

# New leadership will refocus Michigan Works!

**Paul R. Kopenkoskey**  
Special to the Business Journal

A local agency of Michigan Works! Kent and Allegan Counties, the Area Community Service Employment and Training Council recently tapped Sylvia Hopson to serve as its new executive director, and its Workforce Development Board elected David Smith as its chairman.

Now, say the two, the heavy lifting begins to make the agency regional in its scope, connect a highly skilled labor force with employers on the prowl to fill high-skilled positions, prod the unemployed to get the training they need for those skilled jobs, and do a better job of getting committees of the Michigan Works! system to work collaboratively.

"It's not like we're talking about something that's broken that needs



**Smith**

to be fixed, but we're taking something that's operating very well and we're trying to refocus it a little bit," said Smith, who brings more than two decades of human resources experience to his new post, including 18 years as president/CEO of The Employers' Association. Smith also served on the WDB for many years, initially through the Private Industry Council in 1995.

"I've been on the board for 10 years, and the Kent and Allegan Michigan Works always has been high performance and exceeded state standards, but from an employer's standpoint, there sometimes has been frustration because

there are available jobs but without available talent," said Smith.

Linking talent with in-demand jobs requires a "totally new" interconnection with the Michigan Economic Development Corp., said Hopson, formerly ACSET's associate director before succeeding retiring Beverly Drake as its executive director.

Hopson credits Elliot Forsyth, who took over the reins in April as MEDC's vice president/COO, for tracking the skills Michigan's employers demand in manufacturing, health care, information technology, energy and aquiculture, and then honing work-force development and adult education programs so the available labor force is trained in those skills.

"In the past, it's been like the state's there and the locals (work-force development) do their thing," said Hopson.

"This is going to give potential employees the opportunity to have the skill sets they need. Employers are telling us now they don't have the workers with the skill sets they require, and we have workers who are unemployed who cannot fill those jobs. We could either work on keeping the recruitment strong or work heavily on training, and Elliot says we have to do both and we have to do them quickly. As a result of that, the job seekers are going to benefit because they're going to be able to fulfill those jobs."

Hopson said that, although she is now executive director of ACSET, she intends to cross-train others because of the agency's intricate network of funding.

"I was really comfortable and happy in the associate director position ... but I applied because of the

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## Cross-training will be key

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complexity of the organization," said Hopson. "I want to make sure I'm cross-training people so there are several folks who understand this work and this organization. We have 10 to 15 different funding sources, with different timeframes, and on the community-action side, we have about 30 to 40 funding sources with different eligibility sources. It's been a big part of my life."

Comparing them to silos independent of one another, Smith said he would like the Michigan Works system to develop an integrated link between the board's youth, adults, futures and other committees to focus on common goals to meet current and future needs by making employers and employees key customers. Better communication and collaboration will make the programs the most efficient possible, he said.

"The thing we've been looking at trying to do is to become more employer driven — transform employers into our primary customers," said Smith. "Our focus is still people looking for work, but I don't think employers have been looked at as clients, and we need to get out of our Kent and Allegan silo and look at ourselves and become more regional."

"We're scheduling a semi-annual meeting with the chairs of those groups so we could talk and listen to what the futures committee, what the work-force committee and these other committees need to feed a regional youth committee," added Smith. "We're looking at high school kids who may not

have a (college) degree and how to get that group of people into the work force. It's critical that we not have silos, but have barn doors that are open, and that we share a silo together."

Some employers, Smith said, are frustrated that a low-level labor work force doesn't always have the go-to attitude.

"Many member companies have said because of unemployment, employers are told people can't go to work for \$10 an hour. They can make more on unemployment because they don't have to pay day care," said Smith. "I'm not saying everybody who's unemployed can't find work and that those unemployed don't find work. It's not so much a cultural but attitudinal thing."

A big challenge is training the unemployed so they have the skills that employers require, said Win Irwin, CEO of Irwin Seating Co. and former chairman of the ACSET Workforce Development Board.

"There's such a mismatch," said Irwin. "A lot of employers, even in an economy like we've got, are not filling positions because people do not have the right skill set they need."

Programs such as Grand Rapids Community College's Pathways to Prosperity, along with other community partner organizations, can help bridge the inability to read or write, and acquire new skills to make people employable.

"The single biggest barrier has been a lack of literacy skills," said Irwin. "Pathways to Prosperity is needed to recruit people who need job-specific skills at the community college."

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