such jobs as electrical distribution mechanics and help them learn the trade. Entry-level meter readers earn about \$12 an hour, but electrical distribution mechanics can earn \$48,000 a year with health benefits.

Susana Reyes, who works with the joint training institute run by the utility and electrical workers union, said she did not know how many new recruits were immigrants, but that a recent class included 40% Latinos and 40% African Americans.

"We are anxious to make sure a pipeline of workers is out there and of the quality we need," she said.

Ultimately, experts say, greater investments in public education, a renewed focus on vocational education and better job training are critical to California's continued prosperity. Stephen Levy of the Center for the Continuing Study of the California Economy said the foundation for the state's robust economy was laid by farsighted politicians and voters from both parties. They supported the GI Bill, Pell grants and the vast expansion of the state university system, Levy said, producing the best educated workforce in U.S. and California history.

The investments more than paid off: Every dollar invested in public education produces \$8 in added tax revenues, according to Myers. He and others worry that Gov. **Arnold Schwarzenegger's** proposed cuts in the education budget could cripple efforts to produce the well-educated and skilled workers California urgently needs.

Even some groups that advocate a reduction in legal immigration as a way to preserve U.S. jobs agree with the idea of better training for the existing workforce.

"Absolutely we would favor educating and training the labor force of legal immigrants over bringing in more foreign workers," said Roy Beck, president of the Virginia-based NumbersUSA.

"Let's invest in people we have here."

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For more on the Migration Policy Institute study, visit www.migrationpolicy.org

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