PY 2025-2028 WIOA Multi-Year Local Area Plan

Local Workforce Development Area name: **Berks County Workforce Development Board**

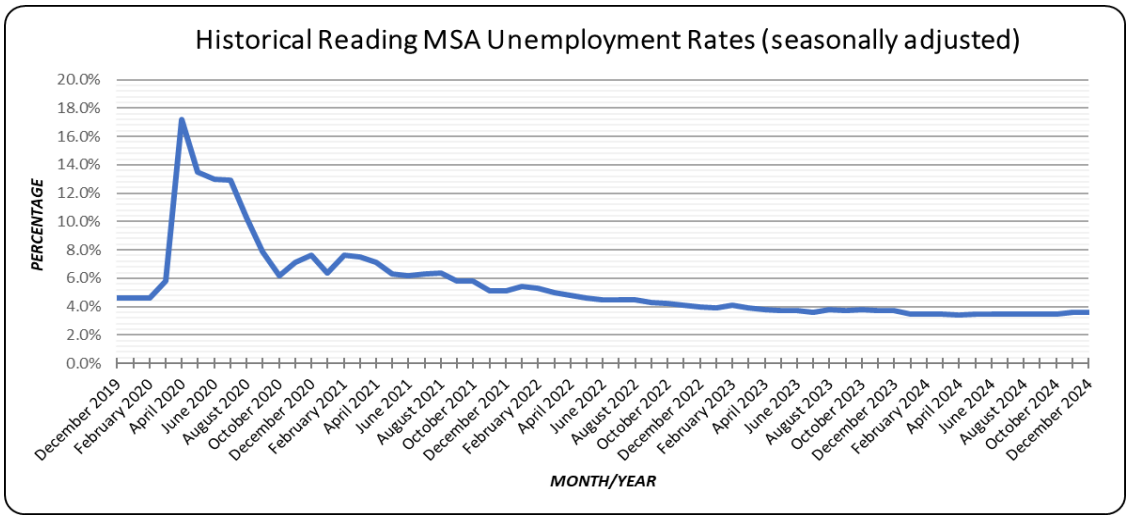
Effective Date: **July 1, 2025**

1. STRATEGIC PLANNING: Local Area Workforce and Economic Analysis

1.1 Workforce analysis – Provide an analysis of the regional workforce, including the composition of the local area's population and current labor force employment data.

The Berks County Workforce Development Area (WDA) 4-year local workforce development plan covers the period July 1, 2025, thru June 30, 2029, which the Berks County Workforce Development Board anticipates will be a period of dynamic change within our local area's population and labor force.

Reading MSA Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rates (2019-2024) - As reported by the PA Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA), we enter this new four-year plan with over two years of historically low local rates of seasonally adjusted unemployment (below 4.0%):



Source: PA DOL&I Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA)

Location: Our local economy and associated labor market benefit from a competitively advantaged geographic position in Southeastern Pennsylvania (SEPA) which is the Commonwealth's largest, wealthiest, and most dynamic region. For planning purposes, we benefit from the Berks County Workforce Development Area (WDA) being coincident with the Reading Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). We will use the terms "Berks County" and "Reading MSA" interchangeably throughout this plan.

Notably, the Reading MSA is home to a distinctive local employment profile and a sizable, readily accessible labor market characterized by 59.7% of those employed in "private jobs" in the WDA both live and work within Berks County. (Source: Pennsylvania Center for Workforce Information and Analysis [CWIA]).

Employment/Residency Inflow Status,2021 (CWIA)	Count	Share
Employed in the Berks WDA	142,312	100.0%
Employed and Living in the Berks WDA	85,009	59.7%
Employed in the WDA but Living Outside Berks WDA	57,303	40.3%

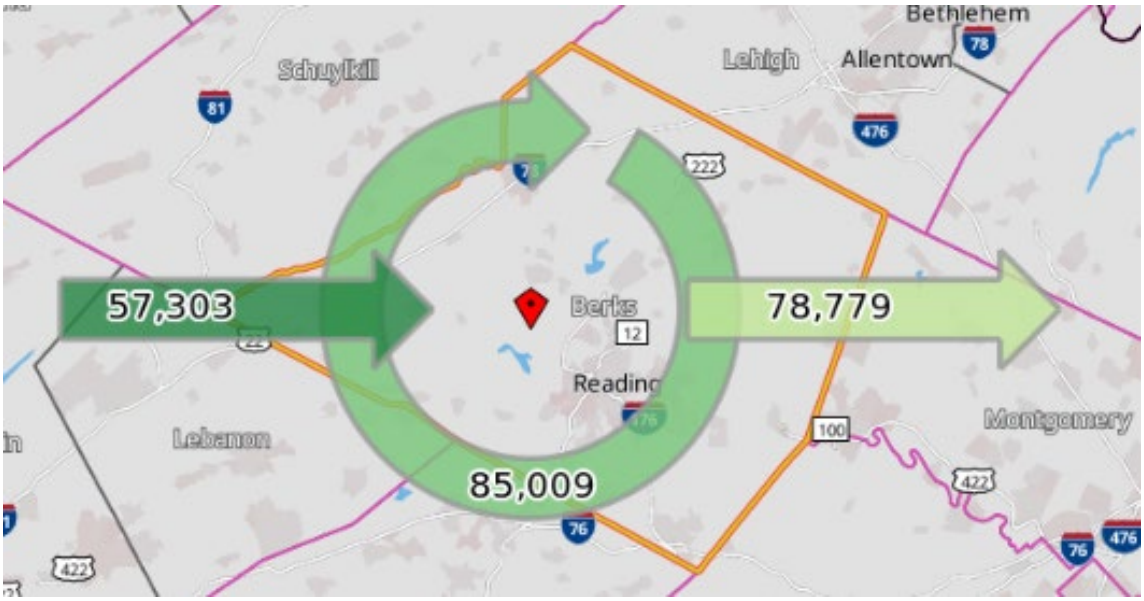
Commuter Patterns: These 85,000 Berks County residents employed in private jobs as noted above who take advantage of the many readily available attractive local employment opportunities in our WDA are

joined by over 57,000 residents of other counties. Most of these inbound workers have relatively easy commutes from four large bordering counties (Chester, Montgomery, Lehigh, and Lancaster) situated from our northeast to south, each with substantial working-age populations of their own. Others commute in from two more modestly populated rural counties to the northwest (Schuylkill) and west (Lebanon). At the same time, many Berks County residents easily access employment opportunities in private jobs in these six neighboring counties and beyond - especially where these counties are home to distinctive industry clusters (e.g. pharmaceutical and life sciences in Montgomery County, financial services in Chester County, or hospitality in Lancaster County.)

Employment/Residency Outflow Status, Berks County WDA, 2021 (CWIA)

	Count	Share
Living in the WDA	163,788	100.0%
Living and Employed in the WDA	85,009	51.9%
Living in the WDA but Employed Outside	78,779	48.1%

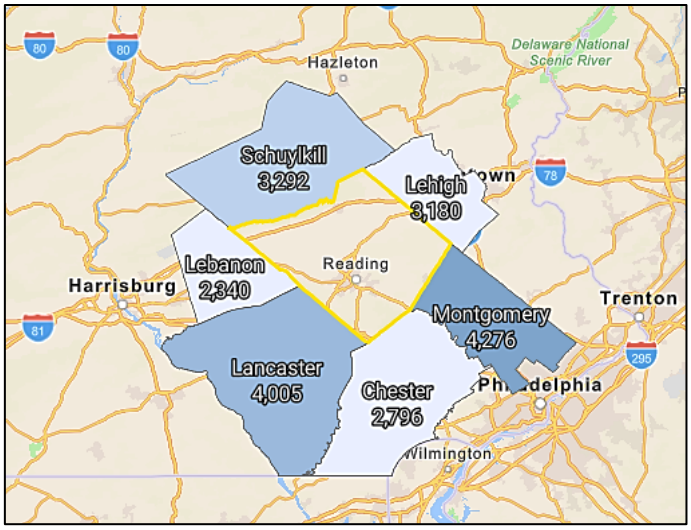
As shown in the pattern mapping below, Reading MSA (Berks County WDA) Net Commuting Worker Private Job Inflow versus Outflow* is ***-21,476***. In other words, Berks County experiences a net outflow of residents working outside the county compared to those outside residents who are employed in Berks County.



*A positive number indicates the number of individuals working in the WDA but living outside is higher than the number of individuals living in the WDA but employed in private jobs outside. A negative number indicates the opposite. Source: CWIA

These commuter inflows and outflows vary by geography:

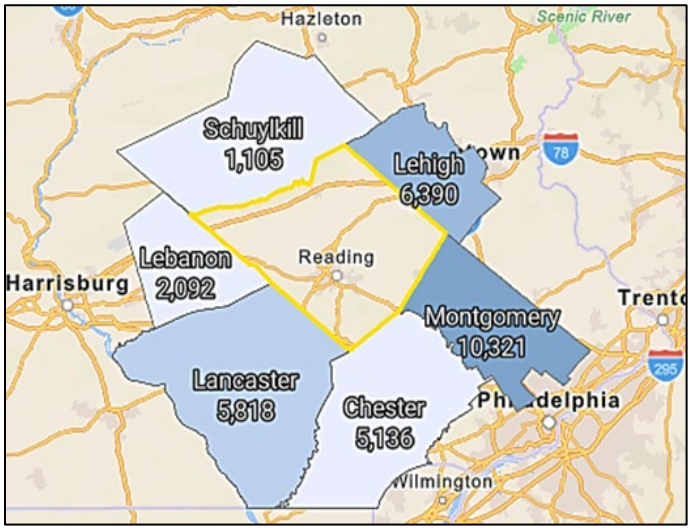
Employed Workers in Reading MSA (Berks County LWDA) and Where they Reside – As the map detail and table below show, the strongest private job commuter flows into Berks County come from Montgomery County (4,276), Lancaster County (4,005), and Schuylkill County (3,292).



Region	Commuters
Chester County	2,796
Lancaster County	4,005
Lebanon County	2,340
Lehigh County	3,180
Montgomery County	4,276
Schuylkill County	3,292
Total Inbound Surrounding County Commuters to Berks	19,890

Source: JobsEQ®

Residents of the Reading MSA (Berks County LWDA) and Where they Work - As the map detail and table below show, the strongest commuter flows to private jobs outside of Berks County are into Montgomery County (10,321), Lehigh County (6,390), and Lancaster County (5,818).

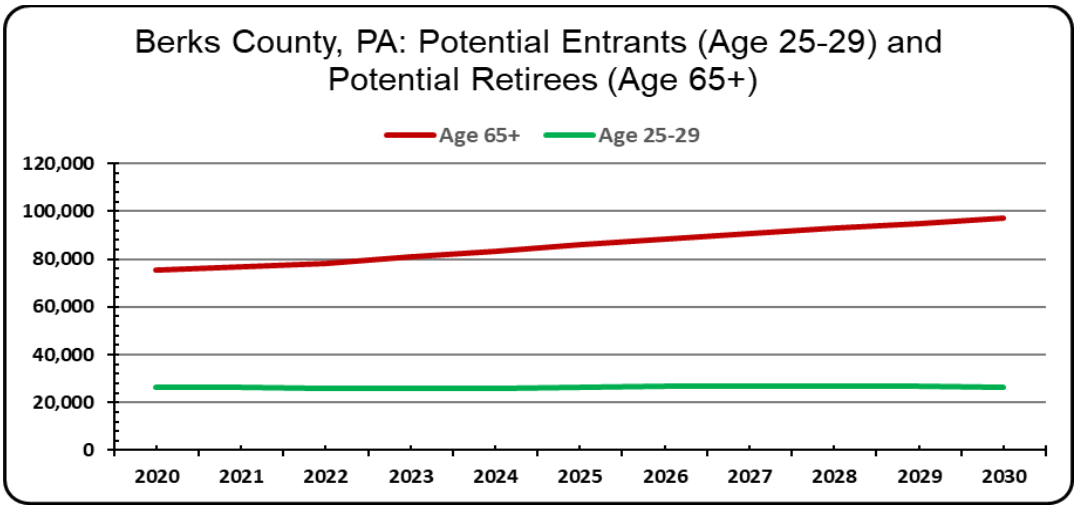


Region	Commuters
Chester County	5,136
Lancaster County	5,818
Lebanon County	2,092
Lehigh County	6,390
Montgomery County	10,321
Schuylkill County	1,105
Berks Commuters into Surrounding Counties	30,862

Source: JobsEQ®

Age Distribution: Berks County's population is projected to steadily grow from 428,631 in 2020 to 441,748 in 2030 (Source: Jobs EQ®).

Two of the most significant long-term trends impacting the Berks County labor market during this period remain (1) the continued aging and (2) the rapid diversification of our local population and available workforce. Of greatest concern identified in our workforce analysis, is the projected steady growth in the number and population share of Berks Countians who have or will reach a potential retirement age of 65 vis a vis the static supply of younger residents to replace them as shown in the graph below:



Significant downward pressure on the size of our Berks County labor force will continue as many experienced older adults exit the local workforce over the next five years without enough young adults to replace them. From 2020 - 2030, the "potential retiree" population (ages 65+) is projected to grow by **33%** from just over 75,200 to nearly 100,000 (Source: JobsEQ®). As a proportion of the current total Berks County population of 432,851 (Source: ACS V2023), "potential retirees" will grow from 17.4% to 23.1% or approximately 1 of every 4 Berks County residents.

Our population of "potential entrants" into the labor force (ages 25-29) is projected to remain essentially flat, barely budging from 26,226 to 26,237 over the same decade (Source: JobsEQ®). The US Census Population Estimate for 2023 calculates an annual average growth rate since 2020 of 0.9% in the total population of the Reading MSA (Berks County). If this trend continues, as a proportion of the overall local population, this important young adult cohort beginning their working careers will remain at approximately 6.0% of the total population.

2019-2024: Stalled Berks County Workforce Growth? The negative near-term results of these long-term demographic trends are now consistently visible in local labor market statistics. The size of the local labor force in Berks County appears to have now settled at levels somewhat below where the Reading MSA labor force appears to have peaked at nearly 219,000 in 2019. 2019 also saw the County's local seasonally adjusted (SA) unemployment rate drop consistently below 4.0% for the first time in nearly twenty years. [Source: the Pennsylvania Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA)].

CWIA since reports that the size f our local Berks County labor force averaged only 215,000 in 2023 and 2024. Both years saw with an average 3.5% unemployment rate driven largely by the historically low average number of unemployed residents at just a bit over 7,500.

Annual Average Labor Force Statistics, Berks County WDA, 2024 (CWIA)

Calendar Year	Labor Force	Employed	Unemployed	Unemployment Rate
2024	215,392	207,933	7,533	3.5

By December 2024, CWIA reported that the size of our local labor force had drifted down further to 213,100 - a 2.5% decline over the preceding five years (12/2019 – 12/2024). Our local number of employed residents has shown similar signs of slow contraction while our seasonally adjusted (SA) local unemployment rate has been astonishingly stable and low at **3.4% - 3.6%** for twenty-two straight months (March 2023 – December 2024). This remains on par with Pennsylvania's statewide extended

unemployment rate of 3.4% - 3.6% and below the U.S. rate of 3.7% – 4.2%. CWIA further reported that, as of December 2024:

- The seasonally adjusted number of employed Berks County residents stood at 205,300 or ≈1.0% lower than a year earlier.
- The seasonally adjusted number of unemployed residents has remained incredibly low and steady at below 7,600 for nearly two years.
- Berks County's non-farm jobs (SA) count has slowly recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic and after five years is only 600 non-farm jobs shy of its 2019 peak of 183,000 (CWIA).

During the first calendar quarter of 2025, our PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST) continues to receive many requests for recruitment assistance from local employers in key industries (e.g. Manufacturing, Healthcare, Construction, etc.) still struggling to fill current job openings.

Given these significant demographic challenges to the local labor force, a renewed focus on our adult working age population (ages 25-64) is warranted. Accordingly, the WDB seeks to understand key medium-term post pandemic developments within the local adult population (ages 25-64), especially regarding that working age population's engagement in the local workforce.

Berks County and Pennsylvania "Prime Working Age "and "Working Age" Adult Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) – In September 2024, the Berks County WDB received a valuable report from the PA Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA) of "prime working age" (25-54) adults and "working age" (25-64) adults in Berks County. The data from 2023, show that both very important LFPRs have fully now recovered from 2019 and remain notably above those for the Commonwealth of PA.

Labor Force Participation Rates				
	Ages 25-54		**Ages 25-64**	
	Berks County	**Pennsylvania**	**Berks County**	**Pennsylvania**
2018	90.4%	87.1%	86.6%	82.9%
2019	90.4%	87.4%	87.0%	83.1%
2020	X	X	X	X
2021	86.8%	86.8%	83.0%	82.8%
2022	90.2%	88.1%	85.8%	83.8%
2023	**90.5%**	88.6%	**86.9%**	84.4%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, B23001: PA Center for Workforce Information & Analysis

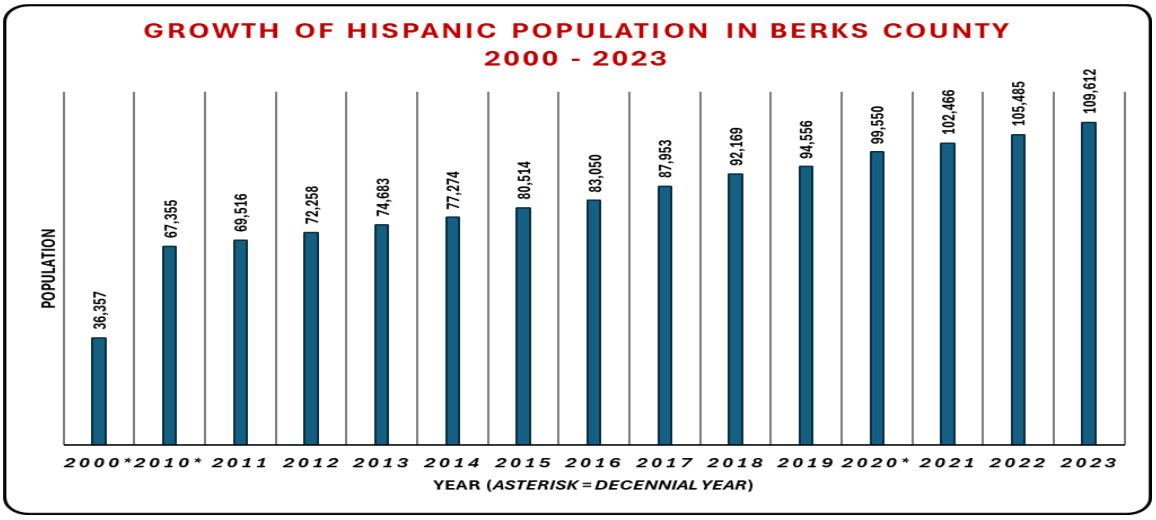
To gain a deeper understanding of these and a wide variety of critical trends within our current and future labor force, the Berks WDB competitively procured a contract with Thomas P. Miller & Associates, Inc. to commence January 1, 2025, with a final report to be delivered to the WDB by September 2025.

Berks County Population Race and Ethnicity: Berks County's growing population is not only aging, but also rapidly diversifying. According to the U.S Census Bureau American Community Survey five-year estimates (2018-2022), the Berks County, PA (Reading MSA) Population Race/Ethnicity demographic is:

Race and/or Ethnicity	Percentage of Population	Population
White	75.4%	322,910
Black or African American	4.9%	21,068
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.4%	1,847

Asian	1.4%	5,831
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.0%	70
Some Other Race	8.9%	38,190
Two or More Races	9.0%	38,567
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	23.2%	99,460

The most dramatic change over the past 15 years, has been the rapid growth of our Hispanic or Latino (of any race) population, especially in and around the City of Reading which is situated at the center of the Rte. 222 Corridor running from Allentown to Lancaster. The Associated Press (10/24/2024) describes the Rte. 222 Corridor as connecting "some of the fastest growing Hispanic communities in the country". The 2020 U.S. census revealed that Reading is now the fourth largest municipality, by population, in the Commonwealth and has the highest percentage of Hispanic or Latinos of any municipality in Pennsylvania: nearly 69%, up from 58% in 2010. Our Hispanic or Latino population now accounts for over 100,000 (25.3%, one in four) Berks County residents. This is much higher than the Hispanic or Latino representation of 8.9 % across the Commonwealth (Source: U.S. Census [2024]).



Source: U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census & 1-Year Estimates

Educational Attainment

Currently available excellent local career opportunities (and pre-requisite education) are often not readily accessible to our many Berks County residents with limited English language speaking ability. The American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimate (2018-2022) identifies a growing number of 31,569 Berks County residents (7.8%) who "speak English less than very well". Our 7.8% rate for residents with this challenge is the third highest rate among Pennsylvania's 67 counties and much higher than the statewide rate (4.5%).

More broadly, the Berks County labor force exhibits a distinctively challenging education-level profile as compared to Pennsylvania as a whole. As reported by the ACS 5-year estimate (2018-2022):

- An increasing proportion (11.9%) of the County's adults (age 25+) lack a high school diploma or equivalent. This is significantly higher than the state as a whole, where a declining proportion (only 7.3%) of Pennsylvania adults lack this critical baseline level of formal education.

- Low educational attainment is particularly a concern among working age adult (25-64 years of age) residents of the City of Reading where 28.9% lack a high school degree or equivalent (Source: CWIA and ACS 2018-2022).
- 36.6% of Berks County adults have earned a high school diploma or the equivalent.
- Fewer (26.8%) Berks County adults possess a bachelor's degree or higher as compared to 33.8% of Pennsylvania adults.

A Critical Need for More Appropriately (and Affordably) Educated Workers: It is an unfortunate common practice when evaluating educational attainment to lump together adults who have earned an associate degree with adults who report having "some college, no degree". The WDB is not sure what we can say with confidence about the educational attainment of the substantial cohort of 16.1% of adult residents ages 25-64 reporting having "some college, no degree" (Source: JobsEQ®). It is nearly impossible to determine what level of education such "non-completing" adults may have actually acquired. In the absence of a recognized post-secondary credential, the educational attainment of these adults is best categorized along with their peers who simply report having attained a high school diploma or equivalent. By contrast, our 10.1% of adults who have earned an associate degree (Source: JobsEQ®) should be recognized for this major career achievement and career credential as they are likely well positioned lifelong learners who can adapt to the evolving needs of local employers.

Unfortunately, our current local education profile does <u>not</u> match well with the needs of our region's emerging technology-driven workplace. In the decade ahead, while we may have a sufficient supply of local working age adult residents with 4-year degrees, our local employers need a much larger pool of adults with **associate degrees** (particularly in technical fields of study) or similarly valuable post-secondary educational and skills credentials. Importantly, such post-secondary credentials serve as tickets to career success which can be affordably acquired through registered apprenticeships, technical applied associate (AAS) degree programs, and military or other technical training programs without taking on undue student loan debt.

As Pennsylvania's Center for Workforce Information and Analysis (CWIA) reports in its Long-Term Occupational Employment Projections (2022-2032), Berks County firms currently employ 35,560 skilled workers in occupations linked to such affordable and valuable industry-recognized post-secondary credentials. With local employers reporting difficulty in finding qualified replacements for their many skilled retiring workers, CWIA projects that overall jobs for individuals with such credentials will grow 8.7% to 36,610 by 2032.

Migration and Mobility:

- Our region is experiencing some out-migration of retirees; however, more families are moving into Berks County:
  - Local school districts, the Berks County Intermediate Unit (BCIU), housing program administrators, and community-based organizations consistently report to the WDB that most of our newly arriving families (often with school age children) are moving here over the past decade from the greater New York City / Northern New Jersey region which is only 120 miles distant.
  - Like many immigrant families before them, these families come to Berks County in search of more affordable housing, safer schools and better job prospects. As described above, in January 2025, the Berks County WDB competitively-procured a comprehensive study with Thomas P. Miller & Associates, LLC. to better understand the dynamics of this important "in-

migration" of working age adults, along with its opportunities and workforce development challenges. The final report will be made available to the public by September 2025.

Disconnected/Underprepared Young Adults: Another significant source of unemployment in Berks County with serious long-term implications is the large number of young adults (ages 16-24) who are not engaged in work or education preparing for careers. The WDB continues to dedicate significant resources to ensure that we have the most comprehensive and current information available regarding the size and critical characteristics of this elusive population. While the unstable circumstances of such "opportunity youth" make them extremely difficult to track and connect with, the WDB estimates that Berk County is now home to 5,000 – 6,000 disconnected young adults and that over half of disconnected young adults face more than one reason for being disconnected.

Based on previous research sponsored by the WDB, the top barriers disconnected young adults in Berks County face include:

1. Lack of Transportation
2. Family Care Obligations
3. Little Understanding of or Preparation for Attractive Career Opportunities
4. Significant Barriers to Pursuing Education

Other Barriers to Employment (U.S. Census): Berks County is home to 29,743 individuals (ages 18-64) with a disability representing nearly 1 in 9 residents in this prime age cohort (11.6%). Of these adults with disabilities, only 14,088 or 47.4% were participating in the labor force. With an unemployment rate of 12.3%, adults with disabilities in our labor force are more than two and half times as likely to be unemployed as are those in the labor force with no disability. (Source: CWIA and ACS 5-Year Estimates; 2018-2022*).*

In 2021, the Berks County WDB competitively-procured a contractor to conduct research: leading to (a.) a deeper understanding of the reasons working age adults with disabilities in Berks County are disproportionately not employed or are under-employed, both from the individual's perspective and the potential employer's perspective; and (b.) context for the WDB concerning the development of strategies to promote the employment of individuals with disabilities.

This contract was awarded Thomas P. Miller & Associates, LLC (TPMA). and focused on the disproportionate employment and under-employment of individuals with disabilities in Berks County, Pennsylvania. During this study, TPMA conducted best practice research, collected demographic and labor market data on Berks County, surveyed 140 individuals directly involved with the employment of people with disabilities (community-based organizations that assist individuals with disabilities with employment services, employers, individuals with disabilities, and their support team members), and interviewed 18 key stakeholders. The study revealed important new insights regarding employment opportunities and challenges for Berks County residents with disabilities:

- **Individuals with disabilities desire more variety in job opportunities.** Employees of community-based organizations (CBOs) that work directly with individuals with disabilities to help them find employment frequently reported that job opportunities for these individuals are often limited to janitorial or retail industries. Individuals with disabilities that participated in this study, along with their support teams, expressed the same frustration, especially with how difficult it is to find employment opportunities that align with their interests and abilities. Rather, many jobs offered to these individuals are janitorial or retail with low pay, irregular hours, and limited opportunities for advancement.

- **Employers would benefit from increased access to trainings and resources around supporting the employment of individuals with disabilities**. Through the survey responses and interviews, one major finding that emerged was the need for more intentional training opportunities and resource sharing with local employers in Berks County around supporting individuals with disabilities (especially those with cognitive disabilities) during their employment.
- **All stakeholders would like to participate in more intentional networking opportunities.** Individuals with disabilities and their support team members often expressed how segregated they feel from the workforce community. This separation creates frustration because they feel like they do not have opportunities to make their voices and needs heard. Representatives of community-based organizations (CBOs) and employers all expressed similar sentiments around not having the time or manpower to go out and network on their own.

Poverty: Our local age 16 and older poverty rate (10.2%) is somewhat better than Pennsylvania's poverty rate of 10.7% for adult and pre-adult teenage working age residents (ages 16 and older). However, we realize that our strong local labor market often leaves this substantial population of 34,127 Berks County residents living below the poverty line behind. Disturbingly, the majority (61.6%) are not in the labor force at all (Source: CWIA and ACS, 5-Year Estimates; 2018-2022*).*

Individuals in poverty can be especially challenging to serve as they often have multiple barriers to employment such as unstable housing, low educational attainment, lack of reliable and effective transportation, etc. These combinations of barriers can make it difficult for these residents to establish a strong employment history which then becomes another barrier to future opportunities. As a result, our local workforce system must continuously improve on our design and delivery of effective comprehensive services to assist this important pool of human potential and talent help create and share in our local prosperity.

Single Parent Families: Closely related to the challenges facing the Berks County WDB in serving adults living below the poverty line is the pressing need to effectively serve our 15,795 families led by a single parent - representing 36.8% of all local families with at least one dependent child. This current local rate is notably higher than the statewide rate of 32.8% (Source: CWIA and ACS, 5-Year Estimates; 2018-2022*).* Shortages of early childcare education professionals and affordable qualified childcare providers are especially disruptive to the career prospects and job stability of single parents (mostly women) with school age children and, potentially, a long-lasting detrimental impact on their employment options and family sustaining earnings potential.

Re-entrants: Berks County is also home to a large population of individuals with involvement in the criminal justice system and approximately 85% of all Berks County Jail inmates are unemployed upon release. The Berks County Adult Probation and Parole Office and the PA Board of Probation and Parole's Reading Sub-Office combined supervise over 7,800 individuals on either state or county parole living in Berks County (Source: Connections Work).

Historically, a record of involvement with the criminal justice system has been a major barrier to gainful employment and one of the Berks County WDB's top priorities to address over the past eight years. The WDB maintains a strong strategic partnership with Connections Work (previously Berks Connections Pretrial Services), our local lead agency to assist reentrants attain the skills, support and work experience to gain meaningful and family-sustaining employment. To expand and sustain this work in collaboration with other publicly funded workforce partners, Connections Work joined and remains a partner in the PA CareerLink® Berks County.

The best example of the fruits of the partnership is Connections Work's ***"R3" - Rebuilding Reentrants and Reading*** **registered pre-apprenticeship program** for the construction sector. Since its inception in 2017, Connections Work has successfully completed 37 R3 cohorts with 319 graduates. As of October 2024, R3 recidivism rate was measured at 4% one-year post graduation compared to 30% for those who did not complete the program. The national average one year post incarceration recidivism rate is 46%.

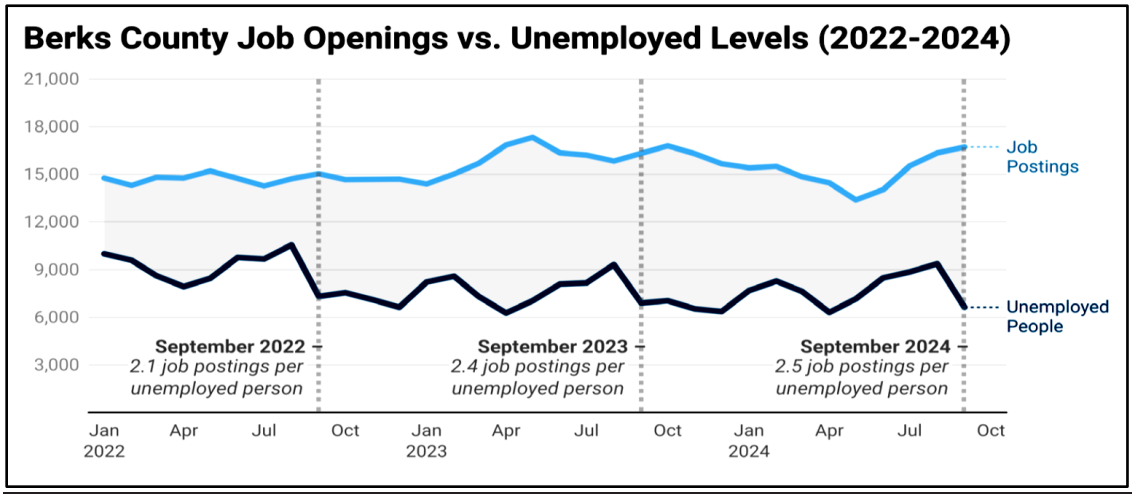
Post R3 graduation employment rate is 83% as of October 2024. Typically, the unemployment rate of the justice involved is much higher than that of the general population and estimated at over 50%. R3 has become a widely recognized best practice re-entry program across the Commonwealth of PA and we look forward to partnering with Connections Work to sustain, improve, and grow R3 even further over the next four years.

1.2 Economic analysis – Describe strategic planning elements including a regional analysis of economic conditions.

Local Economic Conditions.

