

First ever round of EARN grants awarded

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EASTON — On Monday, Dec. 30, 29 recipients were awarded the state's first round of EARN Maryland Planning Grants.

The EARN grants, which stands for Employment Advancement Right Now, mark the first funds awarded under the new state-funded competitive workforce and economic development grant initiative that took effect in June 2013.

“The 29 emerging Strategic Industry Partnerships awarded EARN Planning Grants today represent a diversity of industries, regions, partner organizations and target populations as rich as the state of Maryland,” Maryland Department of Labor Secretary Leonard Howie said Monday, Dec 30.

EARN Maryland, which is managed by the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation, is a first-of-its-kind initiative. It's designed to ensure that state employers have the talent they need to compete and grow while providing targeted education and skills training to Maryland workers.

“There is no progress without a job. By awarding today's state-funded planning grants to these selected strategic partnerships, we're moving our state forward and helping more Marylanders get the skills they need to qualify for Maryland's most in-demand jobs,” Gov. Martin O'Malley said on Monday. “Working together, these EARN planning grants will provide industry-specific, state-of-the-art training for high-demand occupations.”

For fiscal year 2014, \$4.5 million was set aside by the state for the EARN Maryland program. The grants are being distributed in a two-phase competitive process.

The 29 awarded on Monday were part of EARN Maryland Planning Grants, which provide seed funding to allow emerging partnerships to analyze their respective workforce needs in detail, expand their partnerships by adding additional members and develop the best possible workforce training plans to close skills gaps, grow the state's economy and increase employment opportunities.

The average planning grant award amount this round is \$22,000, according to DLLR.

The Eastern Shore Area Health Education Center in Cambridge was one such recipient of an EARN Maryland Planning Grant to the tune of \$20,600.

The Eastern Shore AHEC is a nonprofit under the University of Maryland School of Medicine that works with health care and health care services on the Eastern Shore, especially training for the workforce, according to Cyndi Slacum, health careers coordinator at Eastern Shore AHEC.

“This is an effort to really get on top of and ahead of the future needs in the health care workforce,” Slacum said.

Slacum said the organization is excited to receive the grant. She said the nonprofit plans to work with health care-related entities like hospitals, clinics, health care professionals and the education institutions that train them to work in a “united effort to look at what are our real workforce needs and how can we prepare for them quickly.”

“We have a large consortium of employers and trainers who will plan together how to prepare cutting-edge health care professional to meet the needs of the Eastern Shore’s population,” Suzi Peel, project coordinator at Eastern Shore AHEC, said.

The next round of EARN Maryland grants are the implementation grants, which are planned to be awarded in June 2014.

Implementation grants will fund worker training in the skills that employers demand from the training provider best able to meet industry-identified needs, according to DLLR.

The solicitation for implementation grants will be released this month, according to DLLR, with proposals, or finalized workforce training plans, due by March 3.

DLLR will host a statewide pre-proposal conference open to any potential EARN Maryland Implementation Grant applicant. The conference is at 1 p.m. Friday, Jan. 31, at the Anne Arundel Community College’s Robert E. Kauffman Theater, 101 College Parkway, Arnold.

The Shore Manufacturing Strategic Industry Partnership, a coupling of Chesapeake College and the Upper Shore Workforce Investment Board, was also awarded an EARN Maryland grant. Representatives of the board and college were unavailable for comment because the school is closed for winter break until Monday.