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**SPOTLIGHT**

**Nancy Huntington Stager**

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**About the author:** Nancy Huntington Stager leads Eastern Bank's human resources division and the \$60 million Eastern Bank Charitable Foundation. Stager's 25-plus years of human resource management experience lends itself to directing the bank's talent acquisition and management, training, development, employee relations, compensation, benefits, and payroll. The Eastern Bank Charitable Foundation last year provided \$2.6 million in donations to more than 1,200 local organizations.

# Fixing the problem of long-term unemployment

New joblessness realities require radical fixes

**T**oday's long-term unemployment is a different animal. It is the product not only of the recession, but of a rapidly changing business world in which skills become obsolete in a nanosecond and, unfortunately, in which the skill gap experienced by displaced workers is widening to a chasm. In Massachusetts, nearly 500,000 people are unemployed — about 42 percent have not worked for 26 weeks or more, and for 30 percent, the duration is over a year. The average length of unemployment continues to rise. Just as sobering are the hundreds of thousands of people currently underemployed — working, but in jobs that don't make use of the skills they have.

While the recession has caused significant job losses, technology and business efficiency improvements have also removed jobs permanently from the economy — which accounted for 58 percent of the state's unemployed in 2009 (up from 35 percent in 2007). Many people have exhausted their unemployment benefits, and to find employment, they need to upgrade their skills, and even transition to entirely new occupations.

The data show that the number of long-term unemployed and their length of unemployment are both increasing. Whether or not we are witnessing the growth of a permanent unemployed class, unemployment's personal, financial and emotional toll and its draining effects on our people, our economy, and our state and local governments are clearly unacceptable.

We as a commonwealth would benefit by reversing this trend, but how?

We need proactive solutions for long-term unemployment that help these people gain the skills they need not only for today's but for tomorrow's workforce, and that enable employers to easily find these retrained workers. No single group can solve this problem alone. Collaborative efforts between all three, however, provide the best model for providing funding, skills training, and connections between potential employees and employers.

**I BELIEVE THAT SOLVING TODAY'S SEEMINGLY INTRACTABLE LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYMENT PROBLEM REQUIRES INDIVIDUALS, BUSINESSES, EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, AND GOVERNMENT TO WORK TOGETHER.**

One promising statewide solution lies in a recent collaboration among the commonwealth's 16 regional Workforce Investment Boards — public-private partnerships that bring together state agencies, educational institutions and corporations specifically to advance job development for workers and training and placement services for businesses. The WIBs, along with their One-Stop Career Centers, have submitted a proposal to the U.S. Department of Labor that would focus on reversing long-term unemployment by strengthening business relationships within local critical industries such as manufacturing, health care, biotechnology and financial services.

Through these deeper relationships, WIB and Career Center staff would have a much more sophisticated understanding of these industries' employment needs and practices, and would be able

to provide stronger advice, support and direction to unemployed individuals in the effort to help them enter new careers. In addition, this proposal would enhance technology available to Career Center staff and customers, and improve the ability to make connections with companies in this constantly evolving, technologically driven hiring culture. Joining in this effort are the 15 community colleges, also poised to make changes needed to better serve this important part of our labor force.

If approved and funded by the DOL, the Learning Across Business Sectors Initiative would also provide the unemployed with practical education through job-site training, internships, on-the-job training and apprenticeships. The proposed program would extend the public-private partnership and would help workers gain contemporary skills and enable businesses to find potential employees more easily and less expensively. The WIB/Career Centers system is in place and quite robust. To me, it is a perfect example of a resource that can be put to work to take the "un" out of long-term unemployment.

I believe that solving today's seemingly intractable long-term unemployment problem requires individuals, businesses, educational institutions, and government to work together — and reap the benefits together. With programs such as the one briefly described here as the catalyst, unemployed people would have a means to learn and connect with workforce educators and companies, and ultimately get back to contributing their best efforts in a work setting. Working together will make the difference.

That, in my view, is the essential basis for solving many problems, and in this case, generating long-term economic benefits.

**Nancy Huntington Stager** is executive vice president of human resources and charitable giving at Eastern Bank and vice chairwoman of the North Shore Workforce Investment Board.

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