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## **SPI teams up with work force development board**

**By Steve Toloken**

PLASTICS NEWS STAFF

WASHINGTON (June 5, 11:20 a.m. EDT) -- The Society of the Plastics Industry Inc. will launch a partnership with a national work force development association at NPE 2003, in hopes of raising the industry's profile among the hundreds of local job-training agencies around the country.

The partnership between SPI and the National Association of Workforce Boards will kick off with a June 24 program at NPE that will feature industry, government and NAWB officials talking about best practices where SPI has developed partnerships with local and state work force agencies.

The event is designed to spark discussions among work force boards and plastics companies. The groups have invited representatives of 89 local work force boards throughout the Midwest, and sent invitations to 2,200 plastics firms. The event will begin at 11:30 a.m. in McCormick Room N137.

"We want to tell them that we exist and that we contribute mightily to the state economies," said Catherine Randazzo, chief member services officer with Washington-based SPI. "We are definitely trying to raise our visibility."

NAWB officials said the NPE event will present two models of how SPI worked with work force boards — one at the state level in Florida and one at the local level in North Carolina.

Beyond the June 24 lunch program, the partnership is less well-defined, but NAWB officials said they will highlight the plastics industry to work force boards and mention the industry prominently at the group's annual conference in Washington in March.

"I don't see this ending with lunch," said Alex Graham, executive vice president of Washington-based NAWB. "We'll continue ... reinforcing [to local agencies] that the plastics industry is one you should have on your radar screen. It's the fourth-largest manufacturing industry."

A key aspect of the alliance will be helping SPI tap into a shrinking pool of government training money, particularly for its satellite-based Plastics Learning Network.

According to NAWB President Stephanie Powers, government spending for training programs is being cut at the federal level, and state governments are not able to pick up the slack. Federal funds were cut 12 percent in 2003, with another 9 percent proposed for 2004, NAWB said.

"We're seeing some significant cuts in the federal contribution," Powers said. "The problem is that the states are suffering so badly [they] can't jump in and help. Some of the discretionary spending is being whacked away at."

That makes alliances like the one with SPI all the more important, she said.

The partnership is NAWB's first with a specific industry sector, but it may not be the last, Powers said. The American Hospital Association expressed interest in a similar program, after hearing NAWB officials talk about the SPI venture.

Powers said Department of Labor officials also are interested in the partnership, and DOL Assistant Secretary for Employment and Training Emily DeRocco has expressed interest in coming to NPE to hold a executive forum on work force issues, Powers said.

While the economic downturn may have eased the labor shortages industry faced when business was booming, Powers said training remains important because workers in manufacturing need to be much more skilled than 20 years ago.

"Even though manufacturing is suffering serious layoffs, it is masking the fact that there is still a shortfall of employees with skills," Randazzo said. "Providing training and education is something we're going to continue to need to do."

NAWB and SPI had been familiar with each other before this alliance. SPI was given an award from NAWB in 2001 for its work developing the Florida program, which consisted of state money funding training using SPI's satellite-based training program, the Plastics Learning Network.



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