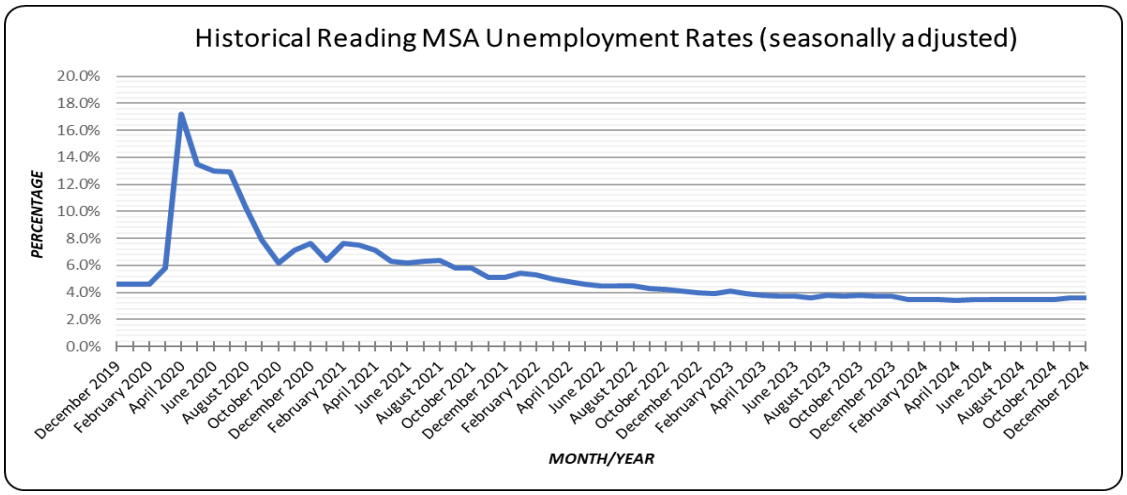
As reported by the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance in their Economic Intelligence Report Q32024 (published in January 2024), Berks County businesses' hiring challenges persist amid low unemployment:

- *In September 2024, there was an average of 2.5 job postings for every unemployed person in Berks County. By comparison, there was an average of 2.4 job postings per unemployed person in September 2023 and 2.1 job postings per unemployed person in September 2024.*
- *Although Berks County's low unemployment rates have eased pressure on people looking for work, they can also present a challenge for businesses seeking employees.*



Reading MSA Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rates (2019-2024)

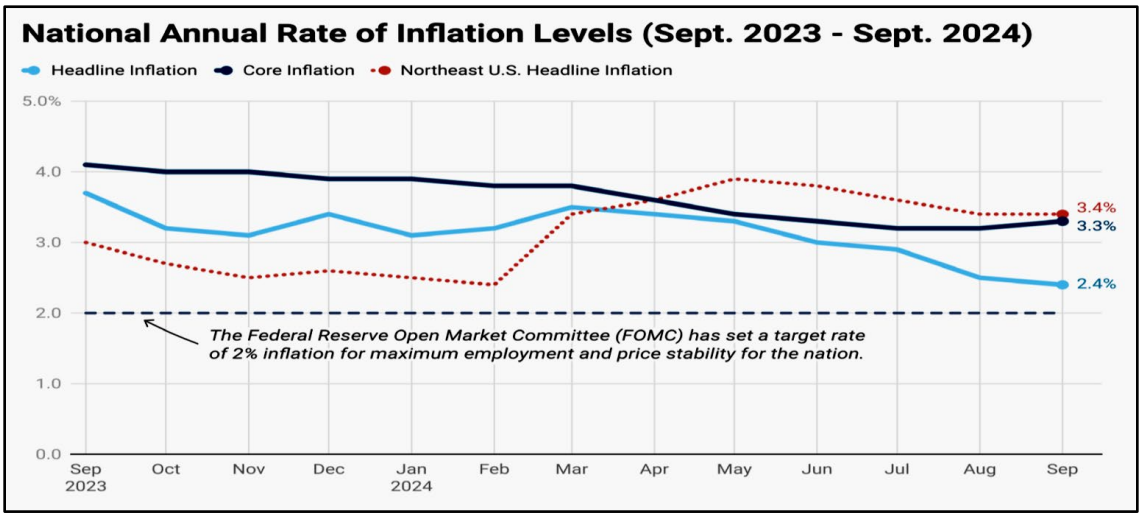
GRCA's reporting of a continuing local tight labor market through the end of 2024 tracks with monthly data reported by the PA Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA) as shown above in Section 1.1:



Source: PA DOL&I Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA)

Despite labor supply challenges, local and regional businesses reported having a stronger third quarter of 2024 compared to the previous quarter. Similarly, in its September 2024 surveys of regional businesses, the Philadelphia Federal Reserve found that 72% of manufacturers and 63% of non-manufacturers reported production and sales stronger or equal to the previous quarter. The largest constraining factor to both manufacturing and non-manufacturing businesses was the challenge of finding qualified workers.

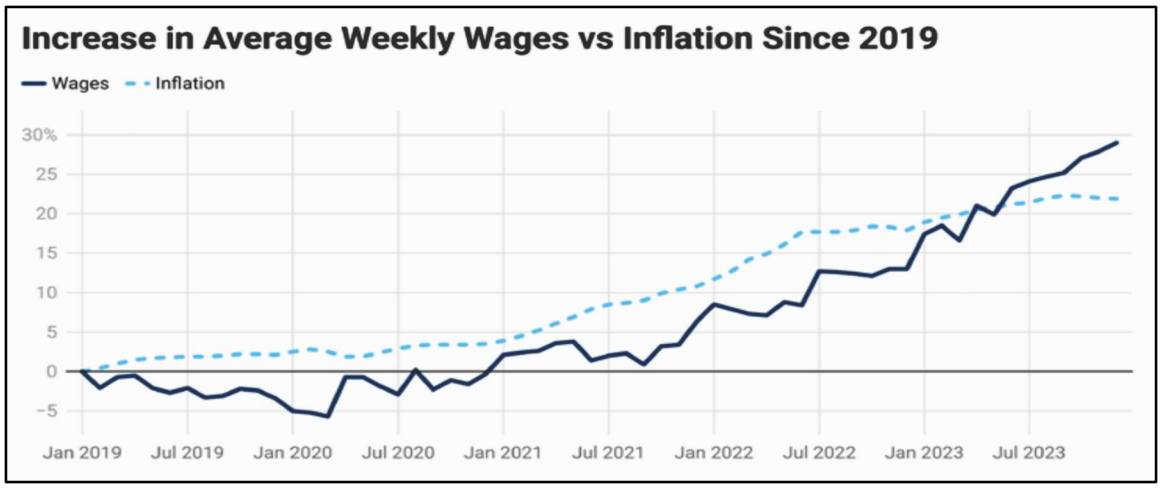
National annual inflation continued its decline down to the lowest annual inflation rate, declining since February 2021 with a notable_0.6% drop in the annual rate of inflation seen from June 2024 (3.0%) to September 2024 (2.4%). However, prices in the Northeast region rose more than across the nation during 2024. Annual headline inflation in the Northeast region was 3.4% in September, a full percentage higher than the nation. The rising costs of shelter, transportation, and education and communication grew more quickly in the Northeast region than the full United States over the last year (September 2023-September 2024). ***Data source*** *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*



Housing: Shelter costs in the region grew at nearly double the rate of other household costs in 2024. A primary driver for elevated shelter costs has been a misalignment between housing supply and consumer demand, with the latter outpacing the former.

Reviewing historical data for new housing permit approvals can shed light upon how a local economy's real estate and construction markets have performed year to year. GRCA goes on to report that Berks County saw a significant drop in the volume of housing permits issued in the wake of the Great Recession in 2008 and has remained well below pre-2008 levels. In September 2024, the median sale price of a house in Berks County rose 6.4% from a year earlier, with the median home price reaching $410,000. This supply shortage vs. demand is likely to continue for the foreseeable future as GRCA reports that Q3 2024 saw the lowest quarterly volume of housing permit approvals in Berks County since Q4 2022.

Local Wages vs. Inflation: Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) analyzed by the EDC for GRCA shows that Berks County's sustained low unemployment rate has led to a simultaneous rise in wages. In April 2023, Berks County wage growth surpassed the national inflation growth from January 2019 as shown in the chart below:



Data source *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics/GRCA*

Cost of Living Index (COLI) for Berks County, PA: GRCA also provides the quarterly collection of local data for the national Council for Community and Economic Research (C2ER). Historically, the cost of living in Berks County remained slightly below the national average. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, published their *Analysis of Cost-of-Living Data for Pennsylvania Counties (May 2024)* using C2ER 2023 data. According to the report, Berks County's COLI stood at 101.9 in 2023 – slightly above the national average and just under Pennsylvania's 102.1. This valuable county by county COLI breakdown clearly illustrates Berks County's sometimes overlooked competitive regional labor market advantage. With a COLI equivalent to the 100.3 average for Pennsylvania's rural counties, Berks County is within commuting distance of the five economically-dynamic Philadelphia metro region counties – all of which have much higher local costs of living – Bucks (113.0), Chester (116.4), Delaware (114.3), Montgomery (117.4), and Philadelphia (128.5). As the report concludes, "Combined with other factors like quality of life, proximity to family, recreational opportunities, and many others, cost of living could be the deciding factor for individuals considering relocation."

Strategic Planning to Meet Employer Needs - The Berks County WDB remains committed to local employer engagement through rigorous industry sector analysis. It is the Board's practice to broadly share occupational and industry sector employment information with our economic and education partners and community-based organizations. In return, the WDB seeks feedback from these partners that they often receive directly from employers. This ongoing exchange of labor market intelligence allows the WDB to continuously update and deepen our understanding of the current and future skills needs of our employers

and to develop responsive programming. As a result of our long-standing commitment to this proven best practice, the Berks WDB is home to local labor market subject matter expertise in the knowledge, skills and requisite industry-recognized credentials needed to contribute to the growth of a qualified talent pool, the recruitment and retention qualified employees, and the upskilling of "home grown" talent. Proven benefits of our industry sector approach include:

- Greater **focus** by engaging employers with common workforce and skills development needs.
- The ability to **prioritize** and target the impact of limited workforce development funds to address common critical skills needs.
- Improved **alignment** among the WDB and our partners in economic development, education, community-based organizations, etc. as we collaborate to meet common skills needs identified in conjunction with local employers.

In keeping with this employer engagement strategy and in preparation for the development of this latest WIOA four-year plan, the WDB completed its most recent bi-annual analysis of local industry sectors in Spring 2024. Using the latest economic data and labor market information (LMI), the WDB confirmed and approved five priority industry sectors on which to focus. In June 2024, the Berks County WDB formally adopted the following workforce development sector priorities for Program Years 2024-2028:

I. Priority A *(Driver Industry)*: Manufacturing

- Largest sector by annual economic output *(2022)* = $5.431 Billion *(23.3% of Berks GDP)*
- Largest sector by employment: 31,600 jobs *(PA DOLI/CWIA, April 2024)*
- 17.4% of local employment *(JobsEQ® 2023Q4 dataset)*
- Critical current and future skills shortages for technical occupations, especially precision machining, industrial maintenance/mechatronics technicians, welders, and quality systems professionals.
- Entry-level production worker hiring/retention increasingly difficult in current labor market.
- *Average Weekly Wages for local manufacturing workers grew 6.6% in one year (4th Quarter 2023 versus 4th Quarter 2022) per the US DOL Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).*
- Industry average annual wage = $73,741 *(JobsEQ® 2023Q4 dataset)*
- 510 establishments in 2023Q4 *(BLS, including 1st and 4th largest employers – East Penn Manufacturing and Carpenter Technology Corp., respectively, CWIA 2024Q2)*
- Very Strong Location Quotient (LQ) = **2.17**, more than twice the national average.
- Local Manufacturing Sector is broad-based but with some significant concentration in certain sub-sectors. Top five manufacturing sub-sectors by employment (*67% of total sector employment):*

Industry Sub-Sector (JobsEQ® 2023Q4 dataset)	LQ	Employment	% Industry
1. Electrical Equipment, Appliance, and Component Manufacturing	17.01	7,900	25%
2. Primary Metal Manufacturing	10.36	4,323	14%
3. Food Manufacturing (does not include Beverage & Tobacco)	2.05	4,045	13%
4. Fabricated Metal Product Manufacturing	1.46	2,400	8%
5. Transportation Equipment Manufacturing	1.06	2,156	7%

- Significant multiplier effect supports many jobs in supply chain and other sectors.
- Continued productivity growth will drive increased economic output with moderate decline expected in manufacturing employment over the next 5 years, likely to under 30,000.
- ≈29% of manufacturing production workers are age 55 or older. Local manufacturing employers need 6,500 new entrants by 2029 to maintain current workforce level due to exit forecast.
- Facing continued impact of direct competition for entry-level talent from Transportation &

Warehousing sector expansion in Berks County since 2020 (1,600 warehouse associate job ads in the period 1/2023 - 1/2024).

- Failure to address talent pipeline/skills shortages and incumbent talent upskilling will lead to reduced business investment and lower economic output with a significant negative impact on local economic prosperity.
- Ongoing demand for Heavy & Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers requiring Commercial Drivers Licensing (CDL) and Industrial Truck & Tractor Operators.

II. Priority A *(Expanding Industry)*: Healthcare (excludes Social Assistance)

- 2nd largest sector by employment: 25,164 jobs - 13.8% of local employment *(JobsEQ® 2023Q4 dataset)* with 751 Reading MSA establishments
- 2nd largest employer (Tower Health/Reading Hospital) and 12th (Penn State Health - St. Joseph Medical Center) largest employer *(CWIA 2024Q2)*
  - Having been hit especially hard by the COVID-19 pandemic *(↓1,500 jobs in the period 2020Q1 to a low in 2022Q2)*, this sector has recovered to 98% of its pre-pandemic employment and is projected to have steady job growth through 2028.
  - Industry average annual wages = $73,347 *(JobsEQ® 2023Q4 dataset)*
  - Strong Location Quotient (LQ) = **1.18**, above national average
  - 11.5% of Berks GDP = $2.7 Billion (2022)
  - Top five Healthcare occupations by employment with 5-year growth/annual growth percentage/5-year projected total demand *(JobsEQ® 2023Q4 dataset)*:

Occupation	Current Employed	5 Year Employ Growth	% Annual Growth	5 Year Total Demand
1. Registered Nurses	**3,699**	**-24**	**-0.1%**	**966**
2. Personal Care Aides	**1,932**	**85**	**1.5%**	**1,469**
3. Nursing Assistants	**1,757**	**-24**	**-0.2%**	**1,197**
4. Licensed Practical & Licensed Vocational Nurses	**844**	**-4**	**-0.1%**	**315**
5. Medical Assistants	**723**	**26**	**0.7%**	**499**

- While the 5-year employment projections for these five essential occupations indicate low or even minimally declining new job growth, the 5-year total demand *(exits + transfers + growth)* projects an alarming replacement need. *Note: Rising employment growth and 5-year total demand projections for Home Health Aides (≈1,000 est.) should also be monitored*.
- Excellent system of industry-recognized licenses and credentials driving education & career pathways. Good opportunities for middle-skill jobs and career paths.
- Significant opportunity to build stronger career ladders from lower-paying Home Health Aides and Nursing Assistant occupations to highly attractive Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) and Registered Nurse (RN) occupations.
- Service industry with limited jobs multiplier effect

III. Priority B (*Infrastructure Industry)*: Construction

- Sector employment = 7,900 jobs *(PA DOLI/CWIA, April 2024) plus ≈1,900 self-employed contractors (non-covered)*
- ↑*700 jobs from pre-pandemic level (PA DOLI/CWIA: 2/2020 vs. 4/2024 data)*
- 5.3% of Berks total employment *(JobsEQ® 2023Q4 dataset)* with 880+ Reading MSA establishments

- Annual economic output (2022) = $1.0 Billion *(4.1% of Berks GDP)*
- Location Quotient (LQ) = **0.88**, below national but slightly above PA (0.87) concentrations
- Industry average annual wage = $67,207 (total employment including self-employed). Significant upward pressure on wages expected to continue related to hiring/retention needs associated with federal Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act as well as Pennsylvania's Commonwealth Training & Workforce Program (CWTP) funded projects over the next four years.
- Top six Construction Trades occupations by employment/5-year projected total demand/5-year mean wage progression/regression percentage *(BLS 2018 versus 2023 Occupational Employment Statistics Data)*:

Occupation	Current Employed	5 Year Total Demand	5 Yr. Wage % Δ
1. Construction Laborers	**1,333**	**544**	**24%**
2. Carpenters	**866**	**317**	**21%**
3. Electricians	**585**	**255**	**40%**
4. Operating Engineers/Construction Equip. Ops.	**463**	**181**	**15%**
5. Plumbers, Pipefitters, and Steamfitters	**456**	**180**	**-6%**
6. HVACR Mechanics/Installers	**438**	**179**	**4%**

- ≈27% currently employed in construction trades occupations at or above 55 years of age
- Employment forecast – stable to modest increase to ≈9,000 payroll employees by 2027Q4.
- The Berks construction industry currently has 77 distinct, employer-sponsored, building trades apprenticeship "earn and learn" training models with well-defined career and wage progression to recruit, train, and retain workers.
- Many similar great career pathways and related employee sponsored skills training opportunities within our local Utility Systems and Civil Engineering Construction Sectors. Ongoing demand for Heavy Equipment Operators requiring Commercial Drivers Licensing (CDL).

IV. Priority C (*Watch Industries):*

A. Agriculture

- Legacy industry – 122 establishments, 42nd largest employer – Giorgio Mushroom *(CWIA 2024Q2)*
- Employment = ≈3,350 jobs or 2% Berks employment *(JobsEQ® 2023Q4 dataset)*
  - Relatively stable employment – less than ±4% average annual change in the last 5 years
  - Industry average annual wage = $46,686 *(JobsEQ® 2023Q4 dataset)*
  - $400 Million annual output (2022) – 1.6% of total Berks GDP (above National GDP of 0.9%)
  - Strong Location Quotient (LQ) = **1.48**, well above the national average
  - Tied closely to food production (manufacturing sub-sector) with "locally sourced" advantage
  - Related regional demand for mechanics/technicians to service increasingly sophisticated farm and production equipment – including electronic, hydraulic and diesel technicians as well as CDL Drivers.

B. Educational Services

- Sector Employment = 12,479 *(JobsEQ® 2023Q4 dataset)*
- 7% of Berks total employment *(JobsEQ® 2023Q4 dataset)*
- Industry average annual wage = $63,130 (BLS OEWS; May 2023)
- Annual economic output (2022) = $1.3 Billion *(5.5% of Berks GDP)*
- Location Quotient (LQ) = **0.87**, below national and PA (0.98) concentrations

- Top five Educational Services occupations (excluding school administration, maintenance, & services) by employment/5-year growth/annual growth percentage/5-year projected total demand:

Occupation	Current Employed	5 Year Employ Growth	% Annual Growth	5 Year Total Demand
1. Elementary School Teachers (exc. Special Ed.)	**1,730**	**-13**	**0.03%**	**563**
2. Secondary School Teachers (exc. Special & CTE)	**1,477**	**-10**	**0.2%**	**438**
3. Teaching Assistants (exc. Postsecondary)	**1,224**	**-11**	**-0.4%**	**694**
4. Middle School Teachers (exc. Special & CTE)	**795**	**-5**	**-0.3%**	**259**
5. Substitute Teachers, Short Term	**266**	**4**	**0.1%**	**164**

  - ≈26% currently employed in Educational Services occupations at or above 55 years of age
  - Employment forecast – modest decrease to ≈12,300 by 2028Q4. This sector is projected to experience significant exits and transfers at the elementary and secondary school levels through 2028Q4.
  - A conclusion from a 2023 Berks County Planning Commission (BCPC) comparison of local population shifts in Berks County's demographic profiles and characteristics between the 2010 U.S. Census and the 2020 U.S. Census suggests local school districts within Berks County should be cognizant of potentially lower K-12 enrollments and plan accordingly.
  - ≈639 Special Education Teachers (Pre K-12). 5-year total demand forecast = 204. *(JobsEQ® 2023Q4 dataset)*
  - 159 Career/Technical Educators (Secondary/Post-Secondary). 5-year total demand forecast = 49. *(JobsEQ® 2023Q4 dataset)*
  - Excellent system of credential attainment and requisite certifications driving education & career pathways including local 2+2+2 CTC/RACC/Kutztown University articulations.
  - Growing local, state and national focus on need to expand early childhood education (ECE), possibly to "universal" access will require much greater supply of early childhood educators.

Manufacturing Industry Needs - Berks County's most prominent "Priority A" Industry Sector remains Manufacturing. Over the past fifteen years, our region's manufacturing employers thrived in a competitive international economy by developing world-class products, processes, and people – the defining characteristics of what we sometimes refer to as advanced manufacturing. During this extended period of steady expansion and prosperity, our regional manufacturing employers have benefited from a stable and experienced workforce which was able to adapt to the changing technological environment. Due to successful process improvement strategies and significant capital investment in new manufacturing technologies, our advanced manufacturing employers were able to increase output with the same number or even fewer employees. However, the retained employees need a higher skill level as reflected in advanced manufacturing's highest priority skilled technical occupations. Our region's economic health is tied closely to our ability to maintain the historically available supply of technically skilled precision machining occupations, industrial maintenance/mechatronics technicians, high-end welders and metal fabricators, diesel engine technicians and manufacturing "technologists" in emerging fields such as additive manufacturing, robotics and the Internet of Things (IoT).

Over the past six years, our region's manufacturing employers have increasingly expressed broad concerns regarding both the quantity and quality of workers interested in and available for high-skill manufacturing employment. These concerns can be categorized under two key themes: (1) An insufficient pipeline exists to fill current openings for skilled manufacturing technicians and to replace skilled "baby-boomer" incumbents who are retiring in large numbers; and (2) less-skilled manufacturing production workers or potential entrants into manufacturing are difficult to attract and retain and are often not prepared to adapt

to changes in the new manufacturing work environment or be "upskilled" into the skilled manufacturing technicians on which the less-skilled positions depend for continued employment. Low numeracy levels among incumbent workers needing to be upskilled and job applicants is a growing problem of concern for local manufacturing employers.

Local small to medium-size manufacturers (SMMs) feel the crunch most acutely. Manufacturing skills shortages are not a challenge confined to Berks County; however, we fortunately are home to a long-standing manufacturing industry partnership (IP) to help coordinate support for manufacturing SMM's from the Berks County WDB, community and economic development partners, and our local world-class education and training providers. Since 2018, this IP has been facilitated by the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) which also coordinates our annual Greater Reading Manufacturing Summit to keep these long-terms skills issues highly visible to employers, community and economic development partners policy makers, and our local community leaders. Over 175 local leaders attended our 10th Annual Manufacturing Summit on October 30, 2024, at Reading Area Community College's Schmidt Training & Technology Center (RACC-STTC) featuring a panel discussion with three local manufacturing employers sharing current best practices on *Developing a Talent Pipeline and Succession Plan for the Entire Organization*.

GRCA's planning for the 2024 Summit included extensive engagement with the IP's manufacturing employers confirming a continuing rise in employer demand for qualified precision machining, industrial maintenance/mechatronics technicians, and skilled welders:

- **Precision machining occupations** have well-defined technical skills development curves along established career paths and/or ladders that can result in greater job responsibility and wages often exceeding $30 per hour in time. Precision machining occupations are consistently identified by the PA Dept. of Labor & Industry as "High Priority Occupations" which are in demand by employers, have higher skill needs, and provide family sustaining wages. Many Berks County employers are recruiting adult candidates even before graduation/program completion directly from Berks Career and Technical Center (BCTC), Reading Muhlenberg Career and Technology Center (RMCTC), and Reading Area Community College (RACC) precision machining training programs. Our highly sought-after young adult student participants regularly receive multiple job offers for good jobs awaiting their graduations from all three programs. Most precision machining employers are willing to provide on the job (OJT) upskilling immediately upon hiring. Unfortunately, only a handful of regional precision machining employers sponsor registered apprenticeship (RA) programs – a proven best practice commonly utilized by precision manufacturers in other regions of the Commonwealth, such as York County and Greater Pittsburgh. The WDB will continue seeking opportunities to promote the RA model with local precision machining employers.
- **Industrial maintenance/mechatronics technicians** are in even greater demand in the region and across industry sectors - generating upward pressure on already excellent wages. Nearly 60% of the current Berks workforce occupying industrial maintenance occupations is 45 years or older compared to 47% of the regional workforce in all industries. By 2028, at least 25% to 30% of the total Berks County industrial maintenance workforce will be retired or near, at or above retirement age (Source: JobsEQ® 2024Q2 data). The skill sets and key competencies for this critical job family closely match the skills local employers demand from graduates of Reading Area Community College's Schmidt Training & Technology Center's (RACC-STTC) Mechatronics program. RACC is responding to employer demand for qualified candidates skilled in the Industrial Maintenance/Mechatronics competencies by partnering with the two Career & Technology Centers (CTCs) located in Berks County, through a 2+2+2 Mechatronics Technical

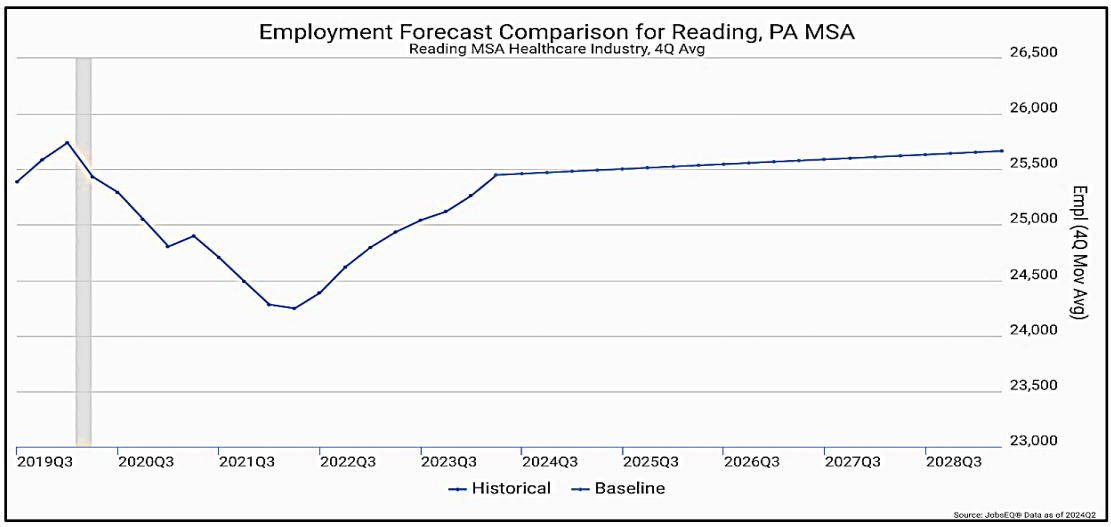
Academy, devoted to nurturing this career-path talent pipeline beginning at the secondary school level. Employers looking to hire workers proficient, specialized, and ready to plug in "out of the gate" talent are constantly soliciting RACC for qualified job candidates.

- **Welders, cutters, Solderers, and Brazers** – With approximately 900 skilled metals fabrication workers in the Reading MSA, primary employers of these occupations are involved in Motor Vehicle Body and Trailer Manufacturing (34.4%). Thirty-eight percent (38%) of workers currently employed in these occupations are 45 years of age and older. Of the three manufacturing occupations requiring industry-recognized credentials listed in this Manufacturing Industry Needs assessment, this job family is projected to have the highest total demand during the PY2024-PY2028 period. 2024Q2 JobsEQ® data estimates a total replacement need of almost 50% of the current workforce occupying SOC 51-4121 jobs in the next five years. Both local CTCs can boast of state-of-the-art facilities and talented instructors who are actively training the next generation of skilled manufacturing technicians so desperately needed by our expanding Berks County advanced manufacturing sector.:
    - Berks Career & Technology Center (BCTC) expanded their welding training facilities six years ago to attract and accommodate increased trainee enrollment capacities for both high school and adult students.
    - September 2023 saw the opening of Reading Muhlenberg Career & Technical Center's (RMCTC's) new $5.6 million welding and metal fabrication training facility and precision machining workshop. Amazingly, the new facilities were designed, approved, and built in less than three years following initial discussions in November 2020 with RMCTC's leadership, local employers, and the County's economic and workforce development leaders. Nearly all RMCTC's talented students in these life-changing career programs come from low-income families.

Employer need for both experienced and entry-level talent in these high demand advanced manufacturing job families extends well beyond Berks and our six bordering counties. The Berks WDB, in partnership with and on behalf of the six county (Berks, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia) WDBs that make up the SE PA planning region was the lead applicant in a collective 2024 regional petition initiative to have skilled production/mechatronics related SOC codes reinstated to and retained on the High Priority Occupations list across the region.

The Berks County WDB's ongoing industry sector analysis and engagement with local economic development partners leads us to conclude that success in building an ever-stronger manufacturing workforce in the Greater Berks region will foster an attractive manufacturing investment environment, resulting in expanding economic output and the creation and retention of tens of thousands of good jobs and careers in the sector. Clearly, the decade ahead offers attractive career opportunities for manufacturing workers who are prepared and positioned to compete and ever-growing risks for those who are not. Failure to effectively address the skills shortage will lead to declines in our region's manufacturing production and potential layoffs of manufacturing workers in a broad range of occupations should our employers miss out on successful transition to the new increasingly technology-driven era.

Healthcare Industry Needs – As a result of its 2024 bi-annual analysis of local industry sectors, the Berks County WDB has now elevated the Healthcare sector to a "Priority A - Expanding Industry". The sector currently employs >25,000 workers (13.8% of local employment) and has demonstrated steady employment growth. The WDB projects a return to pre-pandemic sector employment levels by 2028.



Source: JobsEQ® 2024Q2 dataset

According to a PA Dept. Of Labor & Industry Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA) 2024Q2 report, two regional hospital systems are among the top employers in Berks County – Reading Hospital/Tower Health System (#2) and Penn State-St. Joseph's Regional Health Network (#11).

In 2022, the Berks County WDB secured a Pennsylvania Nursing Pathway Apprenticeship Industry Partnership Grant from the PA Dept. of Labor & Industry. The WDB, serving as lead applicant, fiscal agent, and administrator of the contracts required to successfully manage this project, contracted with the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) to act as "Convener" for the outreach, recruitment, development and launch of the Healthcare Connection Industry Partnership (IP) in the Greater Reading region.

As the convenor, GRCA is responsible for the recruitment, development and launch of a Healthcare Industry Partnership of the Greater Reading region. GRCA currently maintains a great relationship with PA CareerLink® Berks County, the Berks County WDB (as made evident by this application), industry associations/trade organizations, and educational providers - including local school districts, the Berks County Intermediate Unit (BCIU), Berks County's five institutes of higher education, and our two CTCs in Berks; Berks Career & Technology Center (BCTC) and Reading Muhlenberg Career & Technology Center (RMCTC). Through these partnerships, the GRCA will be able to generate a robust turnout from the public partner side but will also be able to reach and cross-promote the program to healthcare organizations through many of the partner organizations listed above. Launched in June 2023, healthcare industry representatives from providers of both critical and long-term/assisted living care services, and local educational agencies engaged in the IP, have helped to make sure that we have current insights into employer needs in this increasingly significant sector. These employers confirm our WDB Healthcare priority sector analysis showing that the top local occupations by employment/5-year growth/annual growth percentage/5-year total demand are (Source: JobsEQ 2023Q4 dataset)

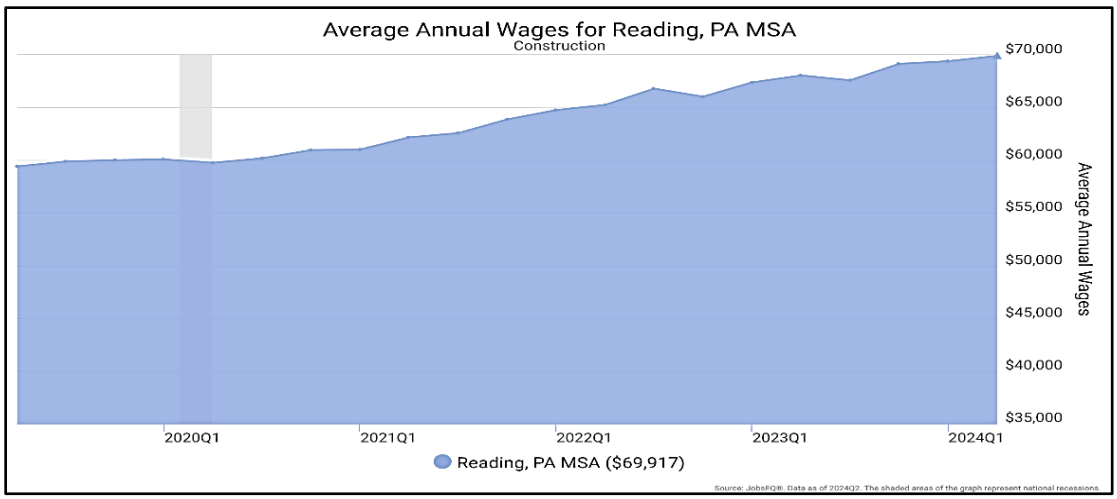
- For the foreseeable future, Registered Nurses (RNs) will remain a large and highly visible occupation anchoring the center of one of the most attractive career paths. Many opportunities for RNs will continue to develop both inside of and outside of the traditional acute care hospital environment to include assisted living residential and home healthcare.
- Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) are also projected to remain in great demand. Initial feedback from our hospital system leadership during IP discussion has underscored their reinvestment into the role that LPNs can serve in critical care teams. At the same time, many Ambulatory Healthcare

Service providers and Nursing and Residential Care Facilities are also turning to the recruitment of LPNs to help relieve critical care staffing shortages. The Berks WDB considers LPN certification to be a great return on postsecondary education investment as it represents a well-paying entry point on the nursing career pathway.

