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Mass. Labor secretary Acosta urges a focus on building skills

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Westborough, MA Massachusetts Secretary of Labor and Workforce Development Rosalin Acosta told members of MassEcon that the Commonwealth has become a more attractive place to do business, with 100,000 more joining the workforce over the last year.

That is partly why unemployment has risen slightly in the state, even though it is still lower than in the United States as a whole, she said. “The state of the economy in Massachusetts is very strong,” Acosta said.

On the job for only three months, Acosta, who immigrated from Cuba to the United States as a young child and worked for three decades in the banking business, said the Baker administration is focusing on attracting more businesses to Massachusetts.

She said it is also working to determine which skills are in short supply and facilitating worker training, spreading the economic success felt in Eastern Massachusetts around the rest of the state, and promoting diversity in companies’ ranks.

Acosta said there are 200,000 job openings in Massachusetts now and only 154,000 people actively seeking work. “That’s why you can’t find talent,” she said, speaking to 40 business people at MassEcon’s morning members meeting.

Acosta said employers need to help prepare workers, some lacking “soft skills – smart kids, but they don’t know how to pick up a phone or shake a hand.”

The state is doing its part, she said, through several programs, including the administration’s Workforce Skills Cabinet, made up of the secretaries of Economic Development, Labor, and Education. They meet every two weeks, because multiple issues need to be addressed and, “We know we can’t do this in silos.”

Sixteen Workforce Investment Boards across the state have been consolidated into seven, and in November those groups will present regional plans to the three secretaries for economic and job growth. “Business and employers are always at the table,” she said. “You are that front line.”

Acosta described the 32 Career Centers across the state and said she was working on making their

efforts consistent and better understood by giving them a new brand or name, yet undetermined. “You have to start with branding whatever it is you want to distribute,” she said.

The state’s Learn and Earn program, she said, is designed to prevent situations where families are in need and receiving public benefits, like transportation or housing subsidies, but are kicked off if they work and increase their earnings modestly. “The safety net we created has now become a trap,” she said, and up to 200 people so far have been able to keep vouchers they otherwise would have lost.

Acosta said in one survey, 80%t of business people they hired through word of mouth or personal connections. “There’s talent – you’ve just got to look harder. Sometimes they’re not always among the people you know,” she said.

“It’s been proved over and over again that the more diverse your company is the more profitable it will be.”

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