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## State labor chief outlines help available for workers, business

Tells Morris Chamber that programs will aid in surviving recession

*By Michael Daigle  
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FLORHAM PARK -- State labor Commissioner David J. Socolow said Friday that federal stimulus funds for unemployment insurance, job training and health insurance will give state residents and businesses a better chance of surviving the current recession.

Funds in the bill to support the shift to electronic medical records, numerous highway and transit projects, and school rehabilitation will support thousands of jobs, he said.

Socolow was the keynote speaker at a Morris County Chamber of Commerce breakfast at which he and two other speakers discussed tools that could help businesses survive the current recession and retain employees.

The first step, he said, is "to admit the size of the problem," he said, adding that Japan failed to address the scope of its economic woes a decade ago and as a result fell into a decade of slow economic growth.

The four parts of the current recovery plan are reigniting consumer demand, infrastructure investment, transition toward a "green" energy system and investment in technologies that help develop a modern workplace and economy, he said.

In December, the state's unemployment rate hit 7.1 percent, up from 4.2 percent in December 2007. Of the 15,200 jobs lost in December, 5,000 were in professional and businesses services.

This summer, more than 3,000 New Jersey military personnel will be returning from service. Socolow said that employers must be mindful of laws that protect the jobs those persons had before they deployed, and urged the employers in the room to consider hiring veterans when they fill an open position.

Among the beneficial aspects of the federal stimulus plan are extended unemployment benefits and a reduction in the cost to a worker for joining the federal COBRA health care program when they are out of work, Socolow said. The previous program called for the worker to pay 100 percent of the COBRA premium. The new cost will be 35 percent of the premium, which will give more families the opportunity to hold onto their health insurance during a period of unemployment, he said.

Socolow also reminded the audience of programs introduced by Gov. Jon Corzine in October and approved by the state Legislature to put in place support programs and business tax cuts that give the state a head start toward economic recovery.

He said that among the state programs that offer help to unemployed workers are the Professional Services Group in the One-Stop Career Center in Dover, retraining programs that use the county colleges as a resource, and programs that offer training and financial support for workers seeking to start a business.

Richard J. Cino, managing partner for Jackson Lewis, a law firm advising management in workplace decisions, said his attorneys are taking calls from clients seeking legal advice relating to potential job cuts.

"The situation is tough, and the main thing is jobs," Cino said. "We are helping employers try to do something to protect jobs and remain viable."

Shanny Peer, a project manager for the Families and Work Institute, said last year 30 Morris County companies received awards from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation as participants in the national When Work Works program designed to highlight workplace management practices that preserve jobs through flextime, telecommuting, job sharing, allowances for care-giving opportunities or phased retirements.

Actions taken by Corzine in October, Socolow said, were leveraging funds to start energy efficiency programs with the state's utility companies; fast tracking \$4 billion in school construction projects that were in the final stages of design; promoting the third Hudson River transit tunnel, which is expected to start construction this spring; reductions in certain business taxes, and the start of a tax credit program that rewards businesses for hiring new employees, which Corzine said Thursday has drawn 7,200 applications.

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