- Demand for Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and Medical Assistant credential is increasing exponentially. While we project continued strong demand for CNAs, the lack of adequate educational provider training capacity has become a significant limiting factor as well as inferior wage incentives to promote recruitment and retention. A co-project under the Healthcare Connection Industry Partnership (IP) Grant has been efforts in the development of a group sponsored CNA→LPN registered apprenticeship pathway in collaboration with grant partner Reading Area Community College. However, we still see little evidence of individuals with the CNA credential moving up into LPN, RN or other well-paying healthcare occupations nor do we know of many effective local employer-sponsored programs to help them do so. The WDB will continue outreach to other potential sponsors and will reengage with the Commonwealth's Apprenticeship & Training Office (ATO) if employer interest can be confirmed. Collectively resolving these issues is a fundamental focus of the IP's strategic development.
- Acknowledging the continuing aging of the Berks County resident population, Home Health and Personal Care Aide occupations are also projected to grow substantially over the next decade. However, evaluation and projections of these occupations is particularly challenging given the employer fragmentation and changing environment of service delivery in this subsector. The Berks County WDB's observations on Home Healthcare Occupations include:
    - Local employer feedback indicates that the actual growth of home healthcare industry employment may well exceed already significant growth projections from current models.
    - Unlike most other healthcare occupations, industry-recognized credentials in home healthcare are under-developed.
    - These occupations are too often characterized by low pay, few benefits, high turnover, and little movement onto or along more attractive healthcare career pathways.

Labor market intelligence provided through our new local Healthcare IP strongly suggest that post-pandemic recruitment and retention of professional personnel is improving. However, significant talent issues remain as barriers to full sector recovery and expansion. These challenges include large numbers of replacements for retiring Registered Nurse replacements. A primary focus of employers and community-based training providers in this subsector should be to identify and screen career-oriented entrants with barriers to employment into high quality training programs with ongoing support following initial employment placement. Career development planning and additional training will be critical to retain and grow new-hires and incumbents on pathways that result in better paying high-priority healthcare occupations.

Construction Sector Needs - Though not nearly as large as our local manufacturing or healthcare sectors, our Berks County construction contractors generate significant wealth coming to and remaining within the County while maintaining and expanding our region's critical infrastructure. With extensive federal infrastructure funding now making its way through the state to the local level, we project that the economic impact and visibility of this sector will grow substantially through at least 2029. Our construction sector already provides >9,000 total jobs, including non-covered status, with great (and growing) family sustaining wages and benefits in career pathways that do not require an expensive 4-year degree to get started. In fact, Jobs EQ® reports that the average annual wage in our local construction industry is approaching $70,000 as of 2024Q2 (see graph below).

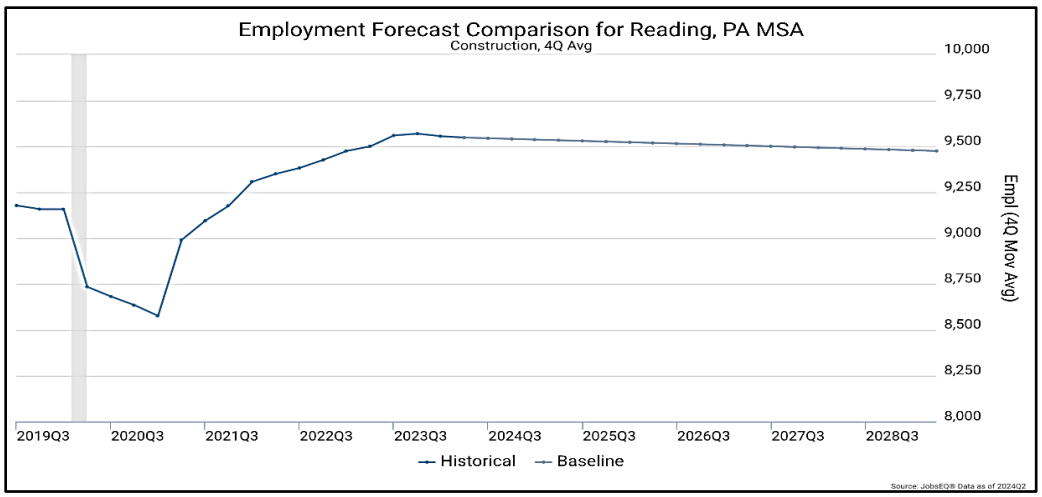


Jobs EQ® also projects that wages will grow in four of Berks WDA Construction sector top five occupations by employment (Source: 5-year mean wage progression/regression percentage: Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) 2018 versus 2023 Occupational Employment & Wage Statistics Data [OEWS]):

Occupation	Current Employed	5 Yr. Wage % Δ
1. Construction Laborers	1,333	24%
2. Carpenters	866	21%
3. Electricians	585	40%
4. Plumbers, Pipefitters, and Steamfitters	463	15%
5. HVAC/R Mechanics & Installers	456	-6%

A growing concern related to this sector is the need for large numbers of replacement workers over the next ten years as currently ≈48% of Berks County residents employed in construction occupations are 45 years of age or older age (Source: JobsEQ® 2023Q2 dataset). Compounding this aging demographic issue is the reality that over 3,000 workers (53% of Berks' Construction Industry non-management/skilled trades employment) are employed in skilled trades and construction machine operating occupations that require long-term training, apprenticeships, and licensing certification (Source: BLS May 2023 OES data). These high demand occupations include Carpenters, Electricians, Plumbers & Pipefitters, HVACR Technicians, and Operating Engineers and Heavy Construction Equipment Operators.

The Berks County WDB projects significant replacement jobs needs in this sector through the next five years due to exits and transfers. Local contractors share concerns that growing opportunities to bid on and secure commercial contracts in federally funded infrastructure construction and municipal upgrade projects may be constrained unless more skilled workers are available for hire. JobsEQ modeling below shows that may indeed be the case:



Recognizing that construction firms typically contract for projects that are regional and might require hiring outside of their local workforce development area, the Berks WDB works with WDBs across the Southeast PA region who share our level of concern surrounding the supply versus demand for these skilled occupations and the need for their continued proper classification as High Priority Occupations. Accordingly, the Berks County WDB has annually supported a collective regional petition initiative for the inclusion of skilled construction trades such as Carpenters, Electricians, Plumbers & Pipefitters, HVAC/R Technicians, and Operating Engineers and Heavy Construction Equipment Operators SOC codes on the CWIA approved High Priority Occupations (HPO) lists in all six local WDBs (Berks, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia WDBs) comprising our SE PA planning region.

Agriculture Sector Needs – Agriculture is both an important legacy as well as a cornerstone of Berks County's economy, culture, and community. Recognizing this vital role, in 2024, the Berks County's Department of Agriculture embarked on a comprehensive study and strategic planning process to address the agricultural sector's challenges and opportunities. In February 2025, the Berks County Board of Commissioner approved and adopted this timely study - *Growing Berks: Agriculture's Impact and Roadmap for Its Future* which aims to better understand and ensure the long-term viability and prosperity of agriculture in Berks County.

Agriculture in Berks County benefits from the county's strategic location within the state of Pennsylvania. Positioned near major urban markets like Philadelphia, New York City, and Washington, D.C., farmers have easy access to a large customer base. This proximity facilitates the direct sale of fresh produce to consumers and supports value-added agricultural enterprises like local dairies, wineries, and organic farms. The combination of productive soils, a favorable climate, and access to key markets has led to a robust agricultural economy in Berks County, with the county ranking among the top in Pennsylvania for agricultural sales, particularly in dairy and livestock production.

As detailed in the *Growing Berks* report, "Agriculture in Berks County is a substantial economic driver, contributing over $1 billion in local output." both directly and indirectly. Despite its importance, the sector faces a severe labor shortage, compounded by a lack of both hard and soft skills among the available workforce. Farmers report difficulties in retaining employees long enough to benefit from on-the-job training, negatively impacting efficiency and growth in the sector. To meet these challenges, educational and training programs from institutions like Penn State Extension and support from the Berks County Department of Agriculture and the Berks County Workforce Development Board are critical, providing valuable resources to enhance workforce skills and support the broad agricultural industry.

Educational Services Sector Needs – In Spring 2024, the Berks County WDB renewed the inclusion of Educational Services as a Priority C - "Watch Industry" in the WDB's Industry Sector Priorities (PY2024-PY2028) Strategy following recommendation by the WDB Planning and Training & Industry Partnership Committee.

Early Childhood Education and Access to Daycare: Accessing care for their children can be a two-generation challenge for many families. Lacking access to childcare can affect a parent's ability to find and retain a job. The cost of childcare, the location of available services and even the hours of operation could impede a parent's willingness or ability to accept a job. Likewise, many employers have found that it can be an inhibiting factor in recruiting and retaining employees, particularly with a challenging job market.

There is clear evidence from broad research demonstrating that high quality early childhood education provides children with the tools that they need to succeed in school. Unfortunately, a serious lack of quality early childhood education centers in Berks County is a growing problem, fueled by an inadequate regional supply of trained childcare workers.

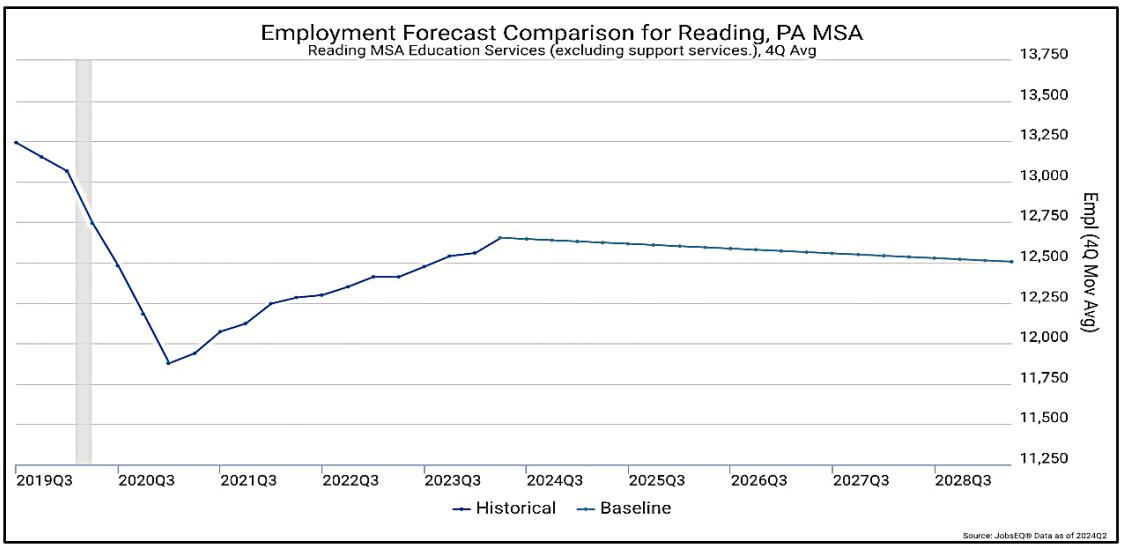
Fortunately, there are several initiatives underway in Berks County to help address these challenges. Six years ago, there were no four-star early childhood education centers in the City of Reading, and access to quality programs was limited across the county. The United Way of Berks County (UWBC) developed effective solutions to help address many of these challenges. Partnering with the Reading Area Community College RACC, they developed a training program for early childhood educators. RACC now has an education program for early childhood educators which has supported over 100 students.

As a partner in a collaboration launched by the Harwood Institute and the Hispanic Center of Berks County, the United Way developed a strategy to improve the work of existing childcare centers. They have launched an effort to reach out to families to inform them about the importance of early childhood education for their children and they have engaged physicians and health care workers to help inform parents of young children about the importance of early childhood education.

Such collaborative efforts can be instrumental in helping Berks County address the education and workforce needs of our community. The table below details the top five Educational Services occupations (excluding school administration, maintenance, & services) by employment/5-year growth/annual growth percentage/5-year projected total demand (JobsEQ® 2023Q4 dataset):

Occupation	Current Employed	5 Year Employ Growth	% Annual Growth	5 Year Total Demand
1. **Elementary School Teachers (exc. Special Ed.)**	**1,730**	**-13**	**0.03%**	**563**
2. **Secondary School Teachers (exc. Special & CTE)**	**1,477**	**-10**	**0.2%**	**438**
3. **Teaching Assistants (exc. Postsecondary)**	**1,224**	**-11**	**-0.4%**	**694**
4. **Middle School Teachers (exc. Special & CTE)**	**795**	**-5**	**-0.3%**	**259**
5. **Substitute Teachers, Short Term**	**266**	**4**	**0.1%**	**164**

The Berks County WDB has been vigilant in its monitoring of employment in this sector, representing 7% of Berks' total employment, which was distinctively negatively impacted by the pandemic resulting in higher-than-average exits and transfers. Compounding this concerning exit from teaching jobs is the demographic reality that ≈26% of educators currently employed in this sector (excluding administrators, maintenance, and service occupations) are at or above 55 years of age when many experienced professionals can take advantage of attractive pension and retiree medical plans. While the sector has now recovered to 95% of its pre-pandemic ≈13,280 employment levels, a projected employment data model indicates a modest decrease to ≈12,500 by 2028Q4 (Source: JobsEQ® 2024Q2 dataset).



A telling conclusion comes from a 2023 Berks County Planning Commission (BCPC) comparison of local population shifts in Berks County's demographic profiles and characteristics between the 2010 U.S. Census and the 2020 U.S. Census. The BCPC suggests local school districts within Berks County should be cognizant of potentially lower K-12 enrollments and plan accordingly.

Traditionally, our Educational Services sector has benefited from an excellent system of credential attainment and requisite certifications driving education & career pathways. The Berks WDB welcomes an innovative 2+2+2 Teacher Academy Program that promises to significantly enhance the emerging talent in education fields of study needed for replacements and new job growth in these teaching positions. Established through agreements articulated between the two Berks CTCs and Reading Area Community College's Early Childhood Teaching (PreK-Grade 4) program, college credit may be granted through dual-enrollment academy articulation agreements and may lead to advanced standing in Kutztown University's Bachelor of Science Education academics programs and, ultimately, PA Dept. of Education Teacher Certification.

The WDB will remain active in partnership with our secondary school and higher education providers regarding workforce development needs and career awareness opportunities in this critical sector.

Cross-Industry Sector Needs

Commercial Driver Licensing (CDL) - Through real-time feedback from employers in manufacturing, construction, agriculture, and other sectors utilizing heavy equipment operations, the Berks WDB has identified a long-term shortage of qualified CDL Drivers serving as a drag on overall local economic activity. Observations on CDL/Driver Occupations include:

- A CDL certification remains a valuable industry-recognized credential and one of the shortest training paths for jobseekers in the region to attain gainful employment at family-sustaining wages.
- Ongoing shortages of qualified candidates with CDL certifications throughout Eastern Pennsylvania have led to upward movement of these wages, including entry-level wages.
- CDL training remains our topmost training activity in terms of local Individual Training Account (ITA) funding expenditure in recent years and this pattern is likely to continue.

	Current		5-Year Forecast	
Occupation	**Empl**	**Mean Ann Wages[2]**	**Total Demand**	**Ann % Growth**
Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	2,955	$59,800	1,476	-0.1%
Operating Engineers and Other Construction Equipment Operators	601	$58,700	240	-0.2%

Heavy Equipment Technicians - As well as the long-term employment needs for Commercially Licensed Heavy Equipment Operators in the manufacturing, construction, agriculture, and transportation sectors, the Berks WDB considers the 5-year total demand for industry certified Heavy Equipment Technicians a long-term priority employment need to guarantee functioning equipment necessary to the ongoing operations in these sectors vital to the Reading MSA economy.

	Current		5-Year Forecast	
Occupation	**Empl**	**Mean Ann Wages[2]**	**Total Demand**	**Ann % Growth**
Bus and Truck Mechanics and Diesel Engine Specialists	412	$60,000	160	-0.3%
Mobile Heavy Equipment Mechanics, Except Engines	201	$62,800	84	0.2%
Farm Equipment Mechanics and Service Technicians	56	$51,200	25	0.6%

1.3 Skills Gap analysis - How are the skills gaps defined in the local area? Provide a description of the skills that are required to meet the needs of employers in region and local area?

Unfortunately, our current local education profile in Berks County does not match well with the needs of our region's emerging technology-driven workplace. In the decade ahead, while we may have a sufficient supply of local working age adult residents with 4-year degrees, our local employers need a much larger pool of adults with **associate degrees** (particularly in technical fields of study) or similarly valuable post-secondary educational and skills credentials. Importantly, such post-secondary credentials are proven tickets to career success which can be affordably acquired through registered apprenticeships, technical applied associate (AAS) degree programs, and military or other technical training programs without taking on undue student loan debt.

The Berks County WDB remains committed to local employer engagement through rigorous industry sector analysis. This allows the WDB to continuously update and deepen our understanding of the current and future skills needs of our employers and to develop responsive programming in conjunction with local partners to address critical gaps.

In keeping with this employer engagement strategy and in preparation for the development of this WIOA local four-year plan, the WDB completed its most recent bi-annual analysis of local industry sectors in Spring 2024 (as described in Section 1.2). Using the latest economic data and labor market information (LMI), the WDB confirmed and approved five priority industry sectors on which to focus from PY2024 through PY2028:

- Priority A Sectors (x2) **– Manufacturing** and **Healthcare (excluding Social Assistance)**
- Priority B Sector (x1) **– Construction**
- Priority C Sectors (x2) **– Agriculture** and **Educational Services**

Manufacturing Skills Gaps - As detailed in Section 1.2, Berks County's most notable "Priority A" Industry Sector is Manufacturing. Over the past six years, our region's manufacturing employers have consistently

expressed concern regarding both the quantity and quality of workers interested in and available for high-skill manufacturing employment. These concerns can be categorized under two key themes: (1) An insufficient pipeline exists to fill current openings for skilled manufacturing technicians and to replace skilled "baby-boomer" incumbents who are retiring in large numbers; and (2) less-skilled manufacturing production workers or potential entrants into manufacturing are difficult to attract and are often not prepared to adapt to changes in the new manufacturing work environment or be "upskilled" into the skilled manufacturing technicians on which the less-skilled positions depend for continued employment.

Low numeracy and English language proficiency levels among both incumbent workers needing to be upskilled, and job applicants is a growing problem identified by local manufacturing employers. Numeracy and English language proficiency barrier issues are addressed later in this section.

Due to successful process improvement strategies and significant capital investment in new manufacturing technologies, our advanced manufacturing employers have consistently increased product output with the same number or even fewer employees. However, the retained employees need a higher skill level as reflected in advanced manufacturing's highest priority skilled technical occupations. Our region's economic health is tied closely to our ability to maintain the historically available supply of technically skilled precision machining occupations, industrial maintenance/mechatronics technicians, high-end welders and metal fabricators, diesel engine technicians and manufacturing "technologists" in emerging fields such as additive manufacturing, robotics and the Internet of Things (IoT).

While RACC and our two local CTCs provide exemplary training and industry-recognized credentialling opportunities in these fields and program enrollment is maximized, a growing concern related to this sector is the need for large numbers of replacement workers. The Berks County WDB projects steady replacement jobs needs in this sector through the next five years due to exits and transfers. In its efforts to promote growth in skilled manufacturing technician pathways, the WDB has authorized the allocation of WIOA Title I training funds to assist employers with upskilling eligible employees in both registered apprenticeship (RA) related technical instruction and non-RA incumbent worker "hard skill" training activities.

Healthcare Skills Gaps – As of June 2024, the Berks County WDB elevated the Healthcare sector to designation as a "Priority A - Expanding" Industry. The Berks WDB acknowledges that the healthcare sector has, traditionally, maintained an excellent system of industry-recognized licensing and credentialing driving education & career pathways, However, the WDB is also aware, over the past four years, of growing talent needs in the healthcare sector due to training capacity barriers impacting the accommodation of new entrants into the fields of study required for certification and/or employment, This is especially a challenge in the following occupations, (detailed in Section 1.2) identified by local healthcare service providers as the skilled healthcare occupations in greatest need in the Reading MSA:

- Registered Nurses (RNs) will remain a large occupation anchoring the center of one of the most attractive career paths for the foreseeable future. Many opportunities for RNs will continue to develop both inside of and outside of the traditional acute care hospital environment to include assisted living residential and home healthcare.
- Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) are also projected to remain in great demand. Feedback from our local hospital system leadership has been a reinvestment into the role that LPNs can serve in critical care teams. At the same time, many Ambulatory Healthcare Service providers and Nursing and Residential Care Facilities are also turning to the recruitment of LPNs to help relieve critical care issues. The Berks WDB considers LPN certification to be a great return on postsecondary education investment as it represents a well-paying entry point on the nursing career pathway.

- Demand for Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and Medical Assistant credentials, especially as a step along the pathway to higher paying LPN or RN occupations, is increasing exponentially. The lack of adequate educational provider training capacity has become a significant limiting factor as well as inferior wage incentives to promote recruitment and retention.
- With the aging of the Berks County resident population, Home Health and Personal Care Aide occupations are also projected to grow substantially over the next decade. However, evaluation and projections of these occupations is particularly challenging given the employer fragmentation regarding training needs due to the changing environment of service delivery in this subsector.

In efforts to mitigate the recognized training capacity issue, Penn State University-Berks Campus has expanded its Practical Nursing (PN) Program, both on campus and in collaboration with Penn State-St. Joseph's Hospital.

The Berks Career & Technology Center (BCTC) is expanding healthcare career programming to include a new Health Occupations program where students can explore the wide variety of fields available to pursue in the medical field. These experiences will include job shadowing, internships, and Co-op. The program will be a 3-year program with the first two years focused on the program of study established under the Health Occupations Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) and job shadowing experiences in local hospitals and medical facilities. The third year of the program will afford students the opportunity to pursue one of three distinct tracks: (1) further co-op experience in specific field(s), (2) completion of the CNA certification, or (3) application for admission into BCTC's Medical Health Professions program.

BCTC also plans to work with Reading Area Community College (RACC) to determine the feasibility of creating a *Health Careers Academy* partnership. RACC also partners with the Berks Latino Workforce Development Corporation's (BLWDC's) Tec Centro in a state-certified nurse aide program. The Tec Centro model provides bilingual adult basic education and nurse aide occupational training at no tuition cost.

Alvernia University and the Reading Hospital School of Health Sciences have partnered to provide dual enrollment programs combining in-demand certification programs with an associate of science degree and seamless transition to the RN to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program after successful RN completion. Albright College has partnered with Drexel University School of Medicine's local West Reading campus to provide dual enrolment that can result in advanced standing when enrolling in Drexel's BSN Program.

While our local colleges/universities and our two local CTCs provide exemplary training and industry-recognized credentialling opportunities in these fields and program enrollment is maximized, a growing concern related to the healthcare sector is the need for large numbers of replacement workers. The Berks County WDB projects steady replacement jobs needs in this sector through the next five years due to exits and transfers. The Berks WDB supports an increased shift to delivery of post-secondary adult programs. In its efforts to promote growth in skilled trades pathways, the WDB has authorized the allocation of WIOA Title I Adult training funds to match employers' own funds to help offset employer costs in upskilling eligible employees in both registered apprenticeship (RA) related technical instruction and non-RA incumbent worker training activities.

Construction Sector Needs – The skilled construction trades occupations listed in Section 1.2 for are considered High Priority Occupations (HPOs) in the Reading MSA. These high demand occupations include Carpenters, Electricians, Plumbers & Pipefitters, HVACR Technicians, and Operating Engineers and Heavy Construction Equipment Operators.

While our two local CTCs provide exemplary training and industry-recognized credentialling opportunities in these field, daytime enrollment is at full capacity and a growing concern related to this sector is the need for large numbers of replacement workers. The Berks County WDB projects steady replacement jobs needs in this sector through the next five years due to exits and transfers. The Berks WDB supports an expansion of post-secondary adult programs to promote growth in skilled trades pathways. Accordingly, the WDB has authorized the allocation of WIOA Title I training funds to assist employers with upskilling eligible employees in both registered apprenticeship (RA) related technical instruction and non-RA incumbent worker training activities.

Agriculture Sector Needs – As described above in Section 1.2, in February 2025, the Berks County Board of Commissioners approved and adopted a timely study - *Growing Berks: Agriculture's Impact and Roadmap for Its Future* which aims to ensure the long-term viability and prosperity of agriculture in Berks County. The Growing Berks roadmap identifies a severe labor shortage facing agriculture employers, compounded by a lack of both hard and soft skills among the available regional workforce. For example, farmers report difficulties in retaining employees long enough to benefit from on-the-job training, impacting efficiency and growth. To combat these challenges, educational and training programs from institutions like Penn State Extension and support from the Berks County Department of Agriculture and the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) are critical, providing valuable resources to enhance workforce skills and support the broad agricultural industry. Key workforce development themes outlined in the study include:

- **Capacity building** - Industry finds that political support for building agricultural industrial capacity is generally strong. Education and training for both farmers and workers on best practices, new technologies, and sustainable farming methods are robust. Having a greater focus on agriculturally specific technical skills would be beneficial.
- **Youth engagement** - Initiatives and activities to encourage young people to pursue careers in agriculture are well regarded and generally supported by the County. Local farmers would like to formalize these activities to ensure the sector's long-term viability.
- **Entrepreneurship** - New and beginning farmers are necessary for the agricultural industry to continue in Berks County. Whether they are young entrants starting their first job or second-career entrepreneurs, resources,

Education Services Sector Needs – The education services sector is a relatively new addition to the Berks WDB's priority industry sector strategy. The WDB recognizes that, beyond post-pandemic recovery and with forethought of anticipated replacement needs, this sector requires our continuing monitoring of employment activity and career pathways to support a talent pipeline necessary to fulfill the future education needs of Berks County employers and residents.

As detailed ion Section 1.2, our labor marked information (LMI) research has led to a primary focus on early childhood, elementary, middle school, and secondary education professions and, as importantly, Career & Technical Education (CTE) qualified instruction. The WDB has become aware of the many recent challenges and opportunities impacting the education sector, including virtual instructor-led, online content, English as a Second Language (ESL) and artificial intelligence (AI) in the classroom.

Berks County has a longstanding and rich history in educator career development with four Berks institutions of higher education offering programs, approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, to prepare future preschool through Grade 12 teachers and special education teachers in public and private educational institutions. The Berks WDB is particularly encouraged by an innovative 2+2+2 Teacher Academy Program that promises to significantly enhance the emerging talent in education

fields of study needed for replacements and new job growth in these teaching positions. Established through agreements articulated between the two Berks CTCs and Reading Area Community College's Early Childhood Teaching (PreK-Grade 4) program, college credit may be granted through dual-enrollment academy articulation agreements and may lead to advanced standing in Kutztown University's Bachelor of Science Education academics programs and, ultimately, PA Dept. of Education Teacher Certification.

Adult Numeracy Gaps– Low numeracy represents a significant barrier for too many adult residents needed to meet projected employer demand for skilled technology workers in the decade ahead. Based on extensive experience working with local adult and dislocated workers, combined with consistent reports from local employers and training providers, the Berks County WDB has concluded that uncompetitively low levels of adult numeracy among incumbent workers and job seekers alike is a skills gap of major concern. While the WDB is limited in data on adult literacy available at the local level, we do have estimates provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Program *for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)* from their skills map launched in 2019 predicting that, compared to the state of Pennsylvania, Berks County has a statistically higher number of adults (ages 16-64) scoring poorly in numeracy. According to the PIAAC, the Berks average adult numeracy scale score estimate has no notable difference than Pennsylvania (which is in the middle of the pack as compared to other states across the nation), but more specifically:

- 33% of Berks County adults are estimated to be at or below Level 1 (notably higher (worse) than Pennsylvania). NCES reports that at this level adults "may be at risk for difficulties with numeracy" or may even be "functionally innumerate."
- 38% of Berks County adults are estimated by NCES to be at Level 2, which is not notably different than the Commonwealth as a whole. At this level, adults can usually perform simple measurements and interpret relatively simple data and statistics in text, tables and graphs. However, the large number of local adults projected at this level may still struggle to perform numeracy tasks.
- NCES estimates that only 29% of Berks County adults have reached "proficiency" in numeracy (at or above Level 3). Unfortunately, this remains statistically lower (worse) than Pennsylvania as a whole, indicating that many Berks County adult residents may not be competitive for success in attractive STEM career as are more residents of other areas of the Commonwealth and the nation.

(Source: The National Center for Education Statistics (NCEW) Program *for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) U.S. Skills Map* https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/)

The strategic workforce and economic development risk posed by our worrisome low adult numeracy in Berks County has been decades in the making with its roots in stagnant (or even worsening) levels of demonstrated mathematics proficiency among our 70,000 local elementary and secondary school students. A key milestone of mathematics proficiency is student performance on the annual 8th grade mathematics assessment required of local school districts under the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). The WDB's Planning Committee regularly monitors publicly available annual reports at this crucial educational crossroads, realizing that our 8th grade students and their families are beginning to make critical career and education decisions that will have lifelong implications. 8th graders who demonstrate proficiency on this very challenging assessment are likely on track to graduate from high school as numerate young adults with outstanding career and post-secondary education options available to them here in Berks County and beyond. Those that do not could be in real trouble with only 4 short years to get back on track toward numeracy and undoubtedly are at higher risk of not graduating from

high school at all as compared to their peers who successfully demonstrated mathematics proficiency before leaving 8th grade.

Regretfully, results from our 18 local school districts on the latest statewide PSSA assessments in 2024 show that overwhelming numbers of our 8th grade students are not able to demonstrate grade level proficiency in mathematics. This alarmingly low performance in math at a critical transition age is not confined to our less affluent school districts. Not one of our 18 local school districts saw even half of their 8th grade students demonstrate proficiency in math. In fact, only three Berks County school districts achieved over 40% of local 8th grade student PSSA math scores at the proficient or above level. Another four local school districts saw only 30%- 40% of their 8th graders demonstrate proficiency in mathematics. Regretfully, students at the remaining eleven school districts averaged below the highly problematic statewide average of 28.5 % proficiency.

Adult English Language Proficiency – The Berks County WDB has identified and documented significant gaps in English language (EL) proficiency along with adult numeracy among incumbent workers and jobseekers as local economic development needs. Failure to address these basic education deficits among a significant portion of our adult workforce undermines our ability to expand and improve the workplace in response. These economic and workforce development challenges have been amplified in recent decades by a lack of sustained employer commitment to employee training and development that is needed to meet long-term business growth.

To better understand these challenges and opportunities, in September 2021, the WDB approved the creation of a local *Ad Hoc Taskforce on Adult English Language Proficiency and Numeracy*. Under the auspices of the WDB's Planning Committee, this Taskforce undertook a dialogue through April 2022 with adult members of the community, workforce training providers, and employers to better understand the root causes of this complex challenge. Feedback was systematically gathered from structured listening sessions with employers and community members. This feedback as well as employment trend data were then reviewed and discussed by members of the Taskforce leading to the following summary findings:

- While adult numeracy as described above will remain a challenge over the medium to long term, a lack of English Language proficiency is holding back many willing workers from contributing to local employers right now. Most community members interviewed were employed, but not in the jobs they most desired nor in ones that they felt led to career paths with sufficient advancement potential. The primary cause for their inability to find better employment was their lack of English language proficiency despite a willingness on their part to learn English.
- There has been insufficient focus on the impact and consequences of the lack of English language proficiency among a significant segment of the local community resulting in inadequate program capacity to address these problems. From a public policy and priorities perspective – relatively low/flat state and federal funding for Adult Basic Education (ABE) is insufficient to address our clear need to upskill our emerging workforce to replace retiring workers and others who have departed the local labor force.
- Changing this situation will require shifts in public policy priorities that result in more funding as well as new models that involve private employers' making their own in-vestments in training as well as human resources' recruitment and incumbent worker retention tactics.
- There simply are not enough local education and training options to serve all who need and desire to become English language proficient in an employment setting. Improving this situation will require:

1. Acknowledging that adult basic education, with a focus in our region on English proficiency, should be considered a priority social determinant of health and well-being for individuals and their families.
2. Fostering collaborative approaches among providers and employers to enhance English language acquisition across Berks County.
3. Increasing the number of English language skills training programs within low to moderate income community areas in the City of Reading, plus a growing need for such programs outside the city.
4. Establishing bridge programs that connect non-native English speakers to workforce training opportunities.
5. The WDB will support initiatives by forward-thinking employers and multi-employer partnerships to sponsor and fund adult English language and numeracy programs for incumbent workers at the workplace.

The WDB understands that the need to dramatically improve adult numeracy and English Language proficiency is now mission-critical for too many of our jobseekers and employers. Meeting this challenge will require a broad County-wide effort through a problem-solving dialogue with and among our local education partners, elected officials, community organizations, philanthropists and employers over the next four years. In fact, this numeracy/literacy issue likely needs to be addressed even before our children begin their formal elementary education with a stronger community pre-K education focus for all families on the value of education and the resources to access it. Our Planning Committee recommends that we support partnerships with libraries/social services/medical clinics/churches/etc. to better coordinate providing free age-appropriate educational material for parents and their children. In addition, the WDB continues to work closely with our Title II partners to provide English as a second language (ESL) and Adult Basic Education (ABE) within our PA CareerLink® (also referenced in section 3 of the plan).

Adult Residents with Disabilities – The Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) has established a strategic priority to address the employment challenges faced by more than 29,743 adult residents (ages 18-64) with a disability. Unfortunately, these talented residents experience an unemployment rate more than two and a half times the rate for individuals in the labor force with no disability. At the same time, employers in our region increasingly report to the WDB that they would benefit from increased access to trainings and resources around supporting the employment of individuals with disabilities.

