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Leaders here want to take a page from California in biotech

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St. Louis-area leaders want to copy a California program that's retrained laid-off employees of airlines to work in that state's booming biotech sector. In St. Louis, the workers won't necessarily have lost jobs in the aviation industry. But they will be jobless or under-employed, and they'll be retrained -- for free -- to work in entry-level biotech jobs. The program, set to launch here in April, represents an ongoing shift in the way public job training programs are conducted. Years ago, the main goal was to put people back to work quickly, often in old-line industries such as manufacturing, those involved with the project say. This newer program seeks to match trainees up with jobs in growing industries that often will lead to even better jobs. "So much training had been about just getting people into a job, any job," said Julian Alssid, executive director of Workforce Strategies Inc., a New York-based consultant for the project. "This is about trying to get people in jobs where they can advance along career pathways." Locally, the program is being led by St. Louis Community College and the Metropolitan Education and Training, or MET, center in Wellston. Funding will come from the state of Missouri, city of St. Louis and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private charitable group. The program will begin with a class of 15 to 20 students at St. Louis Community College. After 12 weeks, they will be ready to work as lab technicians or in other biotech jobs. The program is taking cues from one in San Mateo, Calif. That West Coast program was begun in the wake of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when droves of workers at airlines lost their jobs. Those laid-off workers and others entered a California community college and studied in classrooms and labs. Now, about 200 graduates are in jobs at biotech companies, such as Genentech Inc., and are paid about \$35,000 a year, said Alssid, whose company also consulted on the California program. Carolyn Seward, director of the MET center, said she's hopeful that the fledgling St. Louis program eventually will see similar success. The project will cost about \$150,000 a year, she said. "We think that biotech and life sciences are growing in this region, and at the entry level there are jobs for people who don't think of college first," said Lorna Finch, senior manager for workforce initiatives at St. Louis Community College. "Once they're employed, they'll have further opportunities." St. Louis business leaders, similar to their counterparts in many other metropolitan areas, have been scrambling in recent years to establish a biotech hub here. A recently released study from consultant Battelle Memorial Institute reports that the region is making notable progress. "You have this seed of biotech in St. Louis," Alssid said. "What we're trying to do is put in place a pipeline of skilled workers that can be

used in this growth sector." The program is symbolic of the evolution of the MET center, which opened in the mid-1990s and became known for retraining unemployed and disadvantaged people for industrial machining jobs. Several St. Louis area biotech companies are assisting with the design of the new program, Seward said. It isn't far enough along to release the names of the companies, she said. In California, private companies have taken a larger role. Some firms now inform the training coordinators of how many employees they'll need each year. Then, students are trained with those specific jobs in mind. The California program also is being attempted in Albany, N.Y., and other parts of the United States.

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