

### OUR OPINION

# Closing skills gap critical to Berkshires

With General Dynamics of Pittsfield so desperate to fill jobs it has placed a billboard advertising its many openings on South Street, Wednesday's Economic Development Policy Summit at Berkshire Community College could not have been more timely. General Dynamics and other Berkshire businesses need skilled workers, and Pittsfield and the Berkshires need to find ways to provide them.

Filling that skills gap was a central topic at the summit hosted by First District U.S. Rep. Richard Neal, a Springfield Democrat. ("The challenge? 'Bridge that skills gap,'" Eagle, Thursday) The event's keynote speaker was Wayfair co-founder and CEO Niraj Shah, whose sales and service center in Pittsfield's Clock Tower building, scheduled to open Thursday, will bring 300 jobs to the city.

Heather Boulger, executive director of the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board in Pittsfield, observed in The Eagle that there are jobs to be filled in Pittsfield and bridging the skills gap is required to fill them with qualified workers. Mr. Shah said at the forum that Wayfair will train people but certain "core skills" are required to get in the door. His comments were echoed by Stephen Boyd, the CEO of Boyd Technologies of Lee and board chairman of the Berkshire Innovation Center in Pittsfield.

The skills gap in the Berkshires isn't new, and it isn't as if state and local agencies have not focused on finding ways to close it. The two Berkshire public colleges have as well, and Berkshire Community College President Ellen Kennedy told attendees at Wednesday's forum that the college is establishing a program that will provide internships at local businesses. The new Taconic High School in Pittsfield, with its focus on high-tech vocational education, should help close that gap in the years ahead. But the problem is a persistent one, and it puts the Berkshires and its largest city at a disadvantage when

compared to the Albany, N.Y., and Boston areas in attracting businesses and helping established businesses grow.

General Dynamics, with its secure, good-paying jobs, is perhaps the closest thing the city has to General Electric in its heyday. Those employees put down roots, buy houses, become Little League coaches, and serve as volunteers and on city boards and committees. They contribute to the fabric of a community, and that General Dynamics is having difficulty finding and keeping those kind of employees is worrisome.

Job skills is not the only issue, of course, as General Dynamics and other companies must attract and keep young people who might feel out of place in a city and county with an aging demographic and not as much to offer millennials as do other cities and regions. If those companies can persuade their young employees to stick around awhile, however, they can sell the county based on its quality of life, good schools and low housing costs, particularly in Pittsfield.

In terms of population, the fastest growing sector in the county is that of immigrants, who are critically important in filling vacant jobs, empty seats in schools and pushing the economy. Mr. Shah's father immigrated to the U.S. from India and worked at GE in Pittsfield as a mechanical engineer. Mr. Shah then brought his business to the city that he grew up in. That's 300 jobs with a tangible link to immigration, and Mr. Shah's dismay at a shortsighted federal immigration policy that is focused on chasing immigrants away is understandable.

Pittsfield and Berkshire County need immigrants — and more skilled job candidates and more reasons for young people to come here and stay here. There are no easy answers to these challenges, but finding them is necessary if the city and county are to thrive economically.