In March of 2023, the Berks County WDB sponsored a virtual *Symposium for Employers*, highlighting and promoting resources and best practices of hiring, retaining, and developing individuals with disabilities. This innovative webinar was conceived and designed by a committee of the WDB, and delivery of the program was presented by the PA CareerLink® Berks County's Business Services Team (BST). The event was a huge success with 59 Berks County distinct employers represented. In total, 176 employer participants from Berks and surrounding counties viewed short videos and presentations highlighting practical and proven employer "best practices." Employer feedback following the symposium was overwhelmingly positive, underscoring the opportunities acknowledged as proven best practices they could adopt in their own organizations. This resounding success led the WDB's committee to initiate an important next step in the development of an *Employer Resource Guide* for hiring and retaining adults with disabilities which was made available to interested regional employers in August 2024.

1.4 Workforce Development Activities analysis – Provide an analysis of local area workforce development activities, including education and training.

A. The strengths and weaknesses of workforce development activities, including education and training;

Areas of Strength – Berks County has a competitive workforce development advantage as we are home to possibly the most comprehensive and accessible career and technical training and education (CTE) infrastructure of any local area in the Commonwealth.

Reading Area Community College (RACC) is geographically well-positioned at the center of the County (95% of RACC enrollees are County residents) and within the City of Reading (nearly 40% of enrollees are City residents) to serve the region's evolving future workforce. RACC is the first of only two institutions of higher education in the Commonwealth to be designated by the federal government as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) with 36.6% of the student body self-identifying as Hispanic.

RACC is also programmatically well-positioned to meet the education and workforce development needs of key regional industry sectors and employers. Recognizing that 21st Century careers require significant training and education beyond high school, local employers worked with and donated to Reading Area Community College (RACC) to launch the ***Schmidt Training and Technology Center (RACC-STTC)*** in 2006. Since its founding, RACC-STTC has become widely acknowledged as the best advanced manufacturing training facility in the Commonwealth, with expanding programs (both *for credit* and *non-credit)* serving the needs of employers and students/jobseekers alike.

In addition to its world-class manufacturing programs, RACC offers many programs to meet the needs of Berks County's large and growing healthcare industry. For-credit programs include Associate degrees in Nursing, Medical Laboratory Technology, Respiratory Care and Electronic Health Records Technology as well as a clinical-based Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN) program. Non-credit career training programs are also offered including Nurse Aid (NA), Phlebotomy with EKG Training, Pharmacy Technician, Medical Assisting, Medical Insurance & Coding Specialist, and Dental Assistant.

RACC is also the Title II adult education coordinator for the Berks County region and partners with other adult education providers such as the **Literacy Council of Reading-Berks (LCRB)** to meet the extraordinary needs for GED (high school equivalency diplomas) and ESL (English as a Second Language) education in Reading and surrounding Berks County municipalities.

While many regions in the state allowed advanced manufacturing and similar programs at their secondary Career and Technical Education Centers (CTCs) to wither or close over the years, local leadership's commitment to excellence in such crucial programs here in Berks County never wavered. As a result, **Berks Career and Technology Center (BCTC)** and **Reading Muhlenberg Career and Technology Center (RMCTC)** continue to provide state of the art industry facilities, equipment, and instructors to talented high school students in Berks County who are interested and qualified for high-demand careers in mechatronics, precision machining, welding, health care technology, diesel engine technology, construction trades, information technology, etc. BCTC operates two campuses, one at the east end of the County and one at the west end of the County. RMCTC is located at the center of the County, adjacent to the City of Reading and neighboring Muhlenberg Township where the school has developed a unique core competence in meeting the needs of the rapidly expanding Hispanic population of both municipalities. BCTC and RMCTC also provide excellent adult education and training programs and are often the providers of choice for displaced workers looking to retool for re-entry into the local job market and for employers looking to upskill their incumbent workforce.

With encouragement and support from the Berks County WDB, local business representatives and our economic development partners, **Reading Area Community College (RACC)** reached out to the County's

two excellent high school career and technology centers - **Berks Career and Technology Center (BCTC) and Reading Muhlenberg Career and Technology Center (RMCTC)** to establish mutually beneficial agreements for high school Career and Technical Education (CTE) students to earn college credit for high-end technical coursework. In effect, the **Berks County Technical and Teachers Academies** serve as *honors programs* for qualified CTE students, allowing them the potential, depending on their chosen program, to acquire college credits at no cost or very low cost prior to high school graduation. Such focused and talented students are highly sought after by local employers for paid co-ops or internships during the school year or while on summer break and often for full-time gainful employment upon high school graduation. Once hired, Technical Academy graduates often receive financial support from their employers while they complete their Associate' degrees at RACC. RACC has been particularly effective in assisting qualifying students to access federal Pell grants to cover tuition costs. If the students wish to continue their technical training and education beyond RACC, they may do so at aligned 4-year institutions through additional articulation agreements that are part of or connect with the Technical and Teacher Academy pathways.

While our local technical training infrastructure is excellent, our capable training and education providers must continue to evolve to meet the needs of local industry. As just one excellent recent example, following a comprehensive labor market occupational analyses supported by the Berks County WDB, both **BCTC and RMCTC** undertook major expansions with new state of the art welding training facilities to prepare both high school CTE students and local adults for exciting and lucrative welding careers in our region.

Commercial Driver's License (CDL) Training: Berks Career & Technology Center (BCTC) has continuously improved its excellent CDL Training Program for adults. Another CDL training provider new to Berks County in 2022, Optimist CDL Coaching School LLC has implemented a successful English/Spanish Language CDL program. This program provides effective individual coaching that taps into our growing significant Hispanic resident adult population in Berks County. Berks Technical Institute (BTI) in Wyomissing also offers CDL training. These popular programs are supplying many qualified, licensed CDL drivers to employers and family sustaining wages for completers, including many who have traditionally experienced significant barriers to economic upward mobility.

In alignment with Berks County's history of a vibrant local economy oriented to middle-skill occupations, Berks County is not home to a major research university. For some regions, this would be seen as a major weakness, but our employers in key industry sectors know that it can be a competitive advantage to be located in a region that produces so many well-trained jobseekers with skills that match their actual current and long-term needs. For example, **Penn State – Berks** is a centrally located and thriving institution of higher education with a long tradition of providing high quality post-secondary programs relevant to the needs of local employers. Originally founded by local textile industrialists in 1933 as the Wyomissing Polytechnic Institute, the school became part of the Penn State system in 1958. Along with its growth as a full-scale academic institution to include resident student housing and the conferring of four-year degrees, Penn State – Berks continues to enroll large numbers of traditional and working adult students in rigorous degree programs (e.g. Electro-Mechanical Engineering Technology) geared toward the needs of Berks' strong regional industry sectors of advanced manufacturing and healthcare. Berks County is fortunate to also be home to three other four-year colleges – **Kutztown University, Albright College, and Alvernia University** – each with robust ties to local industry, strong programs, and expanding articulation agreements to meet those needs.

The School of Health Sciences at Reading Hospital offers a well-regarded Registered Nursing (RN) program which is accredited by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN) and

approved by the Pennsylvania State Board of Nursing. The school also offers accredited programs for many other health care occupations in association with Tower Health, our area's second largest employer. Alvernia University has a popular BSN – Nursing program while Penn State-Berks and RACC offer LPN-Nursing certifications.

Our local capacity to educate and train highly skilled professionals for the regional healthcare industry took a giant leap forward with the signing of a 20-year academic agreement between Tower Health (West Reading) and Drexel University College of Medicine (Philadelphia) allowing the first cohort of twenty third-year Drexel medical students to begin their core clinical rotations at Reading Hospital. In June 2019, Tower Health and Drexel University held a groundbreaking ceremony for the **Drexel University College of Medicine at Tower Health** regional campus at the Knitting Mills development in West Reading. At the ceremony, Drexel University President John Fry stated, "Our relationship with Tower Health and this four-year regional campus creates an excellent destination for our medical students to build the emerging skills required by today's physicians to meet the ever-growing needs within health care."

The most recent addition to our significant local workforce development infrastructure began in 2021 with the newly formed **Berks Latino Development Corporation (BLWDC)**. With significant local foundation funding, BLWDC opened **Berks Tec Centro** at a former parochial school in the economically challenged south side of the City Reading. At this readily accessible site, BLWDC offers job search assistance, connecting applicants directly to local employers that are hiring. The BLWDC's programming has grown steadily and significantly through collaborative efforts with local partners and business support to assist residents and local businesses improve Berks County's socioeconomic health. All occupational training programs offered by Berks Tec Centro allow participants to obtain role-based training and advanced certifications but also concurrently bridge participants to programming in English as a Second Language (ESL), high school equivalency, soft skills, job readiness, professional development, and college readiness. Initial workforce training programs focused on allied health occupations, culinary arts, and CDL; however, 2025 will see programming expanding into high demand construction trades as well. Berks Tec Centro is a rising star within the Tec Centro Workforce Network, which is a coalition of bilingual community-based Tec Centro Workforce Centers in South Central and Southeastern Pennsylvania. Network members share a collective goal to serve populations that are disproportionately disadvantaged in third-class cities in the region which are home to a heavy concentration of residents who face barriers related to bilingual education, skills training, and job placement. In working to proactively address and break down these barriers, the network provides the tools and opportunities for pathways out of poverty.

Berks County is also home to a comprehensive network of community-based organizations (CBOs) that cooperate with the local workforce development board to leverage private and public funding to assist jobseekers, and their families reach economic prosperity. Many of these service providers receive financial support and coordinate efforts through the **United Way of Berks County (UWBC**). Experienced leaders from UWBC and workforce-focused community-based organizations (CBOs) have also been appointed by our Chief Elected Official to serve on the Berks County WDB, including leaders from Connections Work (our local re-entry services provider) and the Literacy Council of Reading-Berks (our leading provider of English Language Learning training services for employer sponsored programs in the workplace).

Finally, the District Administrator for the **Berks-Schuylkill District Office of Pennsylvania's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR)** is a member of the Berks County Workforce Development Board and OVR is a key partner in the PA CareerLink® Berks County. Local OVR staff members have been particularly active with the Berks County WDB's Youth Committee and local education providers to implement OVR's

transition policy in reaching out to youth with disabilities and their families beginning at age fourteen (14) and at least two (2) years before graduation.

B. Capacity to provide workforce development activities to address education and skill needs of the workforce, including individuals with barriers to employment and employers' needs.

Employment Retention/Layoff Aversion Strategy: As a forward-thinking job retention, layoff aversion, and economic development strategy, the Berks WDB supports the proven practice of capitalizing on incumbent worker training (IWT) to build Advanced Manufacturing, Healthcare, and Construction industry worker competencies while matching newly entering talent with experienced employees for knowledge transfer. IWT will benefit the employer by meeting job skill requirements for development, advancement, and retention of a qualified, highly competent workforce. In addition to industry needed skills gains, individuals employed in entry-level manufacturing, healthcare, and construction occupations will benefit by attaining broad-level employment security in the sector and avoiding future job loss. In cases where upskilled workers do become dislocated, the enhanced technical skills, professional credentials and/or successful apprentice or "journeyworker" status provided by such training will enable them to be more quickly re-employed in similar well-paying jobs at other, more financially successful local employers. Upskilling incumbent workers can also lead to advancement opportunities which create entry-level openings for new entrants into these attractive career pathways. Individuals in these occupations often have skills that allow them to readily move across these technology-driven sectors. The Berks County WDB's key strategic vehicle for assisting local Manufacturing, Construction, and now, Healthcare-related employers to cooperatively address these challenges is the **Berks WDB Incumbent Worker Training Services Consortium.**

As described in Sections 1.2 and 1.3, the Berks County WDB's commitment to industry sector analysis to inform our programming priorities led us several years ago to design, implement, fund and expand our Incumbent Worker Training Consortium (IWTC) in Advanced Manufacturing and Construction. In June 2024, following revaluation of our priority industry sectors, the WDB added healthcare occupational training to its eligibility list. Each program year the WDB strategically budgets available WIOA Title I matching funds to subsidize local employer investments in upskilling eligible technical, skilled trades, and healthcare support incumbent workers. In doing so, the WDB promotes the benefits derived from such high-quality training to (1) strengthen individual company competitiveness and viability, (2) expand the overall talent pool of individuals with such in-demand skills, and (3) provide workers with more career options to contribute their talents with our best employers in key industries while at the same time providing for the needs of their families. Increasingly, our economic development partners and business representatives confirm that local talent availability rather than access to financial resources has become the determining factor in business decisions regarding where to locate new establishments or expand existing ones. Simply put, companies will not invest in facilities and equipment in areas where they may not be able to find and grow the talent needed to profitably operate and expand their business.

In December 2024, the WDB approved WIOA Title I funds for the competitive procurement of two contracts for results oriented, customer focused entities to develop "Career Building Workforce Training Opportunity Programs". Successful responders to this public Request for Proposals (RFP), will be expected to provide career building training opportunities that can include pre-apprenticeship programs for adults with barriers to employment in Berks County. With planned program delivery to commence July 1, 2025, proposed trainings must align with one or more of the targeted industries specified below:

- Manufacturing
- Construction
- Healthcare
- Agriculture and Food Production

Certificates of completion must recognize technical, industry, or occupational skills for the specific industry or occupation within an initial 12-month period of performance. Successful projects would also have the potential for a one-year extension. Since local WIOA funds will be utilized, all performance outcomes will follow WIOA requirements. Required post-completion employment status and entry-level wage outcomes will be tracked and evaluated to improve the long-term socio-economic success of locally unemployed/underemployed adults.

C. How the strategic goals consider both workforce and economic development priorities.

The Berks County WDB's vision is to support the development and maintenance of a skilled and competitive workforce in alignment with the broader economic development efforts to attract, retain and grow business in Berks County. In support of this vision the Berks County WDB has established a reputation for offering effective services and programs and for continuously improving the quality of services and programs.

To implement this vision and to promote broad-based economic growth and economic self-sufficiency for local families, the WDB's Planning Committee developed five goals which were recommended to the full Berks County WDB. Concurrently, the WDB's Youth Committee considered and endorsed two of the goals (IV and V) specifically related to the needs of young adults. Based on these recommendations from the Committees, the full WDB formally approved and adopted all five goals at a public meeting on September 20, 2024. More in-depth information regarding the WDB's rationale for the adoption of these goals is provided in Section 2.1 of this plan. The Berks County will continue to implement these five strategic goals and priorities over the four years covered by this plan:

1) **Building on our Strengths – Local Industry Sector Priorities and Related Technical Training Strategies**

Because of the Berks County Workforce Development Board's (WDB's) long-standing commitment to industry sector analysis, priority setting, and employer engagement (sections 1.2, 1.3), our WDB houses extensive local labor market subject matter expertise in the knowledge, skills, abilities, and requisite industry-recognized credentials needed to sustain a local talent pool for the recruitment and retention of qualified employees, and the upskilling of "home grown" talent. Benefits of the WDB's industry sector approach to employer engagement include:

- Greater **focus,** by engaging employers with common workforce and skills development needs.
- The ability to **prioritize** and target the impact of limited (and often restricted) public workforce development funds in support of increasingly scarce local talent to address critical skills needs.
- Improved **alignment** among the WDB and our partners in economic development, education, community-based organizations, etc. as we collaborate to meet common skills needs identified in conjunction with local employers.

2) **Engaging with Employers in Talent Retention and Development**

Five years ago (even before the arrival of the pandemic in Berks County,) the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) identified stubbornly high local levels of new hire "churn" in our local labor that was remarkably higher than rates in any other area in the Commonwealth. In response to this sustained and disruptive labor market challenge, the WDB focused on assisting local employers with their talent retention and development strategies while supporting these efforts with the best available data. Steady progress has been made in bringing down these high rates of new hire churn and will continue to be a focus in Program Years 2025 – 2029.

3) No Talent Left Behind: Increasing Employment Opportunities for Adults with Barriers to Employment, including:

- Adults with Disabilities
- Adults with Histories of Convictions
- Adults who are English Language Learners (ELL)
- Adults with Low Literacy and Numeracy

The Berks County WDB will also work to expand and upskill the overall talent pool of existing adult workers to meet the needs of our key industry sectors. The WDB's Access and Opportunities Committee consists of board members and off-board members with proven expertise in serving/advocating for the communities of individuals with barriers to employment. A special focus of this committee is to increase the percentage of individuals with barriers who are gainfully employed, especially those adult residents with disabilities.

4) Connecting Young Adults (Ages 18-24)

The Youth Committee of the Berks WDB serves a unique and crucial role for the Board as the key convener of local partners with the mission and capacity to meet the extensive needs of connecting young adults. The Youth Committee recognizes that we require solid local data regarding the extent of the problem of disconnected young adults in our communities. Accordingly, the WDB has regularly allocated funds to research, quantify, and profile disconnected and under-employed young adults (a.k.a. "opportunity youth") in the Reading MSA.

5) Future Talent Pipeline – School Age Population (Ages 5-18) Career Readiness and Career and Technical Education (CTE)

The WDB clearly understands and consistently communicates the serious risk to our local prosperity if we and neighboring counties in our region fail to address the root causes of the mismatch between the evolving needs of local employers and the skills and qualifications of the available workforce. Frankly, too many adult Berks County residents, while they were still in our elementary and secondary school systems here or elsewhere, did not receive the education, workplace skills and career knowledge that they need to succeed in our rapidly changing economy. Fortunately, our two local Career and Technology Centers (BCTC and RMCTC) continuously improve their programming and support systems, thereby building reputations for excellence within our local communities. As a result, school year 2024-2025 saw both BCTC and RMCTC achieve record enrollments despite a slow long-term structural decline in our local high school age population (ages 14-18). Many high-quality programs at both CTCs now have more applicants than they can accept.

D. How the local board may expand the use of apprenticeships to address populations with multiple barriers to employment as well as the local board's business/employer engagement strategy;

The Berks County WDB firmly supports Governor Shapiro's strategy of implementing and expanding pre-apprenticeship programs across the Commonwealth to create greater opportunity for underemployed and nontraditional candidates, many of whom face barriers to gainful employment.

One such program, for which the Berks WDB has been intricately involved, is ***"R3" - Rebuilding Reentrants and Reading*** registered pre-apprenticeship program for the construction sector. Developed and delivered by **Connections Work**, a PA CareerLink® Berks partner, R3 effectively delivers theory and hands-on training provided by the Reading Muhlenberg Career & Technology Center (RMCTC). Since its inception in 2017, R3 has grown to become a best practice workforce development program widely recognized across

the Commonwealth of PA for successfully introducing its over 300+ program graduates to work-based experience and skills acquisition in construction trades occupations leading to good jobs that pay family sustaining wages. In 2018, R3 became the first approved registered pre-apprenticeship for reentrants in the Commonwealth with the Associated Builders and Contractors, Inc – Keystone Chapter (ABC-Keystone) serving as the registered apprenticeship sponsor. As Connections Work closed calendar year 2024 with the graduation of its 37th R3 cohort, the overarching measure of success of this best practice reentry program is that post-R3 graduation employment rate is 83% with R3 graduates maintaining stable employment. Most importantly, 96% have not recidivated. Having been intricately involved in the ongoing promotion and support for R3, the WDB looks forward to partnering with Connections Work to improve and grow R3 even further over the next four program years.

Registered Apprenticeship (RA) Challenges and Opportunities. Registered Apprenticeship is designed to benefit the employer by meeting job skill requirements for development, advancement and retention of a qualified, highly competent workforce. The Berks County WDB remains committed to engaging with local employers in the development and sponsorship of new apprentice models and to sustain existing sponsorships.

The Berks County commercial construction industry has long been home to successful registered apprenticeship (RA) programs sponsored by our local union contractors through three joint-labor management programs (i.e. IBEW Local 743, Sheet Metal Workers Local 19, and IUOE "Operating Engineers" Union Local 542) as well as by over twenty individual non-union contractors currently sponsoring "active" registered apprenticeships. The IBEW Local 743 anticipates expanding its current training enrollment to upwards of 115 apprentice trainees in 2025. Statewide, the IBEW recently revised its apprenticeship & training standards to emphasize a greater focus on attraction of a broader pool candidates into the IBEW training programs. The Sheet Metal Workers Local 19 is looking to add new apprentices into its training programs in anticipation of an increased contractor need in the coming year.

The Berks County WDB has long been a leader among local WDB's across the Commonwealth by developing and including a registered apprenticeship (RA) related-instruction subsidy in its Work Based Training -Incumbent Worker Training (WBT-IWT) Policy. This strategic policy enhancement is consistently and unanimously approved by the full board and is targeted to the WDBs' expressed priority industry sectors. The WDB annually authorizes the allocation of local program year Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I formula funds to be used for a Registered Apprenticeship Strategy targeted to apprenticed incumbent worker upskill training. This policy is designed to incentivize more local employers to adopt the apprentice model and to support them once their sponsorship is formally established. WIOA funds subsidize the employer cost, under an allowable matching scale basis, for the delivery of off-the-job related instruction for eligible registered apprenticeship programs. Since adopting this policy, it has been the WDB Training & Industry Partnership (T&IP) Committee's charge to annually review these expenditures and recommend WDB budget allocations for each subsequent program year. By assisting sponsoring employers through the availability of these matching funds, their apprentices will have access to multi-levels of related instruction, obtaining the skills necessary to achieve the status of registered apprenticeship journeyperson and, thereby, attaining broad-level employment security. Upskilling apprenticed incumbent workers can lead to advancement opportunities which create entry-level opportunities for new entrants to these attractive career pathways.

The Berks County WDB continuously reviews the monthly Pennsylvania Apprenticeship and Training Office (ATO) Approved Programs Reports regarding status of active programs and the opportunity for outreach with support for local registered pre-apprentice/apprentice programs through our WIOA Title I Incumbent Worker Training/Registered Apprenticeship Related Technical Instruction matching funds strategy. One

significant weakness of our local workforce development system has been the continued reluctance of local employers in our two largest industry sectors of manufacturing and healthcare to embrace this proven registered apprenticeship (RA) "earn and learn" model that increasingly is being adopted by employers in those same sectors outside of our region. Despite continued promotion of the RA model by the WDB's active Training & Industry Partnership (T&IP) Committee, we have had only two new manufacturing apprenticeship programs registered with the state in recent years and only one has actively enrolled apprentices. No local healthcare employers have yet adopted the RA model.

The Berks County WDB welcomes the significant process improvements implemented by the Commonwealth's Apprenticeship and Training Office (ATO) to enhance the standard acceptance process for Registered Apprenticeship (RA) and Pre-Apprenticeship programs. The creation of a new ATO registration guide and transitioning to registration documents that are more user-friendly may lessen employer reluctance due to misunderstanding of registered apprenticeship and can only help to facilitate employer education on the benefits of apprenticeship as a hiring and employment retention best practice.

The WDB commits to employing these tools in active promotion of and support for greater business-education engagement in the development, implementation, and utilization of registered pre-apprenticeship/apprenticeship models, to better guide employers and training providers through the process in collaboration with the ATO, to encourage the pursuit of PAsmart and other grant opportunities, and to continue to provide eligible funding subsidy of incumbent worker training and registered apprenticeship related-instruction that can add to the incentive. The Berks County WDB will continue to collaborate with the ATO during this planning cycle to establish best practices and future WDB/ATO action items to advance pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship as a valued and preferred strategy in meeting recruitment and retention needs of Berks employers as well as to promote and support entrance into these pathways by current and future career seekers, including disconnected (a.k.a. "opportunity") youth and adult career-seekers with barriers to employment.

E. How the local board will demonstrate Engage! linkage between workforce and economic development throughout the LWDA.

The Berks County WDB joins with the five other local WDBs in Southeast Pennsylvania and with the major economic development partners in our six-county region in the SE PA Partnership for Regional Economic Performance (PREP) collaboration with annual grant funding provided to the region by the PA Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED). These funds primarily support the regional SE PA PREP Engage! Business calling program. While the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) receives Berks County's share of these funds to conduct a consistently successful Engage! business calling program, the Berks WDB supports this important employer outreach through active participation in monthly SE PA PREP calls and by making referrals between GRCA's Engage! staff and local employer customers.

F. How the local board will work with local economic development organizations.

The Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) is composed of the required mix of leaders from business, labor, education, community-based organizations, and economic development entities as defined in WIOA and subsequent Federal and Commonwealth guidance. The President of a key economic development partner, the Greater Berks Development Fund (GBDF), is a Berks County WDB member and chairs the WDB's Planning Committee, which has oversight in the development of this four-year plan. GBDF is a partner agency in the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) and as a committee chairperson, GBDF's President also sits on the Berks WDB's Executive Committee.

Our Planning Committee membership includes Board Members and non-Board members experienced in WIOA and other strategic plans. This talented planning team includes leaders from economic development, county government and planning, higher education, community-based organizations (CBOs) engaged in workforce development, and local employers. Our broader WDB Committee structure encourages ongoing stakeholder engagement with Board members as well as knowledgeable non-Board members in developing plans and priorities through three other active standing Committees that meet at least quarterly throughout the planning cycle – (1) Youth, (2) Training & Industry Partnerships, and (3) our new Access and Opportunities Committee that has been charged with primary responsibility for overseeing our comprehensive, accessible, and effective one-stop center.

To focus local efforts on economic, workforce, and community development advancement, the Berks County Board of Commissioners established a new role, the Director – Community and Economic Development in July 2022. The newly appointed Director took immediate steps to better align economic development, community development, and workforce development planning and priorities in Berks County by launching a structured process to implement the "IMAGINE Berks Strategic Economic Development Action Plan," formally adopted by the Commissioners in August 2022. The IMAGINE Berks implementation team is comprised of representation from community and economic development, the planning commission, the industrial development authority, the WDB, and the County Department of Agriculture. The IMAGINE Berks plan focuses on five priority areas targeted for goals, strategies, and metrics:

- Business & Industry Growth
- Small Business & Entrepreneurship
- **Talent & Economic Mobility**
- Housing
- Placemaking

The Berks County WDB, with its established workforce development policies and oversight of PA CareerLink® Berks County services, has been enlisted to assist in driving the realization of the IMAGINE Berks Talent & Economic Mobility goal of investing in Berks County's greatest asset – its people. As stated in the report, identified workforce strategies are:

- Retain and add workers to Berks County, prioritizing retention and support for the unemployed and underemployed.
- Invest in and support workforce readiness and upskilling initiatives.
- Support businesses in recruiting talent for immediate hiring, retaining employees, and reducing the number of labor force exits.
- Match disconnected youth and new talent with "opportunity jobs" and pathways to prosperity.

In October 2024, the Director presented a two-year update on implementation of the IMAGINE Berks plan to the Berks County Commissioners. Under the category of talent and economic mobility, activity has included:

- Working with local career & technology centers as resources to attract and develop talent while still at the high school age.
- Workforce readiness and upskilling initiatives that included an $800,000 state grant to target disconnected youth with involvement in the criminal justice system.
- Supporting the "Meet Greater Reading" brand, which the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance uses as a talent attraction and retention tool, and also as a branding tool for Berks County.

- Supporting job fairs through PA CareerLink® Berks County.

Our leading local economic development agency, the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA), plays a key leadership role in to the implementation of the IMAGINE Berks initiative. The Berks County Industrial Development Authority (BCIDA) is another important economic development partner that is leading the implementation of IMAGINE Berk's Infrastructure and Land Use Plan.

G. How the coordination of services with economic development services and providers will occur;

The Berks County WDB has a proven track record of coordinating workforce development programs with regional economic development partners. The Berks County WDB has maintained an especially close and successful relationship with the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA). Since 2018, at the WDB's recommendation, GRCA has acted as the convener of the Greater Berks Advanced Manufacturing Industry Partnership (IP). The fundamental goal of the IP model is business-owner-centric, allowing business owners to be at the very core of the discussion on what their needs will be, and creating actionable ways to present solutions, championed by the businesses themselves. Through this process, employers identify needs that may not be on the community's current radar, and longstanding, recurring issues can be addressed with new perspective and creative problem solving. The Berks County WDB determined that the most effective way to accomplish these goals with one voice is to house the model under the auspices of Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA). The Berks County WDB's ongoing guidance, support of, and involvement in this Greater Berks Advanced Manufacturing IP reflects its confidence that GRCA is uniquely positioned and staffed to build capacity and strengthen the partnership's ultimate reach.

As the benefits of this movement to an Industry Partnership (IP) model have become even more evident statewide over time, the Berks WDB continues to explore additional opportunities for similar IP development in its other priority industry sectors. In November 2022, the Berks County WDB, acting as lead applicant, submitted a proposal for a Pennsylvania Nursing Pathway Apprenticeship Industry Partnership Grant. On February 22, 2023, the WDB was informed by the Apprenticeship and Training Office (ATO) that our proposal was successful for an award of $176,155.01 in grant funds (April 1, 2023, through June 30, 2026). Beginning in April 2023, the WDB enlisted GRCA to act as convener in launching a new Greater Reading Healthcare Connections Industry Partnership (IP) whose focus is to create strategies for employers to develop career pathways, industry credentials and articulation to education partners in our growing healthcare sector.

Launched in June 2023, the GRCA, sub-contracted as the Healthcare IP convener, has been working with the two major Berks hospitals, three local colleges, Berks County's two Career & Technology Centers, the Reading Hospital School of Health Sciences, and the Berks Latino Workforce Development Corporation (BLWDC -a.k.a. Tec Centro Berks) which provides healthcare training programs, and multiple independent healthcare support employers. The IP's initial focus is to provide information and updates about local Healthcare educational programs and to promote this information through GRCA's new Healthcare IP webpage and Healthcare IP newsletter. Recently GRCA has added all local healthcare educational programs to their Healthcare IP web page so this information can be easily found in one place. Additionally, the WDB has authorized the allocation of WIOA Adult Title I funds to be leveraged to subsidize eligible IP member training opportunities that are identified through the regularly scheduled IP discussions.

The Berks County WDB verifies the relevance of the training activities associated with the targeted occupations through continuous outreach to employers. The WDB develops a detailed understanding of the skills and experience related to current and future employment projections by utilizing print and on-line job ad analysis, employer surveys, employer feedback via in-person, phone and email interviews, and

by active WDB participation in educational provider Occupational Advisory Committees (OACs) and Industry Partnerships (IPs). Sustained partnership with economic development agencies is solicited to promote the growth of a competent workforce in support of economic development initiatives.

As described above, since 2016, the Berks County WDB has been an active participant in the Southeast PA Partners for Regional Economic Performance (PREP), working with and often leading on regional economic development opportunities that support the local occupations on the High Priority Occupation list. As a result of this collaboration, the region coordinates workforce services with our economic development partners through the regular Southeast regional PREP meetings as well as in special initiatives.

The Board has also built partnerships with local economic development organizations/groups (discussed in section 2.1) to better coordinate ongoing economic development and workforce activities.

In keeping with the Berks County WDB's unflagging support of manufacturing as our largest and most dynamic industry sector, the WDB works hand in hand with the Manufacturers Resource Center (MRC), our local Industrial Resource Center (IRC). This partnership is especially vibrant in support of our local manufacturing talent pipeline where the MRC's regional representative, a nationally recognized manufacturing training expert, serves as an active non-Board member of the WDB's Training & Industry Partnership Committee.

1.5 What are the local area challenges in aligning existing labor force skills and education, and training activities with the needs of regional employers?

Berks County will continue to prosper if we can successfully prepare our working age adults (including young adults) for the great career opportunities generated by the many expected retirements described in section 1.1 and planned regional economic growth over the next decade. Looking ahead to the next four years, Berks County employers and the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) together face significant workforce development opportunities and challenges. The WDB is confident in our joint strategies to meet these challenges which we will now effectively implement in partnership with local employers.

Berks County Local Workforce Development Area: Economic and Workforce Strengths - Any assessment of our local area workforce development challenges is best informed by starting with a summary of our local and regional strengths beyond those identified in Section 1.1 thru 1.4 above. Such strengths include:

- **Strategic Geographic Location –** Berks County is fortuitously located in the center of the Southeastern quadrant of Pennsylvania, roughly defined as South of I-80 and East of I-81, which is by all measures the Commonwealth's most dynamic economic and demographic region.
- **Opportunity Occupations** – Berks County is an economic engine producing large and growing numbers of opportunity occupations that pay higher than average wages and do not require a 4-year degree to get started. Locally, these opportunity occupations are plentiful in our three highest priority industry sectors of manufacturing, healthcare, and construction/infrastructure (including utilities). As described above in section 1.2, Berks County's relatively modest cost of living is measurably lower than much of the SE PA region which accentuates this competitive advantage for middle income resident earners.
- **Steady Source of In-Migration Labor Force "Replenishment" Supply** – Despite facing the same declining birthrates currently plaguing nearly all regions across the U.S. (and other advanced economies), Berks County has benefited significantly over the past two decades from both international immigration and domestic "in-migration". Here again, our geographical location is

a competitive advantage for attracting new workers, particularly from the densely populated New York City / Northern New Jersey Metro area which is only 120 miles distant.

- **Emerging Cohort of Bilingual Business Leaders, Policy Makers, and Professionals** – Related to our steady supply of families moving here as noted above, we also now benefit from a dynamic and diversifying local pool of emerging business, public, and community leadership and professional talent. This emerging talent often communicates readily in English and Spanish. We now see signs of a similar trend among English and Haitian Creole speaking leaders and professionals who have more recently arrived in Berks County.
- **A Strong Technical Training and Education System** that is well aligned to meeting the needs of our manufacturing, healthcare, and construction/infrastructure sector. This technical training infrastructure has historically been anchored by our three public Perkins V partners – Reading Area Community College (RACC), Berks Career & Technology Center (BCTC), and Reading Muhlenberg Career & Technology Center (RMCTC). Our five other local institutions of higher education increasingly offer training and education programs well-aligned with local workforce needs.

