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Education key for Miss., experts say

More must seek degrees, skills training

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Mississippi has lost 50,000 jobs in the last two years and it would "need 10 more Nissans to fill the gap," state economist Phil Pepper said Friday.

"We will see very little increase in employment in the next several years," he said.

And education will be the key to making the most of the opportunities that are there, Pepper and other speakers said during an economic forum at the Jackson Marriott sponsored by the Mississippi Economic Policy Center, an independent, nonpartisan initiative that analyzes policies.

Natasha Boyd and her husband, John, traveled from Moss Point to attend the forum. They help operate Life Sowers, a faith-based, community service group that assists the underprivileged with education and other needs.

"Everything my husband and I do for Life Sowers comes from our own pockets," Natasha Boyd said. "We have limited funding. (The people we work with) are one paycheck away from being evicted."

Pepper said a person with a four-year degree will earn about three times as much as a high school dropout.

He said today's jobs require a more skilled work force, which eliminates some career options that were previously available to the less-educated resident.

While a four-year college education greatly increases a person's options, MEPC senior analyst Rebecca Dixon said community colleges can provide training for some in-demand careers.

Many jobs that require mid-level skills, such as truck driving, welding and certain nursing fields, are expected to grow and pay \$30,000 to \$50,000 over the next five years, she said.

That type of job can help a family meet its most basic needs from month to month, she said. MEPC found the average Hinds County household needs to earn \$31,925 to be able to pay bills and fulfill other duties without public or private assistance.

A registered nurse earning about \$58,000 in the Jackson area can easily meet that benchmark. Someone earning roughly \$15,000 annually in a minimum-wage job will likely struggle, Dixon said.

Panelist Michael Rowett detailed an Arkansas program that has helped residents get needed work-force training.

Since 2005, the Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative has aided more than 14,000 people. He said 25 institutions, mostly community colleges, split about \$11.2 million annually to develop career programs

that can match participants with in-demand careers.

Of the 14,000, 63 percent have earned a credential, certification or associate degree, said Rowett, research and communications manager at Southern Good Faith Fund, an Arkansas-based nonprofit that specializes in work-force development. He said 89 percent of those who join the program are retained from semester to semester.
