

*Tennessee's*  
**BUSINESS**

Vol. 16 No. 2 2007



**The Workforce**

Tennessee's  
**BUSINESS**

Vol. 16 No. 2 2007

Published by the Business and  
Economic Research Center (BERC)  
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Recipient of the 1991, 1996, 2000, and 2004  
AUBER Award of Excellence in Publications

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**L**abor and Workforce Development Commissioner James Neeley and I are the same age. We have both seen significant change in Tennessee during our lifetimes. Born on farms, we have worked and watched over these 60 years as the state industrialized and became part of a constantly changing global economy. While we marvel at the change, like the other authors and policymakers who have contributed to this issue, we are concerned about the challenges facing Tennessee today and in the future.

**To be competitive in today's world**, Tennessee is required to focus increasing resources on the education and training of its workforce. We must also shed old attitudes and provide a full opportunity for all members of our workforce to share in rising standards of living. We must continue to improve educational attainment in Tennessee. Commissioner Neeley is dead on when he focuses on our need to ensure that every Tennessean earns a high school diploma or the equivalent. Attaining this goal would lift more families out of poverty than almost any other effort we might make in Tennessee. Beyond that we need to encourage and help finance further education and training for these graduates. And these educational and training programs should encompass the full range of career opportunities that the post-boomer economy will offer. Tennessee needs more students to complete college and provide expertise and leadership in companies and classrooms across the state. We still lag the nation in the percent of our population who are college graduates. Increasing this percentage is correlated in other states with improved levels of personal income. But the state also needs a skilled workforce prepared by apprenticeship or community college programs to address its construction and technical needs. Electricians, boilermakers, and other well-trained craft workers are necessary to build and maintain the complex generation and distribution systems that provide power to Tennessee companies and homes. We applaud the three-pronged partnership of companies, contractors, and unions working to spread this message across Tennessee and the Southeast.

**Policymakers in Tennessee and in the nation** must also continue to focus their efforts on improving workplace experiences and earnings for Tennessee's women. In December 2006 the Institute for Women's Policy Research ranked Tennessee as one of the 10 worst state economies for women. Another study reviewed in these pages indicates that a portion of the wage gap between men and women in Tennessee can be explained only by discrimination or disparate socialization. Either reason contributes to an underutilization of an important and large portion of our labor force. An increase in the federal minimum wage would have a significant impact on the earnings of Tennessee women—particularly those working in retail and food service—and take a bite out of the state's poverty statistics. Alternatively, Tennessee could accomplish a similar result by passing its own minimum wage and joining the ranks of 18 other states including Arkansas, Kentucky, and North Carolina.

**The Tennessee Center for Labor-Management Relations** is pleased to join the Business and Economic Research Center at MTSU in producing this issue. We hope these articles will encourage discussion of many issues important to the development of our workforce and the health of our state economy.

—Barbara Haskew, guest editor; economics professor, MTSU;  
director, Tennessee Center for Labor-Management Relations

**EDITOR'S NOTE**

# CONTENTS

## Tennessee Can Make the Difference:

### Equal Pay for Women

*Kim McMillan*

2

## Workforce Dynamics in Tennessee

*Murat Arik, Harika Erdemir, and John Seaton*

16

## Tennessee's Changing Labor Force

*James G. Neeley*

5

## Southeastern Manpower Tripartite Alliance:

### Construction Craft Labor

*Barbara Haskew*

24

## Strengthening Tennessee's Workforce

*Susan Cowden*

7

## Smoking and Obesity: Are There Wage Penalties?

*Charles L. Baum II, William F. Ford,  
and Jeffrey D. Hopper*

28

## The History and Evolution of Benefits:

### Enigma, Middle Ground

*Richard Hannah*

10

## Middle Tennessee Workforce Investment Board

*E. James Burton and Christine Bradley*

33