Accompanying these many strengths, Berks County's local workforce development partners face many challenges in aligning labor force supply, skills and education, and training activities with the needs of our regional employers:

2019- 2024: Stalled Berks County Workforce and Jobs Growth. Berks County experienced a decade of slow but steady economic growth following the "Great Recession" of 2009-2010 leading to 2019 standing out as a "peak year" for the local labor force which reached a record 218,900. Concurrently, the local seasonally adjusted (SA) unemployment rate dropped consistently below 4.0% for the first time in nearly twenty years. Berks County's "potential entrant" cohort of young adults (ages 25-29) also peaked by 2019 at just under 27,000. Unfortunately, current projections (see Section 1.1 above) are that the size of this critical labor force "replenishment" age group in Berks County will essentially remain flat at just over 26,000 through at least 2030. At the same time, the available labor force at the upper end of our adult working age population is eroding as the long-anticipated exit wave of aging "baby-boomer" local workers choosing to retire accelerated before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2023).

The negative near-term results of these trends are increasingly visible in current local labor market statistics. By December 2024, the seasonally adjusted (SA) size of the local labor force (213,100) remained 2.5% below our peak local labor force of 218,900 (September 2019) and the number of non-farm jobs in Berks County (182,400) was still struggling to return to our record 182,800 non-farm jobs in April 2019.

Notably, this stalled workforce and jobs growth have occurred alongside a beneficial full post-pandemic recovery by 2023 of local labor force participation among "prime working age" (ages 25-54) adults and "working age" (ages 25-64) adults in Berks County. The chart below illustrates this recovery as our critically important local Labor Force Participation Rates (LFPRs) compare favorably to these rates across the Commonwealth.

Labor Force Participation Rates				
	Ages 25-54		Ages 25-64	
	Berks County	Pennsylvania	Berks County	Pennsylvania
2018	90.4%	87.1%	86.6%	82.9%
2019	90.4%	87.4%	87.0%	83.1%
2020	X	X	X	X
2021	86.8%	86.8%	83.0%	82.8%
2022	90.2%	88.1%	85.8%	83.8%
2023	**90.5%**	88.6%	**86.9%**	84.4%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, PA Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA)

Given these significant demographic challenges to the local labor force, a renewed focus on our adult working age population (ages 25-64) is warranted. Accordingly, in December 2024 the WDB approved the award of a competitively procured contract to Thomas P. Miller Associates, Inc. (TPMA) for additional research to, more deeply, investigate medium-term post pandemic developments within the local adult population (ages 25-64) and generate detailed projections regarding that working age population's engagement in the local workforce through 2030. TPMA's final report will be delivered by September 2025.

Skills Shortages in Key Industry Sectors – While the stalled overall size of our local labor force will remain a concern for the foreseeable future, the ongoing loss of skilled workers to retirement in critical industry sectors has generated significant employment headwinds for local employers in these sectors.

As described above in Section 1.3, the WDB has identified advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and construction as our three highest priority industries warranting long-term workforce development support for their attractive career pathways incorporating many opportunity occupations. The available local workforce for all three sectors will certainly be impacted by the projected age demographic changes described above. For example, the estimated 65,900+ workers who make up our experienced manufacturing, healthcare, and construction workforces continue to age, and many are approaching retirement. 27% of Berks County incumbent workers in these sectors are aged 55 years or older (JobsEQ® 2023Q2):

- **Manufacturing** remains Berks County's largest industry sector by economic output and by employment with over 31,000 jobs (≈17.4% of local employment). Berks County WDB projections indicate that local manufacturing employers will need to hire at least 6,500 new skilled and semi-skilled replacement workers by the end of 2029 just to replace expected retirements. At a Berks County Manufacturing Industry Partnership meeting held at Brentwood Industries on September 10, 2024, and attended by top management representatives of fifteen local manufacturing employers, Berk County WDB staff and members reiterated our full support for these employer's efforts to upskill new entrants as well as to retain and retrain existing employees. Particular attention will be given to developing critical technical skills in industrial maintenance (mechatronics), precision machining, advanced welding technology, diesel engine technology, and sophisticated quality systems which make up an increasing share of essential skills in the modern advanced manufacturing workplace. Emerging technology in manufacturing (i.e. the "factory of the future") along with the need for a well-trained workforce to make this journey were the two major themes of our 10th annual Manufacturing Summit attended by over 175 employer representatives and industry partners at Reading Area Community College – Schmidt

Technology & Training Center (RACC-STTC) on October 30, 2024. Discussions with local employers across sessions at the Summit confirmed these challenges and the need for effective training responses in Berks County.

- **Healthcare** is our second largest industry sector in terms of employment with currently over 25,000 workers (13.8% of local employment). At a meeting of our new Healthcare Industry Partnership (IP) on December 11, 2024, the Berks County WDB staff confirmed with the seven employer representatives in attendance that our region's aging population and growing need for quality-of-life assistance will continue to drive demand for skilled healthcare workers at all local healthcare establishments and industry subsectors. In combination with the rapidly widening gap between growing critical-skilled worker exits and a sustained shortage of qualified new-hire replacement candidates described above, the workforce needs of both critical care and long-term care providers deserves special focus over the next five years. For example, the 5-year total demand (exits + transfers + growth) for the top five essential healthcare-related occupations (RN, LPN, Nursing Assistant, Medical Assistant, and Personal/Home Health Aide) projects an alarming replacement need. Further labor market information (LMI) trends in healthcare support occupations show an overall growth of ≈100% in the period 2018-2023, rising consistently with projected regional industry needs. Consequently, a significant opportunity exists to build even stronger career ladders, especially for underemployed Berks County residents seeking attractive family sustaining careers through abundant career pathway opportunities, including emerging registered apprenticeships.

- The WDB has determined, through continuous Labor Market Information (LMI) analysis and personal dialog with employers, that our expanding **Construction** industry remains vulnerable to a talent pipeline deficit that mirrors that of the manufacturing sector. Projected JobsEQ® 2024Q2 estimates suggest local construction sector employers will need to find 1,500 replacement workers due to retirements over the next five years, including workers that are employed in high priority skilled trades and heavy machinery operation occupations that require long-term training, apprenticeships, and licensing certification. Unfortunately, unlike manufacturing and healthcare, Berks County's much smaller construction sector lacks a local industry partnership (IP) to readily confirm our analysis of the resulting skills challenges. Instead, the WDB must primarily rely upon regular feedback from our union and non-union construction industry and training partners to guide us, especially through their active participation in our quarterly WDB Training & Industry Partnership Committee meetings. In addition, WDB staff look for opportunities to meet with individual construction sector leaders to confirm their needs and opportunities. For example, the WDB Director met with leaders of two influential local business owners at Schlouch Construction in Blandon, PA on October 31, 2024, to review the WDB's latest construction sector labor market information (LMI). This discussion led to a follow-up meeting with the employers at Reading-Muhlenberg Career & Technology Center RMCTC) on January 31, 2025, to learn more about RMCTC's training capacity. Connections Work, a local community and workforce development partner joined the discussion which confirmed the WDB's analysis and projections for robust industry growth leading to both opportunities for new entrants and growing challenges for local construction employers facing major shortages of skilled workers over the next 5-10 years. Fortunately, unlike our manufacturing sector, our Berks Construction sector currently has a robust foundation of 77 distinct employer-sponsored Registered Apprenticeship (RA) "earn and learn" training models on which to build. These RA programs, covering a wide variety of attractive construction occupations, are a proven "best practice" incorporating well-defined career and wage progression to recruit, train, and retain workers.

Berks County's manufacturing, healthcare, and construction sector talent attraction, retention, and incumbent worker training challenges have been decades in the making. Local employers, especially small-medium size firms, are unlikely to solve these challenges solely within their own resources. Without a proactive strategy, these skills gaps could serve as barriers to effective operation, services, and maintenance capabilities thereby negatively impacting employer judgments about their ability to find, develop and retain the talent they need to positively impact their long-term expansion planning decisions. Our current reality is that most semi-skilled and entry-level workers lack the technical skills and/or credentials needed to advance into higher-paying positions without additional education and training. As a result, these individuals may lack present and/or future employment security in a changing skills-driven environment and could be at risk for job elimination or forced replacement. While local major layoffs and plant closings have been at record lows over the past three years, in a dynamic economy such labor market disruptions will always be a risk to our employers, workers, and communities. Fortunately, experienced and more skilled workers impacted by layoffs in these critical sectors will likely be well positioned to quickly find comparable family-sustaining employment with other good employers right here in Berks County.

Employment Retention/Layoff Aversion Strategy: As a forward-thinking job retention, layoff aversion, and economic development strategy, the Berks WDB supports the proven practice of leveraging available funding for incumbent worker training (IWT) to build Manufacturing, Healthcare, and Construction industry worker competencies while matching newly entering talent with experienced employees for knowledge transfer. IWT will continue to benefit the employer by meeting job skill requirements for development, advancement, and retention of a qualified, highly competent workforce. In addition to industry needed skills gain, individuals employed in entry-level manufacturing, healthcare, and construction occupations will benefit by attaining broad-level employment security in their chosen sector and avoiding future job loss. In cases where upskilled workers do become dislocated, their enhanced technical skills, professional credentials and/or successful apprentice/journeyperson status provided by such training will enable them to be more quickly re-employed in similar well-paying jobs at other, more financially successful local employers. Upskilling incumbent workers can also lead to advancement opportunities which create entry-level openings for new entrants into these attractive career pathways. In fact, individuals in these high opportunity occupations often have skills that allow them to readily move across these and other technology-driven sectors.

The Berks County WDB's key strategic vehicle for assisting local Manufacturing, Construction, and now, Healthcare-related employers to cooperatively address these challenges is the Berks WDB Incumbent Worker Training Services Consortium. Since 2017, the Berks IWT Consortium has supported cooperative training solutions that have benefited incumbent workers, and employers alike, by reimbursing the eligible federal portions of training costs to sponsoring employers who commit to required matching cash contributions.

In continuance of this board-approved strategy, the Berks WDB will seek and "braid" additional sources of public and private matching funds to sustain and support needed technical skills training for incumbent workers employed in the advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and construction industries. Such funding sources may include federal WIOA Title I and Rapid Response funds, National Emergency Grants, and state discretionary grants (including Registered Apprenticeship grants and Industry Partnership grants where IWT implementation is warranted).

The WDB clearly understands and consistently communicates the serious risk to our local prosperity if we fail to address the root causes of the mismatch between the evolving needs of local employers and the skills and qualifications of the available workforce. Frankly, too many adult Berks County residents, while

they were still in our elementary and secondary school systems, did not receive the education, workplace skills and career knowledge that they need to succeed in our rapidly changing economy. Low numeracy skills are often a barrier to career success for many underemployed Berks County adults.

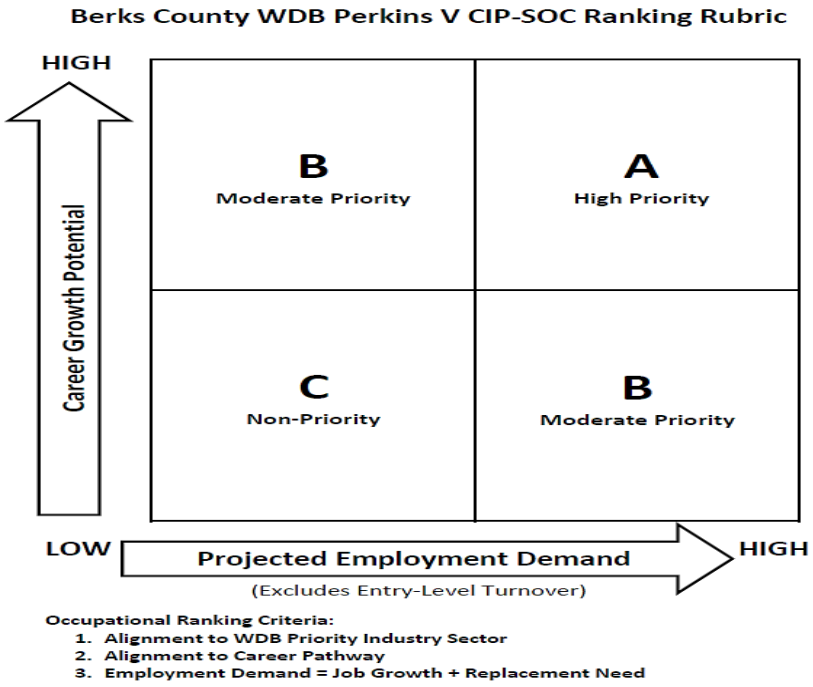
As is the case throughout the country, youth in Berks County lack current and sufficient knowledge about career paths in key industry sectors to inform their career and education decisions. Our youth also too often lack early understanding of the academic preparation necessary to succeed in rigorous career and technical education programs, particularly in STEM-related fields. As a result, attracting needed numbers of well-prepared and motivated students onto these career pathways is a key long-term workforce development strategy. The ***Engineering & Industrial Technology*** and ***Science, Health, & Agriculture*** career clusters have been identified by the Berks WDB as priority career clusters driving the economic viability of our county. These two clusters effectively incorporate the Berks WDB's five priority industry sectors of Manufacturing, Healthcare, Construction, Agriculture, and Education Services.

On July 31, 2018, the federal *Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act* (Perkins V) was signed into law with bipartisan support. Key points of this important legislation were meant to assist educators, employers and local workforce development boards collaboratively address skills gaps by:

- Aligning career and technical education (CTE) with secondary, postsecondary, and business and industry needs to strengthen CTE programs and post school outcomes.
- Preparing students for high-demand, high-skill, and high-wage careers.
- Increasing underserved populations' access to CTE and high-demand, high-wage careers.
- Completing a Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment (CLNA) to review career and technical education (CTE) grant recipient data, identify strengths and gaps, and develop strategies and interventions to close the gaps.

Over the past six years, the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) has facilitated an effective bi-annual process analyzing local area needs and evaluating technical education programs for all three local institutions receiving federal Perkins V funding - Reading Area Community College (RACC), Reading Muhlenberg Career & Technology Center (RMCTC) and Berks Career & Technology Center (BCTC).

- The focus of this process is to review each institution's existing technical education programs and discuss their alignment with the county's workforce development priorities.
- This collaborative bi-annual process began anew in February 2025, when Berks County WDB staff were invited to join BCTC's Comprehensive Plan Stakeholder meeting.
- A ranking rubric (below) was developed by the Berks County WDB to evaluate the overall projected employment demand of program-related occupations versus the corresponding career/wage growth potential participants will receive from enrollment in the various technical education programs offered at all three institutions to prioritize these programs under their successful individual Perkins V funding applications. This simple but effective rubric was subsequently adopted as a best practice by many other local areas in the Commonwealth for completing their own initial local needs assessment under Perkins V.



2. STRATEGIC PLANNING: VISION and GOALS

2.1 *Local Board's Strategic Vision and Alignment with the Governor's Strategic Vision*

The Berks County Workforce Development Board's (Berks County WDB) vision is to support the development and maintenance of a skilled and competitive workforce in alignment with the broader economic development efforts to attract, retain and grow business in Berks County. In support of this vision the Berks County WDB has established a reputation for offering effective services and programs and for continuously improving the quality of services and programs.

To implement this vision and to promote broad-based economic growth and economic self-sufficiency for local families, the WDB's Planning Committee developed five goals which were recommended to the full Berks County WDB. Concurrently, the WDB's Youth Committee considered and endorsed two of the goals (IV and V) specifically related to the needs of young adults. Based on these recommendations from the Committees, the full WDB formally approved and adopted all five goals at a public meeting on September 20, 2024.

Looking ahead to program years PY2025-2028, the Berks County WDB will implement these five strategic goals and priorities over the four years covered by this plan:

1) **Building on our Strengths – Local Industry Sector Priorities and Related Technical Training Strategies**

Because of the Berks County Workforce Development Board's (WDB's) long-standing commitment to industry sector analysis, priority setting, and employer engagement (section 1.2 above), our Board houses extensive local labor market subject matter expertise in the knowledge, skills, abilities, and requisite industry-recognized credentials needed to sustain a local talent pool for the recruitment and retention of qualified employees, and the upskilling of "home grown" talent. Benefits of the WDB's industry sector approach to employer engagement include:

- Greater **focus,** by engaging employers with common workforce and skills development needs.
- The ability to **prioritize** and target the impact of limited (and often restricted) public workforce development funds to increase the supply of scarce local talent to address critical skills needs.
- Improved **alignment** among the WDB and our partners in economic development, education, community-based organizations, etc. as we collaborate to meet common skills needs identified in conjunction with local employers.

It is the Berks County WDB's practice to broadly share occupational and industry sector employment information with our economic and education partners and community-based organizations and solicit feedback that they may receive separately from employers. In this work, we continue to emphasize ongoing close collaboration with our three strong local "Perkins Partner" institutions of Reading Area Community College (RACC), Berks Career & Technology Center (BCTC), and Reading-Muhlenberg Career & Technology Center (RMCTC). As the needs of our local employers continue to evolve, we are also increasingly engaging with our four local 4-year colleges and universities in this collaborative work, leading to even greater mutual insights for the development of effective technical training programs tailored to the education and skills needs of regional employers in our priority industry sectors.

Such strong strategic partnerships with local education and training providers in support of employers in our priority industry sectors have never been more critical. According to our latest information from JobsEQ®, 50.9% of Berks County adults (age 25 to 64 years) have successfully achieved a high school education (and may completed some college). However, only 38.5% of Berks County adults currently within this prime working age range have persevered with their formal education to complete an associate degree or higher. (American Community Survey data; 2018-2022). This education profile of local adults simply will not meet the needs of our region's rapidly evolving technology-driven workplace.

The Berks County WDB joins with the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry's Apprenticeship and Training Office (ATO) to promote registered pre-apprenticeship and expand group sponsored registered apprenticeship (RA) models. The WDB views these models as preferred best practice solutions in meeting recruitment and retention needs of Berks County employers. However, unlike the ongoing expansion of the apprenticeship model in our commercial construction sector, to date, its adoption in our top priority sectors of healthcare and manufacturing has been quite limited. Ongoing promotion of group-sponsored registered apprenticeship (RA) models in these two largest local sectors will remain a WDB priority for the next four years as local labor market and business conditions are likely to be increasingly favorable to the adoption of the RA model.

From time to time, the WDB determines that its ongoing analysis and "iterative" processes for identifying local skills gaps may not provide all the labor market insight we need. In such instances and when sufficient WIOA formula funding is available, the WDB has a proven track record of leveraging such funds to competitively procure targeted studies to help us better meet the priority needs of employers in the local area and broader region. As one particularly effective example, our *Greater Berks Advanced Manufacturing Skills Gap Study* completed in January 2021 uniquely positioned the Berk County WDB to better understand regional manufacturing needs and lead the coordination of near-term, medium-term, and long-term workforce system responses in close collaboration with our economic development, education, and community partners. Partly due to this data-informed support, our crucial local manufacturing sector is thriving and expanding as we begin 2025.

In keeping with this proven employer engagement strategy and in preparation for the development of this WIOA four-year plan, the WDB conducted its biannual analysis of local industry sectors using the latest economic data and labor market information (LMI). In June 2024, the WDB confirmed and approved five key industry sectors of focus through 2029:

- Priority A Sectors (x2) **– Manufacturing** and **Healthcare**
- Priority B Sector (x1) – **Construction**
- Priority C Sectors (x2) **– Agriculture** and **Educational Services**

Accordingly, the WDB provides local employers in our top three priority sectors with valuable matching funds to offset some of their costs for training activities associated with incumbent workers, including registered apprenticeship related instruction. Our focus on incumbent worker training (IWT) and registered apprenticeship (RA) training can be especially helpful to small and medium-size employers in key industry sectors with similar needs and scarce internal training resources. This strategy assists both experienced incumbent workers and newly hired apprentices to grow and develop with their companies, making room for the hiring of additional less-skilled new hires onto these proven career pathways. This virtuous upskilling cycle continues as many of the resulting new hires may receive assistance from other WDB-sponsored programs (e.g. employer on the job training contracts – "OJT's") to get started along these attractive regional career pathways.

2) Engaging with Employers in Talent Retention and Development

Five years ago (even before the arrival of the pandemic in Berks County), the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) identified stubbornly high local levels of new hire "churn" in our local labor that was remarkably higher than rates in any other areas in the Commonwealth. In response to this sustained and disruptive labor market challenge, the WDB focused on assisting local employers on their talent retention and development strategies while guiding these efforts with the best available labor marked information (LMI).

In February 2020, the WDB contracted with Educational Data Systems, Inc. (EDSI) to conduct a comprehensive study of current employer recruitment, retention, development, satisfaction and engagement best practices in the Greater Reading and Berks County area. Despite the interruption of the pandemic, more than 150 employers in the region participated in the study. Respondents completed a talent self-assessment tool, rating themselves on five key talent metrics: employee retention, employee development, employee attraction, talent and culture, and overall talent strategies. After completing the assessment, employers were invited to participate in focus groups to discuss specific best practices.

Selected findings from this study of local employer recruitment, retention, development, and satisfaction and engagement best practices, show that most high-performing talent organizations:

- Have a talent strategy and vision in place that is connected to the organization's overall strategy and is clearly communicated and supported.
- Understand that competitive wages, benefits, and work environment are fundamental for attracting and retaining talent.
- Focus on developing long term recruiting pipelines, in part by establishing recruiting and workforce development relationships with local educational institutions.

- Promote from within their organizational culture, offer job sculpting, internal career ladders, individualized training and career plans, flexible schedules, and opportunities for employees through company growth.

Following release of the study, the WDB was encouraged by the welcoming reception of its findings by many local and regional employers. These forward-looking employers eagerly began implementing these proven recruitment and retention best practices to good effect over the past three years.

Following local employers adjusting to this challenging labor market, by the 1st quarter of CY2024, our worrisome local new hire churn had substantially eased to a much more manageable 7,000 new hire workers (4.0% of our workforce) for the quarter, well below the Commonwealth' s 6.9% Importantly, this reduced churn took place alongside a historically low, and sustained, local 3.5% unemployment rate. The WDB takes satisfaction from our sustained assistance to local employers across industry sectors, helping them to focus over the past five years on proven retention best practices (including competitive pay, benefits, and employee training & development opportunities) as well as recruitment support. We confidently enter our next 4-year plan with an improved and more stable labor market to the benefit of employers and employees alike.

For the WDB, the most important recommendation from the study in our area of direct responsibility is that we integrate its findings and recommendations into annual goals and future strategic plans. In doing so, the WDB will continue to implement two important strategies from the report to assist local employers:

- There are systemic issues (usually related to skill shortages and lack of talent pipelines) that cannot be addressed through individual employers following best practices. Identifying these challenges by industry and organization size and seeking opportunities to address through new partnerships and collaboration is critical.
- Ensuring that the PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST) continues one-on-one follow up conversations with local employers to encourage and assist in following individual employer recommendations included in the report, create customized next steps, and identify areas where further customized support is needed.

3) No Talent Left Behind: Increasing Employment Opportunities for Adults with Barriers to Employment, including:

- Adults with Disabilities
- Adults with Histories of Convictions
- Adults who are English Language Learners (ELL)
- Adults with Low Literacy and Numeracy

The Berks County WDB will also need to expand and upskill the overall talent pool of existing adult workers to meet the needs of our key industry sectors. The WDB's Access and Opportunities Committee consists of board members and non-board members with proven expertise in serving/advocating for the community of individuals with barriers to employment. A special focus of this committee is to increase the percentage of individuals with barriers who are gainfully employed, especially those adult residents with disabilities. This work can principally be accomplished by leveraging strong partnerships with businesses in Berks County. To support this focus and to inform future local programming, the WDB competitively procured a local study of barriers to employment faced by adult residents with disabilities. Thomas P Miller & Associates, LLC (TPMA) was the successful bidder who conducted the study which was

accepted by the full Berks County WDB in September 2021 to inform future local programming and WDB committee activities. This led the WDB to subsequently organize a highly successful virtual webinar in March 2023 highlighting local resources and best practices in support of hiring individuals with disabilities. 176 employer participants from Berks County and the surrounding region joined the webinar. As a follow-up, the WDB's designated committee developed an "employer friendly" *Building an Inclusive Workforce* fact sheet and resource guide which was released in July 2024. The WDB has assigned our PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST) with responsibility for leveraging this new resource when engaging local employers in need of expanded sources of local talent.

Underemployment continues to be a significant issue for many low-income Berks County adults with barriers to employment. At the same time, local employers in key industry sectors report having many unfilled entry-level job opportunities with attractive career pathways that do not require college degrees to get started. Flexible and innovative pre-apprenticeship programs can help low-income residents and other underemployed adults explore and prepare for success along these pathways.

As described above (Section 1.3), the Berks County WDB identified and documented significant gaps in English language (EL) proficiency along with adult numeracy among incumbent workers and jobseekers alike as important long-term local workforce development needs. Failure to address these basic education deficits among a significant portion of our adult workforce will undermine our ability to expand and improve the workforce in response. These economic and workforce development challenges have been amplified in recent decades by a lack of sustained employer commitment to employee training and development that is needed to support long-term business growth.

To better understand these challenges and opportunities, in PY2022 the WDB sponsored and staffed a local *Ad Hoc Taskforce on Adult English Language Proficiency and Numeracy*. Under the auspices of the WDB's Planning Committee, this Taskforce undertook a six-month dialogue with adult members of the community, workforce training providers, and employers to better understand the root causes of this complex challenge. Feedback was systematically gathered from structured listening sessions with employers and community members leading us to conclude that while adult numeracy remains an important long-term challenge, improving the English Language (EL) proficiency of our emerging workforce is an urgent priority. The WDB formally accepted the task force's report in June 2022, and implementation of the report's recommendations to address this challenge is ongoing.

4) Connecting Young Adults (Ages 18-24)

While the COVID-19 pandemic greatly disrupted the career plans and opportunities of many local workers of all ages, our young adults (ages 18-24) were particularly vulnerable to being knocked off-track by the disruption, or in the case of our many already disconnected young adults, being pushed even further behind.

The Youth Committee of the Berks WDB serves a unique and crucial role for the Board as the key convener of local partners with the mission and capacity to meet the extensive needs of connecting young adults. The Youth Committee recognizes that we require solid local data regarding the extent of the problem of disconnected young adults in our communities. Accordingly, the WDB joined with the United Way of Berks County (United Way) in 2017 to fund a research study to quantify and profile disconnected and under-employed young adults. The resulting report continues to provide a solid foundation for our analysis of the size and complexity of our challenges in meeting the needs of disconnected young adults in Berk County and in informing our local priorities and programs. Findings from the report include:

- Berks County was home to between 3,000 – 5,000 disconnected individuals who met the WDBs' definition of a disconnected young adult.
- 90% of disconnected young adults reported experiencing life circumstances that are common barriers to employment or education.
- Disconnected young adults in Berks County often face multiple and varied barriers to gainful employment and education.
- Over half of disconnected young adults face more than one reason for being disconnected.
- Top barriers disconnected young adults in Berks County face include:
- Lack of Transportation
- Family Care Obligations
- Little Understanding of or Preparation for Attractive Career Opportunities
- Significant Barriers to Pursuing Education

As a result of long-term demographic changes in the County, projections indicate we will continue to face a declining number of residents in this critical young adult cohort compared to our projected workforce needs. Therefore, we have great urgency in making sure that all our young adults have the necessary skills, education, and direction to be well established on a gainful career pathway before they reach 25 years of age.

In 2021, the WDB asked our TANF Youth program contractor to review the earlier study considering the pandemic's impact. The contractor confirmed that the number of disconnected young adults in Berks County is now closer to 6,000 individuals. Clearly, the needs of this age group deserve special focus if we are to have sustainable long-term local prosperity.

5) Future Talent Pipeline – School Age Population (Ages 5-18) Career Readiness and Career and Technical Education (CTE)

The Berks County WDB is working to help all stakeholders in our community grasp the sobering reality that our primary and secondary school age population likely peaked in 2022 at 76,806 youth (ages 5-18) and is projected to decline nearly 9.0% to only 68,946 by 2037 (JobsEQ). We need all these students to be properly guided and prepared through our public and private schools to be readily available to our regional employers who will require their knowledge, skills, and abilities in the decade(s) ahead. The WDB clearly understands and consistently communicates the serious risk to our local prosperity if we and neighboring counties in our region fail to address the root causes of the mismatch between the needs of evolving needs of local employers and the skills and qualifications of the available workforce. Frankly, too many adult Berks County residents, while they were still in our elementary and secondary school systems here or elsewhere, did not receive the education, workplace skills and career knowledge that they need to succeed in our rapidly changing economy.

As is the case throughout the country, young adults in Berks County often lack current and sufficient knowledge about career paths in key industry sectors to properly inform their career and education decisions. In addition, our youth are too often unaware of the academic preparation necessary to succeed in rigorous career and technical education (CTE) programs, particularly in STEM-related fields. As a result, our local economy already lacks the needed numbers of well-prepared and motivated students entering these career pathways. As discussed above in Section 1.1, these gaps are likely to grow in the next decade.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) identifies five career clusters, two of which ***Engineering & Industrial Technology*** and ***Science & Health*** have been recognized by the Berks WDB as priority career clusters driving the economic viability of our county. These two clusters effectively incorporate the Berks WDB's five priority industry sectors of Advanced Manufacturing, Agriculture, Construction, Healthcare, and Education Services.

While the WDB's Title I Youth funding will continue to be largely dedicated to out of school young adult (OSY) programs as appropriately required by WIOA, another major priority of the Berks WDB under this overarching goal will be to build on the widely recognized gains of our successful strategic Career and Technical Education (CTE) engagement with our local Perkins V partner institutions of BCTC, RMCTC and RACC. The Berks County WDB enthusiastically endorses the joint statement released on July 12, 2024, by the Pennsylvania Workforce Development Association (PWDA) and the Pennsylvania Association of Career and Technical Administrators (PACTA) that here in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, "Lawmakers have prioritized workforce development and career and technical education (CTE) in policy and funding over the past several years. There is an increased recognition that there are many pathways to good careers, and the commonwealth must support whatever path people choose to build a life and career in our commonwealth".

Many of these challenges and opportunities are not unique to our local Berks County workforce development area. Fortunately, we are part of the six-county Southeastern Pennsylvania (SE PA) planning region which makes up the most dynamic economic region in the Commonwealth. Through ongoing coordination with the other five local WDBs in SE PA, the Berks County WDB's strategic vision and goals described above align with and complement SE PA's latest 4-year regional plan under which this local plan is being submitted for approval.

The Berks WDB is confident that the strategic priorities and goals included in this local plan are the right ones for local employers and jobseekers alike. In particular, the priority given to meeting the challenges local employers currently face with the wave of experienced "baby-boomer" worker retirements now underway will position the WDB to meet developing metrics designed to determine the WDB's *effectiveness in serving employers*. In particular, the emphasis that the Berks WDB will place on WIOA's permissible use of adult and dislocated worker funds allocated to the Board for training activities associated with incumbent workers, including registered apprentices, will be especially attractive to small and medium-size employers with similar needs and scarce training resources. This will facilitate a closer and more consistent engagement with these employers, thereby allowing the WDB to more fully understand and better meet their recruitment and training needs. This strategy will help proven, trained incumbents develop and grow with the companies and allow the hiring of less-skilled new hires into these attractive career pathways. As a result, the WDB's performance will be enhanced against the more traditional employment, retention and earning metrics for eligible Adult, Dislocated Worker and Youth job seekers.

The Berks WDB's commitment to our proven industry sector priorities and strategies will further support attainment of negotiated measures. This commitment will help the Berks WDB understand which key credentials are valued by industry and which credentials are not. At the same time, the WDB will continue to develop a broader expertise in understanding and measuring skill gains attained through a variety of training strategies, programs and partnerships.

The Berks WDB recognizes that perhaps its biggest challenge will be building strong programs and partnerships to help the region's disconnected young adults and under-employed young adults join viable career pathways to family-sustaining occupations with local employers. As mentioned above, experience

has proven that this elusive population is difficult to find, to keep engaged and to stay connected with following program participation. As a result, the Berks WDB's determination to continue a leadership role within Berks County is essential to achieving negotiated Youth performance measures in all six specified areas of measurement.

Finally, a candid look as the root causes of the mismatch between the needs of current employers and the skills and qualifications of the available workforce leads the Berks WDB to the inescapable conclusion that too many Berks County residents, while they were still in our elementary and secondary school systems, did not receive the education, workplace skills and career knowledge that they need to succeed in our rapidly changing economy. This is a national, state, and local problem, but many other developed countries do a better job in this area – particularly in providing in-school youth (ISY) with high quality work-based learning opportunities. By sustaining local summer youth employment programs (SYEPs) despite the decreasing federal and state funds provided for such programs, the Berks County WDB will help our current Young Adults and future Adult and Dislocated Worker job seekers more easily navigate the inevitable labor force disruptions they will encounter in their careers and find and maintain gainful employment leading to family-sustaining earnings. This will promote wide-spread economic self-sufficiency in accordance with WIOA 116(b) (2) (A). As a result, these individuals will also more likely become life-long learners who acquire industry-recognized credentials and are able to demonstrate measurable skill gains throughout their working careers. A local workforce with such qualities will serve as a competitive advantage for employers seeking to expand in or relocate to Berks County, the foundation of economic growth as targeted by the performance measures described in WIOA 116(b)(2)(A).

