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## Young Workers Flee Midwestern States

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MADELEINE BRAND, host: This is Day to Day. I'm Madeleine Brand.

ALEX CHADWICK, host:

And I'm Alex Chadwick.

BRAND: Now for another report in our series we're calling the Bottom Line. We're looking at how the current economic downturn is affecting people and their communities. Today a valuable commodity in the Upper Midwest is draining away. Wisconsin, Nebraska, the Dakotas, they're all losing young workers. As the 20-somethings pack up and leave, so do hopes for an economic recovery. Celeste Headlee reports.

CELESTE HEADLEE: This is the sound of college kids, doing what college kids do, on a spring day on the campus of Wayne State University in Detroit. They may not even be aware of it, but what they do after they finish school will have a major impact on the economic fortunes of the entire Midwest. You see, businesses tend to locate in places where there's an educated, energetic workforce, and many of these students aren't sticking around after graduation.

Professor DAVID SWENSON (Economics, Iowa State University): People go to where they think they're going to get work. Jobs go to where they think they're going to find the right kind of people.

HEADLEE: That's economist Dave Swenson of Iowa State University.

Prof. SWENSON: Where those two things intersect currently just isn't in the Midwest and the Plains.

HEADLEE: So, people are heading west, east, and south in search of a better lifestyle, and Carolyn Sallee with the Anderson Economic Group in Michigan says it's no surprise.

Ms. CAROLYN SALLEE (Consultant, Anderson Economic Group): Manufacturing jobs falling by 30 percent, and so those are the good paying blue-collar jobs that you needed a high school education, and you could go and you could make a 60,000 dollar salary.

Mr. JOHN TILLMAN (Chairman, CEO, Illinois Policy Institute): Moving statistics from moving companies really tells the tale of whether states are having in-migration or out-migration, and the Midwest and Illinois, for example, is suffering from out-migration at a very large rate.

HEADLEE: That's John Tillman with the Illinois Policy Institute. He says his home state has lost over 700,000 people in the last decade.

Mr. TILLMAN: You can certainly see it in places in Cook County outside of Chicago. Some of the neighborhoods that have struggled. You can see it in certain parts of this city where they'll be blocks and blocks of boarded up places where people have left.

HEADLEE: And Dave Swenson from Iowa State says it goes beyond urban areas and manufacturing jobs.

Prof. SWENSON: The Dakotas, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, Illinois, all are losing population in their non-metropolitan areas.

HEADLEE: In fact, Swenson says 75 percent of counties in those states have seen declines, and it's not that state governments aren't aware of the problem.

Prof. SWENSON: Every state in the Midwest has been doing everything they can think of to stimulate growth, to try to entice, bribe, or otherwise subsidize economic development. Whatever it takes to remain competitive, they've tried it.

HEADLEE: Carolyn Sallee says Midwestern states know they have to let go of the old industrial economy, and start adapting to modern realities.

Ms. SALLEE: So, in the auto industry maybe not making cars, but doing other research and development for it. Or it's taking the agricultural products and then, you know, thinking about how they can be used, and turned into fuel.

HEADLEE: And it's slow, probably too slow to stem the current exodus of 20-somethings, but Susan Ramsey of the Greater Des Moines Partnership says her city has focused on those recent graduates and two-income couples. Yes, the city is diversifying, but it's also about doing the little things.

Ms. SUSAN RAMSEY (Senior Vice President, Greater Des Moines Partnership): We've learned from a lot of our employers that they were having trouble landing interns because what they were going to pay interns for the summer, wouldn't necessarily support them in renting an apartment for the summer.

HEADLEE: And for those couples where both are pursuing careers...

Ms. RAMSEY: When a company recruits one, they're not, you know, they're able to connect and make a hire because we can help find that trailing spouse a location here as well.

HEADLEE: But no matter what solutions they choose, it seems clear that Midwestern states need to act immediately to avoid future misfortune. Kurt Metzger is the director of research at the United Way for Southeastern Michigan.

Mr. KURT METZGER (Director of Research, United Way for Southeastern Michigan): The forecast are showing that Michigan's going to be 25 percent over the age of 65 in no time.

HEADLEE: Metzger says states can't sit back and wait for things to improve. It's time for a complete change of mindset.

Mr. METZGER: Those Midwest values that we all feel very strongly about, the whole idea was yeah, the kids are going to go away because kids always do, but they're going to come back when it's time to raise a family. Well, it doesn't happen anymore.

HEADLEE: Metzger says it's not just about reforming the tax structures, or developing new industries. It's also about updating those Midwestern values, and that could mean changing everything we think we know about the Midwest.

For NPR News I'm Celeste Headlee in Detroit.

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