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LEGISLATURE

Hinds seeks to connect workers with region's jobs

His amendment to create a 'workforce alignment czar' was added to state budget

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Call it a good first effort. In his maiden speech on the Senate floor on Wednesday, state Sen. Adam Hinds, D-Pittsfield, made a pitch for funding in the state budget to create a new position to help link businesses to workers in Western Mass.

The amendment, which was adopted by voice vote, earmarks \$75,000 for the Berkshire County Regional Employment Board to fund a workforce alignment czar.

The position is designed to help connect the large number of people looking for work in a region with the large numbers of available jobs.

"I hear it on both sides — the frustration of folks who say they're not sure what jobs they could take, and the employers who come to me



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every day and say they're having difficulty [filling] open positions," Hinds told The Eagle shortly after the vote. "I'm constantly confronted with the reality that we have 1,500 to 2,000 available jobs [in Berkshire County] every single day."

An inability to fill jobs can also cause businesses to not pursue opportunities for expansion, he said. "We're talking about missed opportunities," he said.

The czar would be an employee of the employment board, tasked with pulling together resources, working closely with the business community to understand their needs and open positions and

getting that information out to the general public. The czar also would work with the employment board to gather insight about what specific job opportunities are going unfulfilled for longer periods of time, said Heather Boulger, executive director of the Berkshire County Regional Employment Board.

Whoever fills the position would also be in touch with community organizations to help connect job-seekers to applicable training programs and employment opportunities, Boulger said.

"This is the one person that's going to pull all the pieces together," she said.

Hinds, who was elected in November and took office in January, met with Boulger about a month ago to discuss the board's recent work.

She told him that the board had trouble connecting people in the area with jobs. "There's just a false perception that there are no opportunities in the Berkshires," she said. "And we want to change that."

On Wednesday, over 1,800 jobs in Berkshire County were listed on one particular database — Jobquest, she said.

When people believe in a lack of opportunity in the Berkshires, they tend to leave the region "never to return" or drop out of the labor market altogether, she said.

The employment board tries to help change this mentality, but can only do so much as a small office, she said. "Having another person will certainly help to reverse this trend," she said.

The czar will also augment the employment board's work

by developing long-term relationships with employers and marketing various jobs and training programs. "None of us have enough resources to really go out into the community to do that," she said.

The amendment is subject to potential change or removal by a six-member conference committee that negotiates the final budget.

If the amendment survives the budget process, the funding for the position would be for fiscal 2018, which begins July 1, 2017, Boulger said. The employment board plans to aggressively pursue funding opportunities to extend the position into future years. "Once we can show success, the funding should be easier to come by," she said. "[Hinds] is providing us an opportunity to help plant [a] seed."