To focus local efforts economic, workforce, and community development strategies the Berks County Board of Commissioners established a new role, the Director – Community and Economic Development in July 2022. The newly appointed Director took immediate steps to better align economic development, community development, and workforce development planning and priorities in Berks County by launching a structured process to implement the "IMAGINE Berks Strategic Economic Development Action Plan," adopted by the Commissioners in August 2022. In our current economic circumstances, successful community and economic development both depend upon and directly impact our current and future available local workforce. For example, our current lack of attractive, affordable housing already hinders some potential talent from relocating to Berks County.

The Director, or a designee, provides an annual update to the Berks County WDB on the plan's implementation which focuses on five priority areas targeted for goals, strategies, and metrics:

- Business & Industry Growth
- Small Business & Entrepreneurship
- **Talent & Economic Mobility**
- Housing
- Placemaking

The Berks County WDB, with its established workforce development policies and oversight of PA CareerLink® Berks County services, has been enlisted to assist in driving the realization of the IMAGINE Berks Talent & Economic Mobility goal of investing in Berks County's greatest asset – its people. As stated in the report, identified workforce strategies are:

- Retain and add workers to Berks County, prioritizing retention and support for the unemployed and underemployed.

- Invest in and support workforce readiness and upskilling initiatives.
- Support businesses in recruiting talent for immediate hiring, retaining employees, and reducing the number of labor force exits.
- Match disconnected youth and emerging talent with "opportunity jobs" and pathways to prosperity.

The Berks County Workforce Development Board's vision and goals as detailed above in this section align extremely well with and mutually support the governor's visions and six broad goals for the Commonwealth's workforce development system as outlined in the Commonwealth's WIOA Combined State Plan.

PA Goal #1 - Apprenticeship and Career & Technical Education: Expand opportunities for individuals to enter Registered Apprenticeship and Registered Pre-Apprenticeship programs, assist employers in building Registered Pre-Apprenticeship and Registered Apprenticeship programs, and increase the coordination with Career & Technical Education in these efforts.

- The Berks WDB's first goal *of Building on our Strengths – Local Industry Sector Priorities and Related Technical Training Strategies* is the foundation that supports the development of relevant career pathways in our region. As described above, over the next four years we will actively promote group -sponsored registered apprenticeship (RA) models in our two largest priority industry sectors of manufacturing and healthcare through our existing industry partnerships (IPs) in these two sectors. Labor market intelligence gathered from employers active in both IPs indicates that local labor market and business conditions are likely to be increasingly favorable to the adoption of the RA model. Similarly, the WDB's priority support for the expansion of pre-apprenticeship models in Berks County to support our vibrant local network of registered apprenticeships in the commercial construction sector is likely to prove fruitful.

  The WDB will continue reinforcing to local education and training partners our key insight that career pathways are best nurtured within a well-established industry sector strategy. Time and again our experience at the WDB shows that unanchored proposed career pathways independent of a robust local industry sector too often leads to occupational dead ends for job seekers and unfilled positions for employers – an unfortunate "lose-lose" scenario. Such dead ends are especially detrimental for adults with barriers to employment that are the focus of our third local goal detailed in this plan. Such adults simply have much less room for recovery from ill-advised training programs. Flexible and innovative pre-apprenticeship programs can help low-income residents and other underemployed adults explore and prepare for success along these our most promising pathways.
- The Berks WDB's second goal of *Engaging with Employers in Talent Retention and Development* also aligns seamlessly with this statewide goal. In accordance with Governor Shapiro's goal to expand registered apprenticeships across the Commonwealth, the Berks County WDB remains committed to engaging with local employers in the development and sponsorship of new apprentice models and to sustain existing sponsorships. When engaging with local employers, the WDB will take every opportunity to reinforce that Registered Apprenticeship (RA) constitutes the "gold standard" for accelerating the entry of new talent into attractive "opportunity occupations" as well as for upskilling their incumbent workforce for long-term growth and business success.

This focus aligns well with our fourth goal aimed at *Connecting Young Adults (Ages 18-24)* and our fifth local goal to develop an effective *Future Talent Pipeline for our School Age Population (Ages 5-18) with an emphasis on high quality Career Readiness and Career and Technical Education (CTE).* Leveraging strategic partnerships with our local K-14 educators will be a key success strategy, particularly with our three key Perkins V technical education partners, to prioritize our most relevant career pathways for adults and young adults alike.

- Finally, as described above under our third local goal of *No Talent Left Behind: Increasing Employment Opportunities for Adults with Barriers to Employment*, underemployment continues to be a significant issue for many low-income Berks County adults with barriers to employment. At the same time, local employers in key industry sectors report having many unfilled entry-level job opportunities with attractive career pathways that do not require college degrees to get started. Flexible and innovative pre-apprenticeship programs can help low-income residents and other underemployed adults explore and prepare for success along these pathways.

PA Goal #2 - Sector Strategies and Employer Engagement: Engage employers and industry clusters through innovative strategies to improve the connection and responsiveness of workforce programs and services to labor market demand, including recruiting, training, and retaining talent.

- There is nearly 100% alignment between the governor's goal and the Berks WDB's first goal of *Building on our Strengths – Local Industry Sector Priorities and Related Technical Training Strategies* described above. In support of this goal, the WDB plans to continue our strategy of budgeting annual Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I funding to be used for a Registered Apprenticeship strategy targeted to apprenticed incumbent worker upskill training in support of our top three priority industry sectors of manufacturing, healthcare, and construction.
- This approach also aligns with the WDB's second goal of *Engaging with Employers in Talent Retention and Development* within our targeted industry sectors. Such engagement is essential if we hope to assist local employers meet job skill requirements for the development, advancement, and retention of a qualified, highly competent workforce.

PA Goal #3 - Youth: Increase opportunities for all youth to experience work-based learning through summer employment, pre-apprenticeship, Registered Apprenticeship, internships, job shadowing, mentoring, and other experiences in the workplace, including developing employability skills.

- Here there is significant alignment between the governor's goal with our WDB's fourth goal aimed at *Connecting Young Adults (Ages 18-24)* as we will continue our local emphasis on work-based training and pre-apprenticeship programs for disconnected and under-employed young adults. The Berks WDB recognizes that perhaps our biggest challenge will be building strong programs and partnerships to help the region's disconnected young adults and under-employed young adults embark on sustainable career pathways to family-sustaining occupations with local employers. As mentioned above, experience has proven that this elusive population is difficult to find, to keep engaged, and to stay connected with during and following program participation. The Berks WDB's determination to continue our leadership role in addressing this challenge by promoting work-based learning opportunities is a key component of our strategy.
- This statewide goal also aligns well with our fifth local goal to develop an effective *Future Talent Pipeline for our School Age Population (Ages 5-18) with an emphasis on high quality Career Readiness and Career and Technical Education (CTE).* This remains a proven best practice for our

in-school youth to keep them connected and to bring relevance to their high school academic preparation.

PA Goal #4 - Continuous Improvement of the PA CareerLink® System: Identify and enact system changes and improvements that enhance the collaboration and partnership between agencies and partners in the workforce development system.

- This statewide goal aligns directly with the WDB's third goal for *No Talent Left Behind: Increasing Employment Opportunities for Adults with Barriers to Employment,* continuous improvement of the PA CareerLink® System. The WDB's analysis of our current statewide workforce development system expects the system to effectively evolve to meet changing conditions and customers' needs. At the same time, we must recognize that the career challenges faced by many residents often result from long-term structural demographic and educational challenges and not just a cyclical/recovery phenomenon.
- Continuous improvement of the system depends upon effective engagement of employers, as described in our two local goals of (1) *Building on our Strengths – Local Industry Sector Priorities and Related Technical Training Strategies* and (2) *Engaging with Employers in Talent Retention and Development* described above. Such employer engagement, particularly with small to medium-size employers in key sectors, is best accomplished at the local level through frequent and sustained personal contacts. Two priorities of the Berks County WDB that focus on supporting the needs of employers are (1) funding incumbent worker training as authorized by WIOA and (2) our emphasis on industry partnership (IP) strategies in support of this statewide goal.

PA Goal #5 - Barrier Remediation: Develop strategies to ensure the workforce development system is equipped to support individuals with barriers to employment in finding and maintaining self- and family-sustaining employment.

As described above under our third local goal of *No Talent Left Behind: Increasing Employment Opportunities for Adults with Barriers to Employment*, underemployment continues to be a significant issue for many low-income Berks County adults with barriers to employment. At the same time, local employers in key industry sectors report having many unfilled entry-level job opportunities with attractive career pathways that do not require college degrees to get started. Clearly, the Commonwealth's fifth goal is in complete alignment with our third local goal of *No Talent Left Behind: Increasing Employment Opportunities for Adults with Barriers to Employment*, including:

- Adults with Disabilities
- Adults with Histories of Convictions
- Adults who are English Language Learners (ELL)
- Adults with Low Literacy and Numeracy

PA Goal #6 - Addressing Workforce Shortages in Critical Industries: Prioritizing investment in industries that are critical to the economic prosperity of the Commonwealth.

- The Berks County WDB applauds the Governor and the Pennsylvania Workforce Development Board (PA WDB) for the addition of this goal in the state plan as it provides critical focus to the statewide system as well as to our regional and local workforce development plans.
- We see nearly 100% alignment with our own first local goal of Building on our Strengths – Local Industry Sector Priorities and Related Technical Training Strategies

Opportunity Occupations: Risks and Opportunities - No review of our state, regional, and local vision and goals would be complete without candidly facing the reality that our state, regional, and local working age adult population has too often not been properly prepared while still in our K-12 system to take advantage of the many "opportunity occupations" that already exist in our regional labor markets. Accordingly, this is a challenge to be addressed in WIOA plans at all levels and is appropriately addressed in our SE PA regional 4-year plan.

Here in the Berks County Workforce Development Area, we confidently project that local needs within critical opportunity occupations will only continue to grow. Left unaddressed, gaps between the skills needed by employers in key industries and the actual skills of our available workforce will only widen. As discussed above in this section and in Section 1.3, low levels of adult numeracy and English language proficiency will hold back many residents from entry into the many opportunity occupations that our employers will so desperately need. Failure to effectively address the need of so many local adults for these foundational skills will have serious consequences for the future prosperity of our local communities.

In Section 1.2, we detailed the new and rising challenges now facing our Education Services Sector with growing shortages of early childhood, elementary, middle school, and secondary education professionals and of qualified instructors to meet the growing demand for high quality Career & Technical Education (CTE).

Fortunately, Berks County has a longstanding and rich history of successful educator career development with four Berks institutions of higher education offering programs, approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, to prepare future preschool through Grade 12 teachers and special education teachers in public and private educational institutions. We are also home to an exciting new chapter in teacher professional education at Alvernia University through TExpL® - an award-winning methodology that encourages interdisciplinary learning through student-led experiences, resulting in students' measurable personal success. Educators are trained in solutions-driven TExpL® philosophies, empowering them to implement project-management techniques in their classrooms and personalize their teaching practices. Student-focused programs encourage self-directed research projects across vitally important disciplines. The WDB is confident that TExpL® will help attract, retain, and develop passionate and confident K-12 teachers to better prepare our emerging 21st century workforce.

2.2 What are the local levels of performance that have been negotiated with the governor and chief elected officials? How will the local board's goals relate to the achievement of these measures?

The WDB negotiated PY2024 and PY2025 local levels of performance for the federal measures are found in Attachment 1.

Relation of Goals to Negotiated Performance Measures. The Berks County WDB is widely recognized for sustained competence in developing and implementing strong processes to ensure the proper oversight of its publicly funded programs and has a proven track record of meeting annual negotiated performance measures and consistently positive annual program, equal opportunity (EO) and fiscal monitoring reports from the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry (L&I). The Berks WDB's commitment to our approved industry sector priorities and strategies, as described above in Section 2.1, will further support attainment of negotiated measures. For example, this commitment will help the Berks WDB understand which key credentials are valued by industry and which credentials are not. At the same time, the WDB will continue to develop a broader expertise in understanding and measuring skill gains attained through a variety of training strategies, programs, and partnerships.

The Berks WDB is confident that the strategic priorities and goals included in this local plan are the right ones for local employers and job seekers alike. In particular, the WDB will give priority to meeting the challenges local employers currently face including the wave of experienced "baby-boomer" worker retirements now underway. Focusing on our second goal of *Engaging with Employers in Talent Retention and Development*) will position the WDB to meet any new metrics designed to determine the WDB's *effectiveness in serving employers*. The emphasis that the Berks WDB will place on WIOA's permissible use of adult and dislocated worker funds for training activities associated with incumbent workers will be especially attractive to small and medium-size employers with similar needs and scarce training resources. This will facilitate a closer and more consistent engagement with these employers, thereby allowing the WDB to better understand and meet their recruitment and training needs. This strategy will also help proven, trained incumbents develop and grow with the companies and allow the hiring of less-skilled new hires into these attractive career pathways. As a result, the WDB's performance will be enhanced against the more traditional employment, retention and earning metrics for eligible Adult, Dislocated and Youth job seekers.

The Berks WDB's commitment to continuing our proven industry sector priorities and strategies will further support attainment of negotiated measures. In particular, this commitment will help the Berks WDB understand which *key credentials* are valued by industry and which credentials are not. The WDB will continue to develop a broader expertise in understanding and *measuring skill gains* attained through a variety of training strategies, programs, and partnerships.

The Berks WDB recognizes that perhaps its biggest challenge will remain our ongoing work of building strong programs and partnerships to help our area's disconnected young adults and under-employed young adults with needed education and work in accordance with our fourth local goal of better connecting Young Adults (Ages 18-24). The experience of the WDB and our local partners has proven that this elusive population is difficult to find, to keep engaged, and to stay connected with following program participation. The Berks WDB's determination to continue our leadership role in youth programming is essential to achieving negotiated Youth performance measures in all five specified areas of measurement. At the same time, we are called to help all our in-school youth (local goal #5) and adults with barriers to employment (local goal #3) graduate from high school better prepared to enter relevant career pathways leading to family-sustaining occupations with local employers.

As described above in Section 2.1, the growing mismatch between the needs of current employers and the skills and qualifications of the available workforce leads the Berks WDB to the inescapable conclusion that too many Berks County residents, while they were still in our elementary and secondary school systems, did not receive the education, workplace skills and career knowledge that they need to succeed in our rapidly changing economy. By continuing to prioritize high-quality year-round paid work experiences (PWE), the Berks County WDB will help current in school youth (ISY) better prepare to navigate any labor force disruptions they will likely encounter in their careers to find and maintain gainful employment with family-sustaining earnings. This will promote wide-spread economic self-sufficiency in accordance with *WIOA 116(b) (2) (A).* These residents will also more likely become life-long learners who acquire *industry-recognized credentials* and are able to demonstrate *measurable skill gains* throughout their working careers. A local workforce with such qualities will serve as a competitive advantage for employers seeking to expand in or relocate to Berks County, the foundation of economic growth as targeted by the performance measures described in WIOA *116(b)(2)(A).* As described above in Section 2.1, the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) goals are aligned with the broader WIOA goals of placement in employment or education/training, credential attainment, retention in employment/education/training, and effectiveness in servicing employers.

Beginning with full WIOA implementation in 2016, the WDB's policy has been to use our federal WIOA Title I youth funding exclusively to serve out-of-school youth. This occurs through effective programs offering High School Equivalency (HSE) and access to post-secondary education and training through individual training accounts, work-based learning opportunities tied to employer needs, and follow-up services that engage youth with continued supportive services and practical training (budgeting, etc.), These programs are designed to help such "opportunity youth" achieve sustained following program exit.

As described in Section 2.1 above, the WDB's first goal of *Building on our Strengths – Local Industry Sector Priorities and Related Technical Training Strategies*, will sustain our ongoing support of our critical manufacturing, healthcare and construction sectors accompanied by continued support for our smaller but still important agriculture industry. Additionally, our local Educational Services sector is showing significant, and expected prolonged, employment loss in educator staffing as a due to ongoing demographic and cultural changes. Our proven strategy of prioritizing these five crucial industry sectors will ensure that job seeker customers of the PA CareerLink® Berks County are provided access to and information concerning the most promising careers in the County. Local employers will benefit through improved recruitment results with access to job seekers meeting their skill requirements. This focus is translated at the PA CareerLink® Berks County to services such as individualized job development for adult and dislocated workers and the extensive use of work-based training to bring the job seeker and employer together. This two-pronged approach is meant to increase the likelihood of employment and retention for the job seeker while meeting the hiring needs of the employer customer.

3. OPERATIONAL PLANNING: Local Area Workforce System and Investment Strategies

3.1 Local workforce system structure – Provide a descriptive overview of the workforce system structure, including key stakeholder and entities in the local area.

Local Workforce Development System

The Berks County Workforce Development Board was appointed effective July 1, 2015 by the Berks County Board of Commissioners. The Board continues the work begun in 1999 by its predecessor organization the Berks County Workforce Investment Board (WIB). Federal funding under the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014* provides most of the financial support for Board activities and programs.

The purpose of the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) is to identify the long-term, strategic workforce development needs of the community; propose strategies to meet those needs; set priorities; build partnerships to align resources in support of those strategies; test specific initiatives to advance those ends; and measure and evaluate results. We support the development and maintenance of a skilled and competitive workforce in alignment with the broader economic development efforts to attract, retain and grow business in Berks County.

WDB members are unpaid members of the local community. By federal law and state policy, representatives of the local business community must constitute a majority of the Board's membership. Local labor organizations, community-based organizations, economic and community development entities and educational institutions are also represented on the Board. The Board normally holds public meetings once each calendar quarter and members also serve on Committees which meet regularly. Board Committees may also include non-Board members with particular workforce development experience and expertise.

The Board designates the operator(s) and oversees the operation of the PA CareerLink® Berks County (one stop delivery system).

Berks County is a single-county Workforce Development Area. The Chief Elected Official (CEO) is the elected Chair of the Berks County Board of Commissioners, a body consisting of three Commissioners, elected for four-year terms as specified by the Third-Class County code. The Berks County Board of Commissioners has entered into a partnership with the WDB for the planning and governance of workforce activities authorized under WIOA with respective roles and responsibilities delineated in the partnership agreement effective April 1, 2024 In general, the WDB is responsible for the administration of these activities and acts as a convener and facilitator for broader workforce issues in the county and collaborates with neighboring boards on issues of importance that cross county borders or have mutual benefit to their respective workforces.

WDB staff are County of Berks employees reporting to the Chief Operating Officer/Director of Workforce Development, who in turn reports to the full WDB and administratively to the County's Director of Community and Economic Development. Staff assist the WDB in the development of its strategic vision and plans and manage the implementation of board initiatives; develop and facilitate community partnerships which advance the goals of the board; maintain relationships with Federal, Commonwealth, and other funding sources; and assure the flow of information to assist the board in oversight and decision-making functions.

The County of Berks is the Grant Recipient for funds received under WIOA. The Chief Elected Official ("CEO") is responsible for all workforce funds allocated to the Berks County Local Workforce Development Area (LWDA).

The CEO appoints the members of the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) to fulfill the following duties and responsibilities:

i. Develop the strategic vision, workforce development plans, policies, and priorities for the local Workforce Development Area.
ii. Conduct workforce research and regional labor market analysis to assist in the development of this vision, plans, policies, and priorities for the local Workforce Development Area,
iii. Advise and assist the County of Berks Board of Commissioners by setting policy to promote effective workforce development programs in the Berks County Local Workforce Development Area.
iv. Support the development and maintenance of a skilled and competitive workforce in alignment with the broader economic development efforts to attract, retain and grow business in Berks County.
v. Propose strategies to meet the long-term, strategic needs of the local Workforce Development Area as identified.
vi. Collaborate with local representatives of secondary and postsecondary education to lead efforts in the local Workforce Development Area to develop and implement career pathways.
vii. Develop strategies for using technology to maximize the accessibility and effectiveness of the local workforce development system for employers, workers, and jobseekers.
viii. Build partnerships to align resources in support of those strategies.
ix. Develop a comprehensive workforce development plan and other plans and strategies as may be required.
x. Designate operators and oversee the operation of the PA CareerLink® (one stop delivery system) located within the Berks County Workforce Development Area.
xi. Select program providers.

xii. In partnership with the Chief Elected Official, provide program oversight for local WIOA and other programs to ensure the appropriate use, management, and investment of funds to maximize performance outcomes. Maintain accountability to assess program performance and customer satisfaction through program oversight and monitoring.

xiii. Negotiate and reach agreement with the Commonwealth on local performance measures as appropriate.

xiv. Recommend providers of workforce development and training to the Commonwealth for certification

xv. Disseminate information on WDB approved and Commonwealth certified training programs.

xvi. Promote private sector participation and employer engagement in the local workforce development system.

xvii. Appoint WDB Committees as described herein.

xviii. Develop and approve the WDB budget, modifications, and other related budgets.

xix. Administer additional federal, state, and other workforce funds as an integrated system.

The Berks County WDB shall exercise its decision-making powers and perform its functions and duties as necessary to fulfill its mission, subject to the requirements and limitations imposed upon it under the terms of WIOA and all Federal and State laws, regulations, rules, directives, and requirements issued by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry (PA L&I) as they may be adopted and amended.

As described in the aforementioned WDB duties and responsibilities, the WDB will designate the operator and oversee the operation of the PA CareerLink® Berks County (one stop delivery system) located within the LWDA. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Adequate, sufficient, and accessible one-stop center,
- Sufficient numbers and types of providers of career and training services (including eligible providers with expertise in assisting individuals with disabilities and eligible providers with expertise in assisting adults in need of adult education and literacy activities),
- A holistic system of supporting services, and
- One competitively procured one-stop operator.

In collaboration with the CEO, designate through a competitive process, oversee, monitor, implement corrective action, and, if applicable, terminate the one-stop operator,

- Approve annual budget allocations for operation of the PA CareerLink® Berks County,
- Help the one-stop operator recruit operational Partners and negotiate MOUs with new Partners,
- Leverage additional funding for the PA CareerLink® Berks County to operate and expand one-stop customer activities and resources, and
- Review and evaluate performance of the one-stop operator.

WDB Staff specific responsibilities include, at a minimum:

- Provide operational and grant-specific guidance to the one-stop operator,
- Investigate and resolve elevated customer complaints and grievance issues,
- Prepare regular reports and recommendations to the WDB, and
- Oversee negotiations and maintenance of MOUs with one-stop Partners.

The Board is composed of the required mix of leaders from business, labor, education, community-based organizations, and economic development entities as defined in WIOA and subsequent federal and Commonwealth guidance. The Board meets quarterly to approve policy and conduct other high-level functions. The "heavy lifting" work of the board is conducted in the committees of the board:

Executive Committee

As described in the Berks County WDB By-Laws and approved by our local Chief Elected Official (CEO), the Executive Committee is limited to current WDB members and shall be composed of the Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson of the WDB and the Chairpersons or Co-Chairpersons of all standing committees and previous WDB Chairpersons as necessary and available to carry out the business of the committee.

The Executive Committee shall have and exercise all the power and authority of the WDB with the exception of the following:

- The adoption, amendment, or repeal of the By-Laws.
- The amendment or repeal of any resolution of the WDB.
- The approval or amendment of the WDB Strategic Plan, unless specifically authorized to do so by resolution of the WDB.

Regular responsibilities of the Executive Committee include:

- Recommend the adoption of a yearly operating budget to the WDB.
- Review of the adopted operating budget against actual expenditures and obligations throughout the program year.
- Fiscal and financial oversight of workforce development activities.

The Executive Committee is subject to the Pennsylvania Sunshine Act, 65 Pa.C.S. §§ 701-716.

Four standing committees of the WDB focus to varying degrees on partner collaboration and service alignment within the local workforce delivery system:

Planning Committee

The Board's Planning Committee has primary responsibility for working with Board staff to develop strategic plans for review and approval by the full Board. In particular, the Committee will develop and periodically review the Board's local plan(s) in alignment with federal guidelines under WIOA, state policy and the Board's priorities. The Committee will provide input into other required plans, including WIOA regional plans.

The Planning Committee conducts analysis of the current state of the local labor market; identifies and analyzes gaps; recommends priorities and strategies for Board action and support; and identifies opportunities for future priorities and strategies in need of further exploration. The Committee regularly reviews and updates the Board's industry sector strategies and priorities in conjunction with the Training and Industry Partnership Committee and makes recommendations for approval by the Board. The Committee has the principal responsibility for guiding and tracking implementation of the Board's plans, including development and maintenance of alliances, partnerships, and key working relationships – particularly those leading to regional planning efforts.

The Committee coordinates closely with the Board's Youth Committee (which has similar related planning responsibilities for youth programs overseen by the Board) and incorporates input from the Youth

Committee into the overall planning process. The Committee assists in the development of local and regional economic development, community development and education and literacy plans as appropriate.

Access and Opportunities Committee

The Access and Opportunities committee has the primary responsibility for discharging the WDB's responsibilities toward a comprehensive one-stop center, to include the following:

- Provisions of services to individuals with disabilities access to all programs and accommodations.
- Educating employers to recruit, retain, and advance employees with disabilities.
- Collaborating with other regional organizations; and recommending specific projects and events designed to facilitate understanding of local barriers to employment.
- Recommendations to the Board on:
    - The local one-stop selection and retention of sub-contractors, with the exception of youth/young adult contractors.
    - The selection and retention of the One-Stop Operator.
    - The approval of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) exclusive of the Operating Budget and the Staffing Survey between the Board and the One-Stop Partner organizations and any major modifications to this agreement.

Integral to the work of this committee is promoting access to all programs in keeping with the WDB's commitment to equal opportunity and fairness in our Workforce Development Area. The committee will primarily pursue this goal by providing employers with educational opportunities, resources, and information; by collaborating with other regional organizations; and by recommending specific projects and events designed to facilitate understanding of local barriers to employment and/or to promote employment opportunities for individuals with such barriers. The committee will focus on the actions employers can take to enhance their ability to achieve goals related to recruitment, retention, and advancement of all persons regardless of potential barriers to employment.

The Committee regularly reviews usage and performance of the PA CareerLink® Berks County system through performance information, meetings and consultation with the One-Stop Operator management, and monitoring by Board staff.

Youth Committee

The WDB's Youth Committee assists in the development of those portions of the Board's plan which pertain to youth and young adults; recommends to the Board priorities for the expenditure of Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act youth funding; recommends selection of youth and young adult service providers; and provides coordination and oversight of youth and young adult workforce development activities. In addition, the Youth Committee serves as a convening and coordinating body for larger community partnerships for youth and young adult workforce development.

Training and Industry Partnership

The Training & Industry Partnership Committee is charged with understanding employer training needs, particularly relative to key regional industry sectors and with making recommendations to the Board to meet those needs. This includes oversight of any Industry Partnerships (IPs) in which the Board may be engaged, particularly as they relate to incumbent worker training activities and funding. In addition, this Committee will review progress on performance on local and regional grants related to industry training

needs and priorities. This group will assist with the development of regional sector-based training strategies to include career pathways and the identification of high priority occupations

The Training & Industry Partnership Committee may also make recommendations to the Board regarding training provider qualifications or significant gaps in training capacity. The Committee will make recommendations on Board training policies in coordination with the PA CareerLink® Access and Opportunities Committee as appropriate. The Committee may be asked to review training vendor performance.

Equal Employment Opportunity and Civil Rights Protection

Amber L. Columbo, Assistant Director – Performance and Policy, Equal Opportunity Officer for the WDB ensures equal opportunity and civil rights protections are provided to customers of the PA CareerLink® Berks County. This is ensured through program monitoring for these specific requirements. She also works directly with the Commonwealth's Office of Equal Opportunity as the need arises as an investigator in the Equal Opportunity complaint hearing process.

Advocacy Groups

The WDB includes advocacy groups in the workforce delivery system through active outreach to these groups.

An example is the board's long-standing relationship with the community of individuals with disabilities in Berks County. The WDB, has long partnered with the Berks County Transition Coordinating Council (BCCTC) to offer summer work experience for youth with disabilities (recently expanded to a partnership with OVR). As discussed earlier in Section 2.1 the WDB's has established a standing Access and Opportunity Committee to focus on increasing opportunities for individuals with disabilities with membership including representatives from this community.

Other Key Stakeholders

Other key stakeholders in the local workforce delivery system include economic development agencies (GRCA, MRC, BCIDA, SBDC, etc.) discussed in detail in section 1.4 (G), the county education system (especially RACC and the two Career and Technology Centers), and community development (United Way of Berks County, Olivet Boys and Girls Clubs, Threshold Rehabilitation Services, Inc.) discussed in section 1.4.

LWDB Partners/One Stop Partners Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) is executed between the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB), PA CareerLink® Berks County One-Stop Partners (Partners), and the Chief Elected Official (CEO), of the County of Berks The purpose of this MOU is to define the parameters within which education, workforce, economic development, and other partner programs and entities operating in the Berks County Local Workforce Development Area create a seamless, customer-focused service delivery system that aligns service delivery across the area and enhances access to program services. By addressing one-stop opportunities together, partners can build community-benefiting bridges, rather than silos of programmatic isolation. These partnerships will efficiently reduce administrative burden and costs while effectively increasing customer access and performance outcomes.

HUD itself is not a required partner. The partnership comes when HUD funding arrives (i.e., a local area grantee needs to receive training dollars through HUD to have a required partnership with a LWDB).

Grantee organizations receiving employment training funds from HUD could be housing authorities, but are not limited to housing authorities (e.g., municipalities may also receive HUD funding through DCED, which could potentially expand the WDBs' available partners).

PA CareerLink® Operator

As described above in this section, the WDB is responsible to "Designate operators and oversee the operation of the PA CareerLink® (one stop delivery system) located within the Berks County Workforce Development Area". This is accomplished through a competitive procurement process with the current Operator contract taking effect on July 1, 2024 (see details below in this section). The Operator provides guidance and oversight to the PA CareerLink® Berks County Administrator.

The PA CareerLink® Administrator manages the center's day-to-day operations with the assistance of a management team which is comprised of the various functional Team Managers.

When fulfilling services for the PA CareerLink® Berks County service delivery system, all Partners are under the functional direction of the PA CareerLink® Berks County Administrator. Those Partners who may be co-located but not providing services through the PA CareerLink® Berks County service delivery system are not under the functional supervision of the PA CareerLink® Administrator. At the time that a co-located Partner begins to provide such services, co-located staff fall under the functional direction of the PA CareerLink® Berks County Administrator, in accordance with the formal PA CareerLink® Administrator Job Description.

Management of the PA CareerLink® Berks County shall be the responsibility of the Operator, acting through the PA CareerLink® Berks County Administrator who reports to the Operator. The one-stop operator, through the PA CareerLink® Administrator is, at a minimum, responsible for:

- Managing daily operations, including but not limited to:
  - Managing and coordinating Partner responsibilities, as defined in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU),
  - Managing hours of operation,
  - Coordinating daily work schedules and workflow based upon operational needs, and
  - Coordinating staff vacations/unscheduled absences with the formal program leader to ensure appropriate service coverage by center staff.
- Assisting the WDB in establishing and maintaining the PA CareerLink® Berks County. This includes but is not limited to:
  - Ensuring that State requirements for center certification are met and maintained,
  - Ensuring that career services such as the ones outlined in WIOA sec. 134(c)(2) are available and accessible,
  - Ensuring that WDB policies are implemented and adhered to,
  - Adhering to the provisions outlined in the contract with the WDB,
  - Reinforcing strategic objectives of the WDB to Partners, and
  - Ensuring staff are properly trained by their formal leadership organizations and provided technical assistance, as needed.
- Integrating systems and coordinating services for the center and its Partners, placing priority on customer service.
- Integrating Workforce Service Delivery, as defined by WIOA, means organizing and implementing services by function (rather than by program), when permitted by a program's authorizing statute

and as appropriate, and by coordinating policies, staff communication, capacity building, and training efforts.

- Service integration focuses on serving all customers seamlessly (including targeted populations) by providing a full range of services staffed by cross-functional teams, consistent with the purpose, scope, and requirements of each program.
- Ensuring the services are seamless to the customer, meaning the services are free of cumbersome transitions or duplicative registrations from one program service to another, when avoidable, and there is a smooth customer flow to access the array of services available in the workforce center.
- Overseeing and coordinating partner, program, and PA CareerLink® Berks County performance. This includes but is not limited to:
    - Providing and/or contributing to reports of center activities, as requested by the WDB,
    - Providing input to the formal leader (partner program official) on the work performance of staff under their purview,
- Notifying the formal program leader immediately of any staff leave requests or unexcused absences, disciplinary needs, or changes in employee status,
- Identifying and facilitating the timely resolution of complaints, problems, and other issues,
- Collaborating with the WDB on efforts designed to ensure the meeting of program performance measures, including data sharing procedures to ensure effective data matching, timely data entry into the case management systems, and coordinated data batch downloads (while ensuring the confidentiality requirements of FERPA, 34 CFR 361.38, and 20 CFR part 603),
- Ensuring open communication with the formal leader(s) in order to facilitate efficient and effective center operations,
- Evaluating customer satisfaction data and propose service strategy changes to the WDB based on findings.
- Assisting the WDB with cost allocations and the maintenance and reconciliation of one-stop center operation budgets.
- Coordinating emergency response at the PA CareerLink® Berks County. This includes public announcements of closings and openings, coordination of virtual/remote services as necessary, communication with one-stop and community partners, and disease mitigation efforts and plans.

