

CLC, Inc. operates this aircraft manufacturing class and TCC is a contractor that provides classroom training.



Star-Telegram/ Ron T. Ennis Students practice machining techniques at the Tarrant County College training facility in Fort Worth for skills needed to work somewhere like Lockheed Martin.

By DAVE
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WASHINGTON --

Roughly a quarter of the nation's 637,000 aerospace workers could be eligible for retirement this year, raising fears that America may be facing a serious skills shortage in the factories that churn out commercial and military aircraft.

"It's a looming issue that's getting more serious year by year," says Marion Blakey, president and chief executive of the Aerospace Industries Association.

"These are real veterans. It's a hard work force to replace."

The AIA, which represents aircraft manufacturers and suppliers, has designated the potential skills drain as one of its top 10 priorities in this year's presidential race. And one of the major unions that represent aerospace workers is also aggressively embracing the issue in a rare alliance between labor and management. A mass exodus of older workers also means the loss of a vast reservoir of knowledge, skills and institutional memory dating to the early years of the Vietnam War. Atlee Cunningham Jr., an engineer and senior fellow at Lockheed Martin's Fort Worth plant, calls it a "gut feel" that can't be learned in books or training manuals. Neeley said the company is currently able to replace retirees, but she acknowledges, "I think that's a concern of the future." In Wichita (Kansas), groundbreaking is expected this spring on the \$50 billion National Center for Aviation Training to help perpetuate the region's stature as a world leader in aviation. Wichita has an estimated 35,000 aerospace workers and accounts for nearly half of general-aviation deliveries in the United States.

"We're really attacking it as an opportunity," says Jim Schwarzenberger, a vice president for the Wichita Metro Chamber of Commerce. Preserving and bolstering the aerospace work force is also a major objective in the Seattle-Tacoma region, where Boeing is a leading employer. "We've postured ourselves to manage this," says Dianna Peterson, Boeing's director of strategic work-force planning. Edmonds Community College and the University of Washington both offer advanced education in composites and other aircraft materials. Boeing is also working with labor to reinvigorate apprentice programs and other "knowledge transfer" concepts that pass aerospace know-how from one generation to another.