The functional direction of the PA CareerLink® Berks County Administrator does not supersede a Partner organization's personnel or labor relations policy. For example, all pay, and benefits will remain as dictated by those organizational policies. All discipline, performance appraisal and similar issues will be handled by an employee's organizational manager or supervisor. All requests for leave will be handled by an employee's organizational manager or supervisor, in coordination with the functional Team Manager. All Partners retain exclusive authority to supervise and manage their employees, conduct any investigation, and administer any discipline to its employees.

Educational Data Systems, Inc. (EDSI) was again chosen to be the one-stop operator effective July 1, 2024, through a competitive process beginning October 23, 2023, with the release of a Request for Proposal for PA CareerLink® Berks County One Stop Operator. A pre-proposal conference was held on November 1, 2023, via Microsoft Teams with a number of interested entities. One proposal was submitted by the submission deadline of January 9, 2024. This proposal was reviewed by an ad hoc committee of the WDB

One-Stop Committee made up of three WDB staff members and two board members. Based on the completed evaluations, the ad hoc committee recommended to the board that EDSI be awarded the contract for One-Stop Operator. A contract for the operation of the one-stop (PC-612084-21) was executed with EDSI to begin July 1, 2024. This contract has three one-year renewals, expiring on June 30, 2028.

3.2 <u>Programs included in the local workforce delivery system</u> – What programs are included in the local workforce delivery system and how will the local board work with the entities carrying out all workforce programs to support service alignment?

The WDB ensures the workforce-related needs of employers, workers, and job seekers in Berks County are met, to the maximum extent possible with available resources. In addition, the alignment of local goals and strategic planning with the Governor's goals, as outlined in Pennsylvania's WIOA Combined State Plan is detailed in Section 2.1, including specifics on how they align with the local vision and objectives.

The WDB will, at a minimum:

- In cooperation with the CEO, design and approve the PA CareerLink® Berks County. This includes, but is not limited to:
    - Adequate, sufficient, and accessible one-stop center,
    - Sufficient numbers and types of providers of career and training services (including eligible providers with expertise in assisting individuals with disabilities and eligible providers with expertise in assisting adults in need of adult education and literacy activities),
    - A holistic system of supporting services, and
    - One competitively procured one-stop operator.
- In collaboration with the CEO, designate through a competitive process (detailed below in Section 3.3), oversee, monitor, implement corrective action, and, if applicable, terminate the one-stop operator,
- Approve annual budget allocations for operation of the PA CareerLink® Berks County,
- Help the one-stop operator recruit operational Partners and negotiate MOUs with new Partners,
- Leverage additional funding for the PA CareerLink® Berks County to operate and expand one-stop customer activities and resources, and
- Review and evaluate performance of the one-stop operator.

All LWDB Partners are part of the Berks County Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), contributing both programmatically and fiscally to the local infrastructure.

WDB Staff specific responsibilities include, at a minimum:

- Provide operational and grant-specific guidance to the one-stop operator,
- Investigate and resolve elevated customer complaints and grievance issues,
- Prepare regular reports and recommendations to the WDB, and
- Oversee negotiations and maintenance of MOUs with one-stop Partners.

WIOA Title I Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth Programs

The delivery of high-quality services through WIOA Title I Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth Programs, continue to evolve to meet customer needs. One of the most significant changes has been the ability of our program providers to provide services both in-person and virtually. With nearly 50% of Title I program

staff fluent in both English and Spanish, we also readily offer programming in both languages which well matches the needs of our Title I customers.

Program services are available on a virtual/remote platform upon request by the participant, including:

- WIOA Services:
  - PA CareerLink® Berks County Welcome Orientation
  - WIOA Eligibility Meetings
  - Initial Program Assessments
  - Case Management Services
  - WIN Assessments
  - Individual Training Application (ITA) Processing
  - Job Search Assistance
  - PA CareerLink® website technical assistance
  - Software utilized to provide remote services:
    - YouTube (Recorded version of welcome orientation)
    - Microsoft Teams (Staff Interaction)
    - Adobe Pro DC (For Electronic Signatures)
- BST Services:
  - Virtual Employer Meetings
  - Virtual Recruitments
  - Virtual Interviews
  - OJT Application Processing
  - Employer Seminars
  - Software utilized to provide remote services:
    - Adobe Pro DC [For Electronic Signatures (OJT)]
    - Microsoft Teams (Staff & Employer Interaction)
    - GoTo Meeting (virtual recruitments/interviews/seminars and customer interaction)
- Youth Services:
  - Virtual High School Equivalency (HSE) Classes
  - Tutoring
  - Mentoring
  - Counseling Sessions
  - Orientation
  - Assessments
  - Virtual Employability Workshops
  - Case Management Sessions
  - Job Prep,
  - Resume Writing
  - Financial Literacy
  - Virtual Work Experience Opportunities
  - Software utilized to provide remote services:
    - Google Classroom
    - Zoom
    - Adobe

Adult and Dislocated Worker - Educational Data System Inc (EDSI) is the provider of Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker Services at PA CareerLink® Berks County. EDSI provides Basic Career Services, Individualized Career Services, and Training. A full description of available Adult and Dislocated Worker Services is listed below in section 3.3.

Youth - EQUUS Workforce Solutions (formerly known as ResCare Workforce Services) is the provider of youth services at the PA CareerLink® Berks County. These services can be broken down to four broad activities: case management, GED instruction, work experience and job placement, and access to occupational skills training through ITA and access to OJT and TE. A full description of available Youth services is listed below in section 3.4.

WIOA Title II Adult Education and Literacy Programs

Reading Area Community College (RACC) is the Title II contractor with the PA Dept. of Education. RACC subcontracts with the Literacy Council of Reading-Berks for adult literacy services.

Currently, the Literacy Council's CASAS competency-based assessment is offered on the first and third Monday of each month and is a 3-hour assessment. Welcome Orientation is now able to directly refer to the CASAS competency-based assessment. The participants who are assessed through CASAS will then be referred to the Literacy Council's English as a Second Language Class at the PA CareerLink® office. This class runs two days a week (Tues. & Thurs.) for a total of five hours each week.

The Literacy Council's TABE Reading & Reading Locator assessments are offered each on Thursdays and are open to partner referrals. The TABE Math & Math locator are held once a month on Fridays and are open to partner referrals. Career Services Team customers need only the Reading assessment for referral to training providers. EARN Team customers will need both the Reading and Math for referral for GED services. We anticipate a new assessment protocol will be in place beginning July 1, 2025.

The Literacy Council offers a two-days a week, 2-hour a day (Mon. & Wed.) class at the PA CareerLink® office covering basic math and basic reading (ABE). This is an open entry, open exit class. The target audience is young adults who do not assess at a level enabling them to enroll in our Young Adult program's GED class as well as adults from the general population. The curriculum will run on a 4-week rotation. The program's instruction will enable attendees to move on to a GED class or pass an employer's pre-employment assessment. When ABE services are deemed appropriate for a young adult, a formal referral will be made to the Literacy Council to commence classes again.

WIOA Title III Wagner-Peyser Programs

The Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry is the provider of Wagner-Peyser services at the PA CareerLink®.

Job search and placement assistance is done by conducting matching within PA CareerLink®, either from within a job seeker's folder or within an employer's job posting. It is also done through the advertising of employer recruitments and completion of employer job applications located in the Resource Room. Career advising is accomplished through staff discussions of job seeker qualifications against job posting requirements. Welcome Orientation and the Career Decision Making / Hidden Job Market workshop include information on in-demand industry sectors and occupations. Nontraditional employment opportunities are available through postings on PA CareerLink®. Information on specific employer worker needs, recruitment activities at our facility, and recruitment activities outside of our office are widely shared via flyers and emails to individuals as well as community agencies.

This team also manages the Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) program orientation.

WIOA Title IV Vocational Rehabilitation Programs

The Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation is the provider of Vocational Rehabilitation services at the PA CareerLink® Berks County.

Eligible OVR customers receive multiple services from qualified Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors that may include but not be limited to; diagnostic, vocational counseling and guidance, vocational evaluation, restoration, training, job placement and pre-employment training services for eligible and potentially eligible high school students with disabilities. OVR also provides multiple services to the business community designed to assist businesses with onboarding pre-screened qualified employees with disabilities. OVR on-boarding supports for a qualified new hire can include reasonable accommodation consultation, initial probationary period wage reimbursement (On-the Job Training-OJT), referral on tax credits or deductions. OVR also offers no-cost consultation on the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), accessibility standards and helping a business to retain current employees following an accident, injury or disability.

Workforce services available to special populations include:

Veterans and covered persons are given priority of service. We notify all visitors of Priority of Service through posters at our entrance. At all points of service delivery, we distribute flyers in English and Spanish that fulfill several functions:

1. describe who is eligible for the entitlement of Priority of Service,
2. list all the USDOL programs and services at the PA CareerLink® Berks County, and
3. provide contact information for each program.

When the veteran/covered persons apply for positions on the statewide PA CareerLink® website, the applicants are identified with an American Flag, enabling staff to prioritize those referrals. Walk-in veterans and covered persons verbally disclose eligibility. Program areas request veteran status on their applications or enrollment forms. All veterans/covered persons who attend our Welcome/RESEA Orientation receive an initial intake and assessment. Veterans and covered persons decide whether they are interested in WIOA Individualized Career Services and/or Training Services. Veteran/covered persons are at the head of the line to be scheduled for WIOA registration and case management appointments. When applications for WIOA Individual Training Accounts are reviewed, those from veterans and covered persons are reviewed first. Staff may also refer a veteran to the OVR or other social service agencies for help with disabilities or more comprehensive needs.

Individuals that are basic skills-deficient have their educational needs met by the Adult Basic Education Title II provider, Reading Area Community College (RACC) or their subcontractor, The Literacy Council of Reading-Berks. Services include a CASAS assessment, Test for Adult Basic Literacy (TABE), Adult Basic Education (ABE), English as a Second Language (ESL), math and English remediation courses.

Individuals who receive public assistance are helped through the Employment, Advancement, and Retention Network (EARN) for employment services. EARN staff, services and clients are located at the PA CareerLink® Berks County. An income maintenance caseworker from the Berks County Assistance Office (BCAO) is available to the EARN program advising them of the requirements to maintain eligibility for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits. The BCAO income maintenance caseworker is

also available to provide assistance as needed for TANF eligible clients in the Young Adult Program, also located at the PA CareerLink® Berks County.

Low-income individuals may access Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) home assistance and weatherization programs that help eligible families make minor home repairs and/or reduce energy consumption and overall energy bills through the installation of cost-effective energy conservation measures. The Berks Community Action Program, Inc. (BCAP) administers these programs in the local area.

Older individuals who may be eligible under Title V are referred to the Senior Community Services Employment Program (SCSEP) offered by AARP. In addition, the PA CareerLink® Berks County often serves as a host agency.

Returning citizens receive guidance and counseling to prepare for employment through Connections Work, a partner in the PA CareerLink® Berks County. Staff from the PA CareerLink® Berks County volunteer at the Connections Work job fairs to assist returning citizens to prepare for successful participation in the event. Connections Work runs a "Tips for Job Seekers with Criminal Records" workshop at the PA CareerLink® semiannual job fairs. The WDB, through a competitive process spanning Spring of 2019 and again in Spring of 2021, helped fund the expansion of Connection Works' Rebuilding Reentrants and Reading (R3) through the 2022 program year. This program was originally funded through the U.S. Department of Labor. This registered pre-apprenticeship program offers an opportunity for individuals with a criminal history to acquire skills in the construction trades that lead to gainful employment. Since program year 2022, the WDB has assisted Connections Work with other sources of private and public grant funding to sustain this best practice re-entry program.

Individuals with disabilities are provided equal access to services at the PA CareerLink® Berks County. Staff receives Equal Opportunity training quarterly. Customers choose whether or not to disclose disability information. Appropriate referrals are made to the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) for evaluation and OVR has an office at the PA CareerLink® Berks County. Eligible OVR customers receive multiple individualized services such as, diagnostic testing, vocational counseling and guidance, vocational evaluation, restoration, occupational training, and job placement. Under WIOA, OVR provides both eligible and potentially eligible youth with pre-employment transition services (PETS) to better prepare these students for life after high school. PETS include paid work experience, job shadowing, workplace readiness training, and career guidance. OVR also provides multiple services to the business community designed to assist with onboarding of pre-screened qualified employees with disabilities. OVR business representatives are a vital part of our Employer Outreach Team made up of representatives from PA CareerLink® Berks County partners who are engaging local employers.

Underemployed individuals are referred to Welcome Orientation, where they receive labor market information, resume guidance, and a full description of all available services at our One-Stop location; including, but not limited to: Basic Career Services, Individual Career Services, and Training Services. Individuals complete an initial assessment and choose their next steps by completing an Initial Plan.

Unemployed individuals are identified through Rapid Response activities and RESEA claimant lists. Individuals are referred to Welcome Orientation, where they receive labor market information, resume' preparation guidance, and a full description of our Basic Career Services, Individual Career Services, and Training Services. Individuals complete an initial assessment and choose their next steps with their Initial Plan.

Migrant or Seasonal Farm Workers (MSFWs) access services through PathStone. They receive the full range of employment services, benefits and protections, including counseling, testing, and job and training referrals. PathStone has a staff member in the PA CareerLink® center one day a week.

Native American and Employment Training is available through a referral to The Council of Three Rivers of Eastern Pennsylvania. If an individual identifies an interest in their services, PA CareerLink® staff will complete a referral to the program. Participants learn of these available services through the PA CareerLink® Welcome Orientation.

Please see Attachment 3: Program Partner/Provider List for more details on PA CareerLink® Berks County partners and providers,

3.3 *Adult and Dislocated Worker training activities – Provide a description and assessment of the type and availability of adult and dislocated worker employment and training activities in the local area.*

Adult and Dislocated Worker

WIOA defines the types of employment and training activities to be offered in local workforce development areas. These include basic and individualized career services and training services. The board uses a competitive process to procure the basic and individualized career services. Training services consist of ITA, OJT and other work-based learning including incumbent worker training. The board currently does not see any discrepancies between adult and dislocated worker activities offered and what job seekers/employers require. The WDB currently has one provider of Title I adult and dislocated worker services.

The WDB partners with the County of Berks Purchasing Department to manage the RFP/contract process. This process is detailed in the County of Berks Procurement Policy as well as in the WDB's written policy.

While the Purchasing Department manages this process for the WDB, the WDB dictates conditions under which the process begins and makes the final decision on the award of contracts.

The following general process is used for the procurement of program services:

1. Board committee identifies a procurement need.
2. Board staff (staff) develops a statement of work (SOW) including summary, type of procurement, method of payment, services to be performed, expected outcomes, administrative requirements, and proposer response items.
3. Board reviews and approves SOW.
4. Staff forwards SOW to County Purchasing Department (purchasing) for insertion into RFP boiler plate.
5. Staff and purchasing develop a timeline for RFP issue, bidder's conference, review, and award.
6. Purchasing issues RFP and all subsequent addendums as necessary.
7. Purchasing runs bidder's conference. Staff is present at conference to answer/clarify questions.
8. Proposals are submitted to purchasing.
9. Purchasing conducts technical review.
10. Purchasing forwards proposals passing technical review to review committee (staff and members of board committee identifying the contracting need).
11. Review committee members conduct reviews and submit evaluations to purchasing.
12. Budgets are reviewed by review committee and changes made to evaluations as necessary.
13. Proposer interviews are conducted if the review committee deems appropriate.
14. Review committee submits final evaluations.

15. Recommendation to award contract is made to full WDB.
16. WDB approves recommendation.
17. Purchasing executes contract.

In addition, the WDB reviews the listing of potential proposers with the County Purchasing Department ahead of each RFP release to help get a broader interest.

Proposers provide a response which becomes the main criteria for evaluation of the proposal. Beyond a general introduction to the agency detailing its capacity to provide services (including financial stability, past performance, etc.) and justification of cost the following specific questions were asked in the most recent procurement for adult and dislocated worker services:

1. Detail your organization's staffing plan for the proposed services. Please include the following:
    a. Staffing table including number of staff, status (full or part time), location, job function, and case load ratio.
    b. Job descriptions that include job titles, job duties, and minimum qualifications.
    c. Resumes for key staff designated to oversee the proposed service delivery model. At a minimum resume should include education, work history, and any specialized training or certifications relevant to proposed job function. If staff will need to be hired as a result of contract award, please outline the plan and timeline to hire qualified staff to deliver proposed services.
2. Describe how the Resource Room will be managed including anticipated staffing levels and hours of operation.
3. Describe how staff will work with job seekers to overcome barriers to employment. Provide a detailed overview of plans to address any or all of the following:
    - Literacy/education
    - Disability
    - Criminal history
    - Housing
    - Basic needs
    - Limited English Proficiency
    - Other barriers not mentioned above
4. Describe how Rapid Response activities will be coordinated with other PA CareerLink® Berks County staff and state-wide efforts.

WIOA identifies four priority groups for service within the Title I Adult funding stream. Priority of service means those individuals in the priority groups are given priority over other individuals for receipt of individualized career services and training services. Priority of service does not guarantee that by virtue of his/her status an individual will always receive services. The individual must be eligible and able to benefit from the services. Once another participant is enrolled in a WIOA individualized career or training service, that participant may not be displaced by an individual who qualifies for priority of service.

The four priority groups are (within each group a veteran or eligible spouse of a veteran takes priority over a non-veteran):

- Recipients of public assistance
- Low income
- Basic skills deficient

- Underemployed

Priority is provided in the following order:

- *First,* to veterans and eligible spouses who meet the requirements for inclusion in one of the four priority groups.
- *Second,* non-veterans who meet the requirements for inclusion in one of the four priority groups.
- *Third,* to veterans and eligible spouses who **do not** meet the requirements for inclusion in one of the four priority groups.
- *Fourth,* non-veterans who **do not** meet the requirements for inclusion in one of the four priority groups.

Priority will be determined at eligibility for all individuals enrolled under the Title I Adult funding stream. Copies of all documentation used to verify priority must be included in the customer's file. See the WDB "Program Eligibility Policy" for further details.

The WDB has elected not to include additional local priority requirements. As such, no local requirements are included or inferred.

The WDB expects that at least 60% of all individuals served with Title I Adult funds will meet one of the priority target groups. Monitoring of progress toward and maintenance of goal will be conducted primarily through monthly reports generated from the contractor, CWDS Ad-Hoc reports, and file monitoring.

Local partnerships are utilized to inform the public of program services within the One-Stop, along with compressive outreach materials providing detailed information including priority groups. As the first point of service, each individual attends or views PA CareerLink® Berks County Welcome Orientation, a detailed presentation of services available within the one-stop, including priority of service.

Intake assessments are completed by each participant interested in services, gathering barriers to employment, this information is used during the first appointment to determine level of eligibility or priority of service. In addition, it's used as the first step to develop each participant's individual service strategy within CWDS, the plan that will be implemented during the participants enrollment to training and/or employment.

While WIOA has expanded the definition of youth to include individuals through age 24 and many in the older age range meet the requirements for priority of service it is the general practice to refer meeting that age demographic to the youth program which is better designed to meet a youth's (young adult) needs.

The decision to transfer funds between adult and dislocated worker is based on training and capacity requirements being faced by the one-stop. Such transfers are approved by the board.

Career Pathways have become an integral part of the occupational and work-based training individuals receive through the one-stop and are discussed under the Access to Services heading of Section 3.7.B.

The local WDB encourages co-enrollment between programs within the one-stop. The encouragement of co-enrollment allows for participation of EARN and WIOA Title I Youth participants in work-based learning activities such as; ITA and OJT. Additional co-enrollment information can be found below in Section 4.5.

The WDB participates in the Local Management Committee (LMC), organized and hosted by the Berks County Assistance Office (CAO). The committee meets quarterly providing an opportunity for updates and

collaboration from community partners including, but not limited to; KEYS, ELECT, Work Ready, Berks Community Action Program (BCAP), PA CareerLink® Berks County EARN program, WIOA Title I program and the Site Administrator, and Opportunity House. In addition to the quarterly LMC meetings, program referrals occur across the partners to help participants overcome barriers, allowing for co-enrollment opportunities.

The local EARN program has a program year performance measure of 90% successful referral to the KEYS program. EARN and KEYS have a great working relationship to promote positive outcomes for the participants being served. EARN continues to have strong relationships with the LMC partners that assist in the achievement of their external support services performance measure of 90% each program year.

Currently, the following Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker services are available at the PA CareerLink® Berks County (the competitive process for this contract is described above):

- Basic Career Services
    - Outreach, intake and orientation to the information, services, programs, tools and resources available through the Local workforce system
    - Initial assessments of skill level(s), aptitudes, abilities and supportive service needs
    - In- and out-of-area job search and placement assistance (including provision of information on in-demand industry sectors and occupations and non-traditional employment)
    - Access to employment opportunities and labor market information
    - Performance information and program costs for eligible providers of training, education, and workforce services
    - Information on performance of the local workforce system
    - Information on the availability of supportive services and referral to such, as appropriate
    - Information and meaningful assistance on Unemployment Insurance claim filing
    - Determination of potential eligibility for workforce Partner services, programs, and referral(s)
    - Information and assistance in applying for financial aid for training and education programs not provided under WIOA

- Individualized Career Services
    - Comprehensive and specialized assessments of skills levels and service needs
    - Development of an individual employability development plan to identify employment goals, appropriate achievement objectives, and appropriate combination of services for the customer to achieve the employment goals
    - Referral to training services
    - Individual counseling and career planning
    - Case management for customers seeking training services; individual in- and out- of- area job search, referral and placement assistance
    - Workforce preparation services (e.g., development of learning skills, punctuality, communication skills, interviewing skills, personal maintenance, literacy skills, financial literacy skills, and professional conduct) to prepare individuals for unsubsidized employment or training
    - Post-employment follow-up services and support (This is not an individualized career service but listed here for completeness.)

- Training
    - Access to occupational skills training through Individual Training Accounts (ITA)
    - Access to On-the-Job Training (OJT) and Transitional Employment (TE)

3.4. <u>Youth workforce investment activities</u> – Provide a description and assessment of the type and availability of youth workforce investment activities in the local area.

Youth

The Youth Committee is chaired by a Board member and is composed of both members of the Board who have special interest or expertise in youth policy (such as educators, employers, and representatives of human service agencies) and non-board members having the same interest or expertise.

The Youth Committee assists in the development of those portions of the Board's plan which pertain to youth and young adults; recommends to the Board priorities for the expenditure of Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act Title I Youth funding and TANF Youth Development funding; recommends selection of youth and young adult service providers; and provides coordination and oversight of youth and young adult workforce development activities. In addition, the Youth Committee serves as a convening and coordinating body for larger community partnerships for youth and young adult workforce development.

The Youth Committee recognizes that support of programs designed to keep youth in school and to assist those that, unfortunately, decide to drop-out is critical but, realistically, our limited funding needs to be fixed on the following:

- 100% of WIOA funding will be used to provide programs designed to support youth who are either high school dropouts or are high school graduates who find themselves underemployed/unemployed due to barriers they find in their life (out-of-school youth).
- TANF Youth Development funding (and any funds used to supplement these funds) will be used to support programs to serve in-school youth (ages 16-24 at the time of enrollment from low-income families) designed to provide work experience and exposure to careers

<u>WIOA Title I Funding</u>

The process for general Title I eligibility is detailed in Section 3.7. The Board has made the determination to focus <u>all</u> WIOA Title I Youth funds on Out-of-School Youth (OSY), The WDB has determined that an OSY who requires additional assistance to enter or complete an educational program or to secure or hold employment is documented as follows:

- Degree/Diploma/GED/Certificate completers: A demonstrated inability to maintain full-time employment (30 hours per week) during the six-month period after the aware of a high school diploma/GED or the award of post-secondary degree/certification, or
- Degree/Certificate Non-completes: Youth with a high school diploma/GED who enroll but do not complete a full-time post-secondary education and are unemployment for a period of six-months following the withdraw from the education program.

Equus Workforce Solutions (formerly known as ResCare Workforce Services) is the provider of youth services at the PA CareerLink® Berks County. These services can be broken down to four broad activities: case management, GED instruction, work experience and job placement, and access to occupational skills training through ITA and access to OJT and TE. The following youth elements are available either directly through the youth services provider or other one-stop partner or through referral to community agencies (The bullets under each element detail how these services are accessed):

1. Tutoring, study skills training, instruction, and evidence-based dropout prevention and recovery strategies that lead to completion of the requirements for a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent or for a recognized post-secondary credential.
    - Daily tutoring and small group instruction are available on site and virtually at the PA CareerLink® Berks County.
    - The program provides GED instruction and attachment to post-secondary education/training as appropriate for the individual.
2. Alternative secondary school services or dropout recovery services.
    - Referrals to alternate secondary schools if the participant's needs cannot be met in the program
3. Paid and unpaid work experiences that have as a component academic and occupational education.
    - Paid work experience is offered to all participants. Work experience exposes youth to various aspects of industry and entrepreneurship while providing hands-on skills instruction and "on the-job experience." Partnerships with local Employers and Community agencies provide opportunity for both entry-level and career pathway placements.
    - Transitional employment is offered as an available option to individuals.
4. Occupational skill training.
    - Youth are exposed to post-secondary environments, including opportunities for advanced training. Visits to college campuses and other post-secondary training institutions are accomplished. Assistance in completing entry applications and financial aid applications is also provided.
    - Youth ITA's are available. When a Youth has an interest in ITA, EQUUS works directly with the Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker provider to have the individual dual enrolled.
5. Education offered concurrently with and in the same context as workforce preparation activities and training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster.
    - Workforce and career readiness are offered as part of the monthly Youth Orientation and GED curriculum. Small group instruction is provided to all individuals during enrollment.
6. Leadership development opportunities.
    - Leadership skills are developed through workshops including decision making, conflict resolution and community service skills. Civic leadership is enhanced through the paid work experience, community service projects, voter registration and community awareness projects, i.e. current events.
    - Community Leaders are invited to the monthly youth orientations.
7. Supportive services.
    - Supportive services in the form of bus passes, uniforms etc. are available to youth enrolled in the program. Staff coordinate with other youth service organization to facilitate a two-way referral network for youth in need of services beyond those offered in-house.
8. Adult mentoring for duration of at least twelve months.
    - Adult mentoring is an on-going activity of program staff, employers and takes place concurrently with other program activities. Examples include but are not limited to guest speakers, worksite supervisors and program staff.

9. Follow up services.
    - The program facilitates a combination of counseling, and workshops to motivate and engage exited youth. Staff offer post-secondary guidance, and job searches for youth who have been exited with placement. In addition to contacting youth viaphone calls; a variety of other methods are used to contact youth such as Facebook, e-mail, and text messages to follow up with students. Incentives to youth that continue to stay in post-secondary education and/ or retain a job to ensure progress towards retaining a year (plus) employment and/ or educational goals.
10. Comprehensive guidance and counseling.
    - Individual and group counseling is provided throughout program participation to discuss personal and career goals. Problems identified are addressed by staff immediately and discussed with the on-site Licensed Counselor. If additional counseling is required i.e. health, drug etc. referrals to the appropriate agencies is provided.
11. Financial literacy education.
    - Financial literacy is incorporated using the Financial Wellness Seminar series and is provided by a representative of Visions Federal Credit Union.
12. Entrepreneurial skill training.
    - Entrepreneurial skill training is incorporated in the monthly youth orientation and GED curriculum. Examples include a mock "Shark Tank" activity in which youth create a product and market it to program staff and an activity in which youth create a business and must develop a business plan.
13. Labor market information.
    - Labor market information is provided to program participants during monthly youth orientation, individual and group counseling when personal and career goals are discussed.
    - Such information is brought back to the program through staff participation on the Employer Outreach Team (EOT) and through WDB provided information.
14. Activities that help youth prepare for and transition to post-secondary education and training.
    - These are also incorporated in the regular individual and group counseling sessions and include topics associated with financial literacy, building support networks and ensuring secondary and tertiary back-ups for issues such as transportation and child-care.
    - College tours and assistance in completing the FASFA.

Equus Workforce Solutions was chosen to be the provider of Title I youth services through a competitive process beginning February 25, 2022, with a release of a Request for Proposal for WIOA Youth Education and Workforce Services Program. A pre-proposal conference was held March 9, 2022, with a number of interested entities attending via Microsoft Teams. Two proposals were submitted by the submission deadline of April 12, 2022. The proposals were reviewed by the ad hoc committee of the WDB Youth Committee made up of three WDB staff members and two board members. Based on review of the proposals the ad hoc committee recommended to the board that Equus be awarded the contract for provider of youth services. The award letter was issued on June 17, 2022. The contract (PC-620122-22) effective August 4, 2022 – June 30, 2024, with a one-year renewal option. The Title I youth services is currently being reviewed under a competitive procurement for July 1, 2025, start date.

Equus Workforce Solutions is currently the provider of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), implemented locally as "Connecting Young Adults with Employment" Grant was approved by the Youth

Committee in November 2020, with the continued efforts on providing year-round work experiences. The RFP solicitation began on August 11, 2023, with a pre-proposal conference on August 23, 2023, with proposals due on September 25, 2023. The grant period for performance to commence on January 1, 2024, and continue through June 30, 2023, with two additional one-year renewal terms of July 1, 2024, to June 30, 2025, and July 1, 2025, to June 30, 2026. A new RFP for TANF youth services will be released in 2025.

Recruitment

The WDB utilized TANF funding to provide work experience to in-school youth, both entry-level and career pathway opportunities are encouraged. Recruitment of youth occurs in multiple ways. The Berks County Intermediate Unit and the Berks Business Education Coalition assists in identifying a point of contact within each of our 18 local school districts. These contacts, normally Guidance Counselors or Internship and Transition Coordinators are provided program information and services to help identify students who are at-risk and undecided seniors. Both Career and Technology Centers are connectors with the program for students who are in need of meeting co-op requirements when funding is available. The County Assistance Office (CAO) caseworkers and EARN staff provide information on TANF Youth Development and WIOA funds to potential TANF families who might have eligible youth to refer to the program.

The program is strengthening and developing partnerships within the local community college and universities to provide services to college students who need work experience, internship opportunities or supportive services. Partnering with work-study programs to help provide additional work-study opportunities on campus where funds might not be available to help students continue to stay engaged/enrolled. Utilization of social media platforms are also used to help increase awareness.

The number of TANF eligible participants served is dependent on available TANF YDP funding providing the WDB. During Calendar Year 2024, 89 participants were determined eligible and provided case management and/or work experience opportunities.

WIOA Youth Elements

All 14 WIOA Youth Program Elements are made available to each TANF youth participant, reference above within this section for details. Currently, TANF YDP programming does not plan to offer incentives.

Worksites

Contractors are responsible for worksite recruitment, developing connections to the employers who can match both entry-level and career pathways. This is accomplished primarily through contacts made by our PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST), but also through direct program partnerships with the co-op coordinators at the two Career and Technology Centers.

Partnering with the United Way of Berks County (UWBC) has provided additional outreach to serve non-profits, allowing youth to give back to their community while developing work skills.

Priority of TANF Youth

The Berks WDB, and in collaboration with Department of Human Services (DHS), Bureau of Employment Programs (BEP) regarding the TANF Youth Development Program funding, ensures compliance with the TANF YDP requirements stated in the TANF YDP handbook. In addition, the WDB reviews all TANF YDP applications for eligibility compliance with application completion in the Commonwealth System of record (CWDS) before participant receives services.

The contractor accepts and encourages direct referrals from the CAO and EARN operators. Many Youth, especially those attending the Reading and Muhlenberg School Districts, live in high poverty areas.

Leveraging

All business partners (worksites) will provide supervision of the youth at no additional cost to the program.

Partners

Partnerships grow over the duration of the calendar year, based on the interest of each participant. Past business partners have included, but not limited to:

- Muhlenberg School District
- Berks Encore
- City of Reading
- Fraser Advanced Information System
- Humane Society of Berks County of Berks
- Penn State Health St. Joseph
- Pivot Physical Therapy
- Opportunity Shop
- Habitat for Humanity

Hourly Wage

The WDB "Paid Work Experience Policy for Youth and Young Adults" allows for the determination of a wage requirement to be in consultation with the worksite employer and not to exceed any current employee of the worksite's hourly wage. Each identified worksite employer completed a job description determines the suggested starting point for the hourly wage, the local WDB has a cap of $15.00 per hour.

Program Monitoring

Contractors receive a yearly fiscal review conducted by the Fiscal Coordinator with oversight from the Fiscal Manager.

Programmatic reviews are conducted by the Program Coordinator with oversight from the Assistant Director. Participant files are reviewed, including payroll, eligibility, career plans, CWDS case notes and worksite visits to ensure compliance with applicable Federal and State labor laws and compliance with the worksite agreement.

Berks County Contacts

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Adams and Associates has a **Job Corps** representative onsite as a required partner for collaboration with all one-stop partner programs.

3.5 *Coordination between Title I and Title II – How will the local board coordinate WIOA Title I workforce investment activities with WIOA Title II Adult Education and Literacy Programs*

The state plan, consistent with federal WIOA guidelines, requires that as part of the WIOA Title II Adult Basic Education (ABE) grant application process, the local board receive opportunity to review applications for alignment with the local plan. Local boards are not directly involved in WIOA title II solicitation and procurement; the title II competition is run solely by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), and all funding decisions are made solely by PDE. The local boards will review applications submitted to PDE for WIOA title II funds for alignment with the goals and strategies of the local area plan, and then provide recommendations to PDE on ways to improve alignment, if applicable.

Federal regulations require PDE to establish the process by which the local boards will review the WIOA Title II applications for alignment with the local area plan and submit recommendations to PDE for improvement of alignment. PDE will receive the applications for Title II funds and then distribute applications to the appropriate LWDB for review. PDE develops related review documents and rubrics and provide them to the local boards along with training on how to conduct the review and return the documents to PDE. All local boards must use the review documents and rubrics provided by PDE. Local boards have flexibility in determining which members of the local board participate in the review of applications. The review work can be led by local board staff but cannot be limited to local board staff. Board members connected to entities that submit applications for WIOA title II funds or who have other conflicts of interest cannot participate in the review.

In April/May 2022 the WDB reviewed the only proposal for ABE Direct Services received for Berks County. The review team consisted of one board member (a private employer with no connection to the submitting entity) and two board staff. The section reviewed by each was the “Alignment with Workforce” section. The Rating Rubric and Confidentiality/Conflict of Interest Statements were submitted to PDE on May 6, 2022. On July 11, 2022, PDE advised the Berks County WDB that Reading Area Community College (RACC) was the recipient of the Adult Basic Education Direct Service grant award for Berks County for the period July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2027.

Through the One-stop Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) process, the WDB works with the local WIOA Title II service provider to design how local Title I and Title II activities will be coordinated. As mentioned below in Section 3.7, reflecting the primary importance of coordinating WIOA Title I and Title II program services and strategies to avoid duplication and maximize our limited local resources, RACC’s Director of Literacy Programs (who leads RACC’s Title II program services) is a member of the WDB and has been an active participant in developing and approving this current 4-year local plan. In addition, since her retirement in June 2018, RACC’s former President (a long-time WDB member) has continued as a non-Board member of the WDB’s Planning Committee. In this capacity, the WDB has had valuable direct access to her widely acknowledged expertise in strategic planning and effective program coordination in the areas of workforce development and adult education.

All individuals that participate in Title II services within the one-stop attend a PA CareerLink® Welcome Orientation and receive information on all available program and partner services. For example, if a participant identifies during an initial appointment, they have an English as a Second Language (ESL) need, they are referred to ESL classes provided by Title II within the one-stop location.

3.6 Wagner-Peyser Act – Describe the plans, assurances, and strategies for maximizing coordination, improving service delivery, and avoiding duplication of Wagner-Peyser Act (29 U.S.C. 49 et seq.) services and other services provided through the one-stop service delivery system.

Since 1999, the PA CareerLink® Berks County has shown the way in how to maximize staff coordination and services to the job seeker/employer customer through the functional alignment of staff. Integration at PA CareerLink® Berks County happens at both the staff and team manager levels. Some teams have mixed staff from multiple partners. Some teams have staff from a single partner organization. All teams have a dedicated manager/supervisor. Integration occurs through twice-monthly full staff meetings, twice-monthly team manager meetings and various staff development activities. Partners whose employees participate as integrated team members are:

- PA Department of Labor and Industry - Bureau of Workforce Partnership and Operation (PA L&I BWPO), EDSI Adult and Dislocated Worker,
- EQUUS Youth Services,
- EDSI Business Services Team, and
- EDSI EARN program. Functional supervisors/managers are individuals who make work assignments and supervise the work of individuals regardless of payroll attachment.

Agency managers serve as liaisons for employer-specific information and issues. Responsibilities are kept separate by making all staff aware of the distinction, setting the expectation that everyone understands and implements the distinction, and enforcing it.

As detailed previously, the one-stop operator provides functional supervision of the PA CareerLink® Administrator who acts as a functional leader within the one-stop. As such, they have the authority to organize and supervise Partner staff, in order to optimize and streamline service delivery efforts. Key functions include:

- Integrate systems and coordinate services for the center and its Partners, placing priority on customer service.
- Integrated Workforce Service Delivery, as defined by WIOA, means organizing and implementing services by function (rather than by program), when permitted by a program's authorizing statute and as appropriate, and by coordinating policies, staff communication, capacity building, and training efforts.
- Service integration focusing on serving all customers seamlessly (including targeted populations) by providing a full range of services staffed by cross-functional teams, consistent with the purpose, scope, and requirements of each program.
- Ensuring services are seamless to the customer, meaning the services are free of cumbersome transitions or duplicative registrations from one program service to another, when avoidable, and there is a smooth customer flow to access the array of services available in the workforce center.
- Oversee and coordinate partner, program, and PA CareerLink® Berks County performance.

Two examples of the integration of staff and programs currently taking place at the PA CareerLink® Berks County are the Welcome Function and Employer Outreach Team. The Welcome Function consists of two components: a Welcome Orientation and an Initial Assessment.

- The Welcome Orientation is a group activity offered twice a week on a drop-in basis, alternating between morning and afternoon sessions for the convenience of customers' schedules. A PA CareerLink® staff member facilitates the orientation and uses a PowerPoint presentation to reinforce the information presented verbally. Information is presented about a wide range of independent, expanded and comprehensive career services, including Resource Room services, explanations of PA CareerLink® registration and use, career exploration and labor market information resources, workshops, assessment tools, case management and career advising, training opportunities, pre-training/pre-employment workshops, structured soft skills preparation, structured job search preparation, self-assisted job search, Career Center for Young Adults, WIOA eligibility, PA CareerLink® events, and Partner Services All new PA CareerLink® Berks County customers are encouraged to attend a Welcome Orientation. Customers who choose not to attend a Welcome Orientation are offered to view a pre-recorded Welcome Orientation within the one-stop's Resource Room (which can also be provided to review virtually), receive a copy of the public calendar that lists all events occurring at the one-stop (including orientation), and a general brochure that provides an overview of all services.
- Immediately following the Welcome Orientation, each customer participates in an individual Initial Assessment with a PA CareerLink® Berks County staff member. Utilizing a specially designed assessment form, staff members guide customers through an assessment of their labor force, Unemployment Compensation, Veteran and disability statuses, their career/employment goals, and their concerns about any factors that may impact their ability to achieve their goals. Considering the next type of service a customer may select, independent, expanded or comprehensive Career Services, the staff member guides them to participate in appropriate services. These may include PA CareerLink® registration, workshops, resume writing assistance, assessments, job referrals, case management and application for WIOA eligibility and services. Staff members may also arrange for referrals to community agencies to assist customers with concerns beyond the scope of services delivered at the PA CareerLink® Berks County services, including childcare, housing, health care and legal/financial issues.

It is especially critical that employer outreach activities are coordinated and communicated among the various workforce development program teams. This is accomplished through a structured Employer Outreach Team (EOT) that was established in 2016. The EOT is comprised of individuals from Business Services, EARN, Young Adult, Job Corps, Local Veterans Employment Representative, OVR, the WDB, and other community agencies who come together, at a minimum, quarterly or at special request of a team member, and independently with relevant interagency members to discuss and share business/employer intelligence and better understanding of employment barriers. The goals of the team are to ensure employers receive a consistent message from the team members, that employer visits are coordinated to maximize outreach efforts and diminish employer program fatigue, and to maximize job seeker placements through the sharing of hiring information.

Each Partner commits to cross-training of staff, as appropriate, and to providing other professional learning opportunities that promote continuous quality improvement. Partners will further promote system integration to the maximum extent feasible through:

- Effective communication, information sharing, and collaboration with the one-stop operator,
- Joint planning, policy development, and system design processes,
- Commitment to the joint mission, vision, goals, strategies, and performance measures,
- The design and use of intake, assessment, referral, and case management processes,

- The use of common and/or linked data management systems and data sharing methods, as appropriate,
- Leveraging of resources, including other public agency and non-profit organization services,
- Participation in a continuous improvement process designed to boost outcomes and increase customer satisfaction, and
- Participation in regularly scheduled Partner meetings to exchange information in support of the above and encourage program and staff integration.
- Utilization of our established referral system. The primary principle of the referral system is to provide integrated and seamless delivery of services to workers, job seekers, and employers. In order to facilitate such a system, Partners agree to:
    - Familiarize themselves with the basic eligibility and participation requirements, as well as with the available services and benefits offered, for each of the Partners' programs represented in the PA CareerLink® Berks County,
    - Develop materials summarizing their program requirements and making them available for Partners and customers,
    - Develop and utilize intake, eligibility determination, assessment, and registration processes,
    - Provide substantive referrals to customers who are eligible for supplemental and complementary services and benefits under partner programs,
    - Regularly evaluate ways to improve the referral process, including the use of customer satisfaction surveys,
    - Commit to robust and ongoing communication required for an effective referral process, and
    - Commit to actively follow up on the results of referrals.

Staff training occurs on a regular basis at the PA CareerLink® Berks County, encompassing training provider and community-based organizations providing overviews of their available services, team updates, health and safety, regular EO/ADA/LEP training, and other training specific to the provision of services (case note training, case management, etc.). These trainings usually occur at the twice monthly full staff meetings. A

Additionally, "fun days" are also scheduled through-out the year (Holiday Luncheon, Cultural Food Day, Chocolate Fest to encourage staff cooperation and cohesion.

3.7 <u>Core program facilitation</u> – How will the local board work with the entities carrying out core programs to:

A. Expand access to employment, training, education, supportive services, and co-enrollment for eligible individuals, particularly individuals with barriers to employment.

WIOA core programs require certain eligibility criteria while other non-WIOA core programs may differ in their degrees of eligibility criteria. Title II ABE program uses an assessment to help determine their services and are the final arbiter of eligibility for Title II programming; Title III Wagner-Peyser Employment Services require no eligibility criteria and Title IV Vocational Rehabilitation services have unique eligibility criteria based on the individual's assessment.

It is the policy of the WDB that no individual receives WIOA Title I Adult/Dislocated Worker/Youth program services until the applicable eligibility requirements for said program have been documented and verified by appropriate workforce staff. This ensures that only those individuals for whom funds are targeted receive services.

Definitions:

• Verification means to confirm eligibility requirements through the examination of documents or speaking to the representatives of authorized agencies.

• Documentation means to maintain physical evidence, which is obtained during the verification process, in participant files. Documentation is used as the basis to verify eligibility. When required, documentation is uploaded into the State System of Record when staff is completing the required application.

- Self – Attestation means a written, or electronic/digital declaration of information for a particular data element, signed and dated by the participant. This can be utilized to documenting eligibility and data validation.
    - May be used when document collection would delay or prevent a customer from enrollment in a program and moving ahead with services.
    - This would be participant generated, participant must use their own words to certify a statement.
    - Case progress note **must** document the circumstances that necessitated the use of the self-attestation including what action steps were taken to obtain primary sources of documentation.

• Self-Certification is a type of self-attestation and means an individuals' signed attestation that the information they submit to demonstrate eligibility for a program under Title I of WIOA is true and accurate. (utilized after all attempts to verify eligibility and as a last resort)

• Telephone/Electronic Verification is the verification of documentation through a telephone contact or email contact with a recognized governmental or social service agency. This form of verification is to be used as the last step prior to the use of self-certification.

• Document Inspection Verification is the verification of documentation through inspection of a document when the document can either not be copied or copying of the document is not possible.

Eligibility Determination

1. Eligibility Determination Prior to Program Enrollment. The WDB administers programs from multiple funding streams with varied eligibility requirements. Under all circumstances program eligibility must be verified by the appropriate staff prior to enrollment of a participant. Failure to do so may result in contractor disallowed costs.

   Eligibility to receive services under WIOA Title IV may only be determined by a qualified OVR Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. OVR Counselors work with customers to develop an Individual Plan for Employment, providing services necessary to meet their specific vocational goal. Examples of services include diagnostic assessment and evaluation, counseling and guidance, restoration, training and placement services. OVR often collaborates with other workforce program partners to provide services, outreach and assessment. Training for OVR staff is at the discretion of the local OVR District Administrator. OVR staff supervision and direction are the responsibility of the local OVR District Administrator.

2. Eligibility Documentation. Documentation required to determine eligibility is defined by the funding stream. If not defined by the funding stream or in cases where the funding stream is not clear the WDB will define the documentation requirement. Documentation requirements will be made available by the WDB to program operators as applicable to operator responsibilities.

3. Eligibility WDB Review. The WDB is the final arbitrator of eligibility verification. All WIOA Title I Adult/Dislocated Worker/Youth funding applications are reviewed and approved by WDB staff prior to program enrollment.

Self- Attestation

1. Allowable Use. Self-Attestation may be used for criteria elements including, but not limited to the following:
    a. Date of Birth
    b. Individual with a Disability
    c. Veteran Status
    d. Low Income Status at Program Entry
    e. WIOA Title I Adult
        i. Homeless
    f. WIOA Title I Dislocated Worker
        i. Date of Dislocation
        ii. Displaced Homemaker
        iii. Reemployment Opportunity is Poor/Unlikely to Return to Work
        iv. Permanently or Temporarily Laid Off as a Consequence of the Disaster
        v. Long-Term Unemployed (Disaster Grant DWG)
    g. WIOA Title I Youth
        i. English Language Learner
        ii. Homeless
        iii. In/Aged Out of Foster Care System
        iv. Offender
        v. Pregnant or Parenting
        vi. Requires Additional Assistance
        vii. Runaway
        viii. School Status at Time of Registration

2. Random Sampling. The use of self-certification will be monitored by the WDB. Review may include an interview with the case manager determining eligibility, a search for applicable documentation not already in the file, and an interview with the participant. Failure to properly use self-certification may result in contractor disallowed costs.

B. Facilitate the development of Career Pathways and co-enrollment, as appropriate, in core programs (specify on-ramps from adult education).

Program co-enrollment where permissible and practical will be supported through the active cultivation of a referral system among the one-stop Partners. The WDB, through the Training and Industry Partnership Committee and our educational partners, will develop relevant and family-sustaining Career Pathways tied to employer needs in key industries. The WDB's Access and Opportunities Committee and regular WDB staff technical assistance will ensure one-stop Partners:

- Familiarize themselves with the basic eligibility and participation requirements, as well as with the available services and benefits offered, for each of the Partners' programs represented in the PA CareerLink® Berks County,
- Develop materials summarizing their program requirements and making them available for Partners and customers,
- Develop and utilize intake, eligibility determination, assessment, and registration processes,

- Provide substantive referrals to customers who are eligible for supplemental and complementary services and benefits under partner programs,
- Regularly evaluate ways to improve the referral process, including the use of customer satisfaction surveys,
- Commit to robust and ongoing communication required for an effective referral process, and
- Commit to actively follow up on the results of referrals.

Reading Area Community College (RACC, Title II) and the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR, Title IV) are long standing partners of the PA CareerLink® Berks County and are represented on the WDB. The referral strategies discussed above will be applicable to these partner programs. The one-stop operator and partners will also develop and implement a strategic outreach plan to market all one-stop programs.

Reading Area Community College (RACC) is the Title II contractor with the PA Dept. of Education. RACC subcontracts with the Literacy Council of Reading-Berks (LCRB) for adult literacy services. The Executive Director of the LCRB is also a WDB member actively serving on the WDB's Access and Opportunities Committee. CASAS competency-based assessment is held the first and third Monday of the month and is a 3-hour assessment. Welcome Orientation is now able to directly refer to the CASAS competency-based assessment. The participants who are assessed through CASAS will then be referred to the Literacy Council's English as a Second Language Class at the PA CareerLink® office. This class will run two days a week (Tue & Thur.) for a total of five hours a week.

Currently, The LCRB's TABE Reading & Reading locator are held once a month on Thursdays and are open to partner referrals. The TABE Math & Math locator are held once a month on Fridays and are open to partner referrals. Career Services Team customers need only the Reading assessment for referral to training providers. EARN Team customers will need both the Reading and Math for referral for GED services.

The Literacy Council will hold a two-days a week, 2-hour a day (Mon. & Wed.) class at the PA CareerLink® office covering basic math and basic reading (ABE). This will be an open entry, open exit class. The target audience is young adults who do not assess at a level enabling them to enroll in our Young Adult program's GED class as well as adults from the general population. The curriculum will run on a 4-week rotation. The instruction will enable attendees to move on to a GED class or pass an employer's pre-employment assessment. Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes are not currently in session due to the pandemic. When ABE services are deemed appropriate for a young adult, a formal referral will be made to the Literacy Council to commence classes again.

The Berks County WDB has a long-standing reputation for successfully promoting ever-increasing connections between Title II and other local Workforce Development Programs. These collaborative efforts, often tied to proven Career Pathways, have been developed in conjunction with designated Berks WDB staff through teamwork with our one-stop Business Services Team, Title I and Title II staff, educators and local employers to determine high priority career opportunities in the Berks County Workforce Development Area. These connections help ensure that our Career Pathways are well-grounded in key local industry sectors (see Sections 1.2 and 2.1) and our local (and regional) high priority occupation (HPO) needs. Care is taken to identify "on ramps" for customers depending on their skills levels, training needs, etc. These pathways are then explained to the customers. A viable education and training plan is created, focusing on raising basic literacy skills, building employability skills, and developing sound study skills (in the case of a student pursuing post-secondary training).

C. Improve access to activities leading to a recognized postsecondary credential (industry-recognized certifications portable, and stackable certifications).

Utilizing Youth Reentry Grant funds successfully acquired in April 2023, the Berks WDB, Connections Work and the PA CareerLink® Berks County Young Adult Program services provider collaborated to create "Connect2Success", designed to implement an adaptive life-skill and academically-focused preparatory pathway enabling 18 to 24 year-old "justice-affected Individuals", who have been targeted for participation through referral, to co-enroll in and successfully complete a dual-track learning and personal improvement experience that will prepare them for entrance into needed educational attainment, paid work experience, occupational training or, if desired, enrollment in the rigorous 8-week schedule of the Connections Work R3 registered pre-apprenticeship program. A project element integral to the Connect2Success preparatory pathway is providing a conduit to connecting these affected young adults to a customized curriculum that incentivizes them to reverse a barrier that is most basic to employability-High School Equivalency. Through the academic methodology of the PA CareerLink® Berks County Young Adult program, Connect2Success participants can get the tools and tutelage necessary to acquire a high school equivalency credential along with professional mentoring in life skills enhancement. With grant funding due to expire in June 2025, the Berks WDB looks to reassess this collaboration in advance of additional continuing grant opportunities.

The Berks County WDB recognizes that pre-apprenticeship training and the Registered Apprentice (RA) "earn while you learn" model offers the best possible approach to entrance into attainable and retainable career pathways. The WDB has long considered the ideal tactic in support of such endeavors to be the targeted usage of WIOA Title I funds in a sequence of Individual Training Accounts (ITA) → On the Job Training (OJT) funds → Incumbent Worker Training (IWT) funds to stably connect the jobseeker and the employer. PA CareerLink® Berks County Employment Specialists can assist Adult/Dislocated Worker jobseekers in identifying registered apprenticeship opportunities by utilizing an individual service strategy tool to identify barriers and/or skills gaps, develop an Individualized Employment Plan (IEP) based on their assessment scores, and recommend the skills training necessary for entry into the individual's apprenticed employment of choice. Eligible program participants who opt to pursue entry as an apprentice into a High Priority Occupation (HPO), as designated in the HPO list for the Berks Workforce Development Area, will be provided access to ITA funds for this preparatory training. PA CareerLink® Berks County Job Developers and the BST can incentivize employers to recruit these ITA participants through OJT agreements that will offset wages during the initial period of onboarding, after which, once the required WIOA employment history is satisfied, IWT matching funds can be accessed by the employer for continuing RA related instruction.

One shining example of the WDC's advocacy for pre-apprentice/registered apprentice models has been its ongoing support for one-stop partner, Connection Work's, "Rebuilding Reentrants & Reading" (R3) registered pre-apprentice program. R3 Prep couples employment focused cognitive curriculum with an innovative, multi-faceted, and proven successful approach to opening career choice opportunities for young adults with a criminal history to further their life skills and acquire fundamental skills in construction trades that lead to sponsored apprenticeships offering lifelong gainful employment.

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation is the sole WIOA Title IV provider of programs under Title I of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. In that role, OVR staff provide technical assistance regarding the provision of disability related services to one-stop staff and partners. The vocational rehabilitation program is mandated to provide vocational rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities based on the program's authorizing statute. Eligible OVR customers receive multiple services from qualified Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors that may include but not be limited to; diagnostic, vocational counseling and

guidance, vocational evaluation, restoration, training, job placement and pre-employment training services for eligible and potentially eligible high school students with disabilities. OVR also provides multiple services to the business community designed to assist businesses with onboarding pre-screened qualified employees with disabilities.

Eligibility to receive services under WIOA Title IV may only be determined by a qualified OVR Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. Vocational rehabilitation counselors determine eligibility for and work with customers to develop an Individual Plan for Employment, providing services necessary to meet their specific vocational goal. As a core partner, OVR provides Vocational Rehabilitation services for people with disabilities. Eligible OVR customers receive multiple services that may include but not be limited to, diagnostic, vocational counseling and guidance, vocational evaluation, restoration, training, job placement and preemployment training services for eligible and potentially eligible high school students with disabilities. These individualized services are designed to prepare OVR customers to become qualified trained members of the workforce. OVR recognizes the value of customer access to various services and resources and encourages co-enrollment across programs as appropriate.

The WDB sets aside WIOA Title I funds for occupational and work-based training by funding stream. Additional Rapid Response training funds are available for dislocated workers – if exhausted, the WDB requests additional rapid response funds from the PA Department of Labor & Industry. The WDB will continue to search for alternative funding sources to supplement adult and youth training funds. Referrals of successful adult Title II completers will allow more deserving residents to take full advantage of Title I funded training programs in our area.

As described above (Section 1.4), since 2017 the WDB's active Training & Industry Partnership (T&IP) Committee has consistently promoted the best practice Registered Apprenticeship (RA) "earn and learn" workforce development model. Apprenticeship is designed to benefit the employer by meeting job skill requirements for development, advancement and retention of a qualified, highly competent workforce and the Berks County WDB remains committed to engaging with local employers in the development and sponsorship of new apprentice models and to sustain existing sponsorships.

In support of building a supportive local "ecosystem" for the registered apprenticeship model, the WDB also provides Title I Adult funding via a bi-annual competitive procurement process with awards going to community-based pre-apprenticeship programs in targeted industry sectors. Such programs are particularly useful for preparing adults and young adults with barriers to employment as they seek to pursue attractive career pathways. In December 2024, the WDB approved WIOA Title I funds for the competitive procurement of two contracts for results oriented, customer focused entities to develop "Career Building Workforce Training Opportunity Programs". Successful responders to this public Request for Proposals (RFP), will be expected to provide career building training opportunities in the following sectors that can include pre-apprenticeship programs for adults with barriers to employment in Berks County. Approved programs are expected to commence delivery in PY2025 and, following WDB assessment of outcomes, the WDB may exercise an option to continue funding for programs in the subsequent program year.

- Manufacturing
- Healthcare
- Construction
- Agriculture and Food Production

The Berks County WDB continuously reviews the monthly Pennsylvania Apprenticeship and Training Office (ATO) Approved Programs Reports regarding status of active programs and the opportunity for outreach

with support for local registered pre-apprentice/apprentice programs through our WIOA Title I Incumbent Worker Training/Registered Apprenticeship Related Technical Instruction matching funds strategy. The Berks County WDB will continue to collaborate with the Apprenticeship and Training Office (ATO) throughout this planning cycle to establish best practices and future action items to make pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship a valued and preferred solution in meeting recruitment and retention needs of Berks employers as well as promote and support entrance into these time-tested pathways by current and future career seekers, including disconnected youth and career-seekers with barriers to employment.

3.8 ITA Accounts – How will training services be provided using ITAs, fund programs of study, or through the use of contracts for training services that fund work-based trainings.

As stated in section 3.7, The WDB has long considered the ideal tactic in support of such career readiness endeavors to be the targeted usage of WIOA Title I funds in a sequence of Individual Training Accounts (ITA) → On the Job Training (OJT) funds → Incumbent Worker Training (IWT) funds to stably connect the jobseeker and the employer. A combined investment of WIOA Title I ITA, OJT, and Incumbent Worker Training (IWT) matching funds can be utilized to; 1) support Adult/Dislocated Worker jobseekers who enroll in WIOA services in their pre-apprenticeship preparation for entry into Registered Apprenticeship (RA) employment opportunities and; 2) incentivize employers to recruit and retain these apprentices throughout their progression to journeyperson status. WDB and/or PA CareerLink® Berks County staff advise the appropriate WDB committees on WIOA Title I ITA, OJT, CJT, IWT/RA funds expenditure and trainee outcomes during scheduled quarterly committee meetings. This information, in turn, is reported to the full board during its quarterly meeting.

It is the policy of the Berks County Workforce Development Board to concentrate its training resources on key industry sectors and on training which prepares people to enter high priority occupations and/or training which provides recognized and portable certifications or credentials for higher wage, higher skill jobs offering real opportunities for self-sufficiency. The Berks County WDB utilizes WIOA Title I Adult/Dislocated Worker funds to promote employer engagement in a hiring and retention strategy supported by our Work-Based Training Policy. The policy provides eligible employers/employees with financial subsidies for foundational skills development at entry-level through enhanced competencies skills training as incumbents and apprentices. Individual Training Accounts (ITA) can focus the jobseeker on the learning and credentials required for entry into a in demand career path.

Each new program year, the Berks County WDB effectively manages the Local Workforce Development Area responsibilities of the Commonwealth Workforce Development System (CWDS) **Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL)** applicant process by reviewing training submissions for adequate content description, alignment with the current Berks Workforce Development Area HPO List, and acceptable performance prior to approval. Training that has been approved by the WDB and other locals in the Commonwealth are posted on the ETPL and accessible to job seekers via the CWDS PA CareerLink® website. Training must be chosen from this list. Customers interested in occupational skills training must conduct market research (job availability after training, salary, etc.) prior to approval of training. Locally gathered data on the training provider and specific occupational skills training is also provided to customers.

The Berks County WDB ITA policy designates a maximum obligation of funds under any individual ITA shall be $6,000, which may be applied to those costs included in the “service cost details” section of the ETPL and the costs of obtaining certifications, permits, and licensures necessary to obtain and/or retain employment in the field for which training was conducted. In the event that testing is involved in the awarding of a certification, permit, or license, the cost of one “retest” may also be covered if the first

attempt was unsuccessful. The “retest” is also subject to the maximum limitation. All training must be completed within twelve months of the start of WIOA funding.

It is the policy of the Berks County Workforce Development Board to concentrate its training resources on key industry sectors and on training which prepares people to enter high priority occupations and/or which provides recognized and portable certifications or credentials for higher wage, higher skill jobs offering real opportunities for self-sufficiency. The cap is determined by a review of the cost/length of the most effective and utilized training available through training providers that provide services in the county.

Training programs that have been approved by the WDB and other locals in the Commonwealth are posted on the ETPL on PA CareerLink®. Training must be chosen from this list. Customers interested in occupational skills training must conduct market research (job availability after training, salary, etc.). prior to approval of training. Locally gathered data on the training provider and specific occupational skills training is also provided to customers. The aforementioned maximum obligation of funds cap is determined by a review of the cost/length of the most effective and utilized training available through training providers that provide services in the county.

Work-based training, including On-the-Job Training (OJT) and Transitional Employment (TE), has a maximum level tied to the maximum ITA level (currently $6,000). OJT and TE will be available to participants of the PA CareerLink® Berks County who are eligible under the Adult, Dislocated Worker, or Youth WIOA funding streams and the Employment, Retention and Advancement Network (EARN) Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. On-the-Job Training funds can assist the employer in rapidly on-boarding new-hires through intensive short term training plans that will lead the new hire to functionality in their new workplace environment.

The Berks County WDB utilizes WIOA Title I Adult/Dislocated Worker funds to promote employer engagement in a hiring and retention strategy supported by our Work-Based Training Policy. This policy provides eligible employers/employees with financial subsidies for foundational skills development at entry-level through enhanced competencies skills training as incumbent and apprentices. Individual Training Accounts (ITA) can focus the jobseeker on the learning and credentials required for entry into a in demand career path. On-the-job Training funds can assist the employer in rapidly on-boarding new-hires through intensive short terms training plans that will lead the new hire to functionality in their new workplace environment.

As noted in Sections 3.3 and 3.4, a combined investment of WIOA Title I ITA, OJT, IWT matching funds can be utilized to; 1) support Adult/Dislocated Worker jobseekers who enroll in WIOA services in their pre-apprenticeship preparation for entry into Registered Apprenticeship (RA) employment opportunities and 2) incentivize employers to recruit and retain these apprentices throughout their progression to journeyperson status. WDB and/or PA CareerLink® Berks County staff advise the appropriate WDB committees on WIOA Title I ITA, OJT, CJT, IWT/RA funds expenditure and trainee outcomes during scheduled quarterly meetings. This information, in turn, is reported to the full board during its quarterly meetings.

Following the adoption of a nine-month provisional policy in early 2023 and the recommendation of the WDB’s Training & Industry Partnership Committee, the Berks County WDB approved a new Customized Job Training (CJT) Policy at their regular public meeting in September 2023. Though no local employers have requested CJT funding under the policy to date, CJT remains an option for interested employers in our local WIOA training “toolkit”. This policy applies to all Berks County WIOA Title I Adult and Dislocated

Worker participants who will participate in a CJT. Companies who train cohorts of three or more new hires will be reimbursed at 50 percent of the cost of training. The maximum amount a company may receive is $5,000 per trained individual. Under specific circumstances, the Berks County WDB will consider an increase in the reimbursement rate (up to 75%) and funding cap. Requirements for employers participating in a CJT are outlined in this policy. PA CareerLink® Berks County WIOA Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker staff, Business Services, and Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) staff are responsible for implementing this policy.

CJT and OJT agreements will only be executed for full time positions. Full time is considered 30 hours per week or more.

Should Congress decide to reauthorize Trade Act funding in the years covered by this 4-year local WIOA plan, individuals whose training is paid with Trade Act funds will follow the wage and hour limits set by the PA Department of Labor and Industry. OJT for EARN has a maximum training length of 520 hours (OJT) while CJT and OJT funded through WIOA (or discretionary grants as permitted) have a maximum length of 6 months with a unit price equal to 50% to 75% based on employer size or participant skill gap. ITA, OJT, CJT, maximums are subject to extension provisions as detailed in the appropriate Berks WDB policy.

3.9 Coordination with adult education programs – How will the local board coordinate relevant secondary and postsecondary education programs and activities with workforce investment activities to support strategies, enhance services and avoid duplication of service(s).

As detailed in Sections 1.5 and 2.1 above, as the needs of our local employers continue to evolve, WDB staff work closely to support relevant training programs provided by our local secondary and postsecondary education institutions, and adult education partners. Over the past two years, this includes increasingly engaging with our six local colleges and universities in this collaborative work in the development of effective technical training programs tailored to the education and skills needs of regional employers in our priority industry sectors.

At the same time, the Berks County WDB most closely collaborates with our three local "Perkins Partners" - both local Career and Technical Centers (BCTC and RMCTC) and Reading Area Community College (RACC) to ensure that training programs align with industry needs and high priority occupations. In addition, the Berks County WDB COO serves on Executive Advisory Boards for both BCTC and RMCTC and reviews requests for state equipment grants, providing letters of support as appropriate. The Berks WDB COO also serves on annual Perkins review committees for all three schools.

With the U.S. Department of Education implementation of the Perkins V legislation now in place, the Berks County WDB continues to ensure that the CTC and RACC Career and Technology Education (CTE) programs are fully aligned with the WDB local plan priorities. This ongoing work began when the Berks County WDB participated in a joint planning meeting with our local Perkins V partners in October 2019. During this initial meeting, Berks County WDB staff, along with the chairman of the WDB Training & Industry Partnership Committee, shared important details of our industry sector and occupational priorities with the Perkins V Stakeholders Committees and reviewed how these relevant elements will be incorporated into BCTC, RMCTC and RACC comprehensive local needs assessments. To guarantee continued alignment and to assure compliance with Perkins V legislative requirements, the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) developed and led a process to concurrently analyze area needs and evaluate technical education programs for all three local institutions receiving Perkins V funding (see section 1.5) In January 2024, the Berks County WDB renewed its commitment with representation at RACC, BCTC and RMCTC meetings for the Perkins V 2023-2024 review of each institutions' programs and their continued alignment with the county's workforce development priorities. WDB staff meet individually as stipulated

under Perkins V requirements with appropriate BCTC, RMCTC and RACC representatives to review each institution's program Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) crosswalks to Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes and determine how their program focus can be enhanced, positioning them to better align with the Berks Workforce Development Area High Priority Occupation List (HPO) and the Pennsylvania In-Demand Occupations List (IDOL).

The Executive Director of Berks Career & Technology Center (BCTC) is a member of the WDB who serves on our WDB Training & Industry Partnership Committee. Additionally, the Reading Muhlenberg CTC's principal is an active no-Board member of our Youth Committee. Together, these two career and education leaders provide valuable insight into continuous improvement of WDB Work-Based Training and Young Adult program policies and discretionary job training/workplace experience grant considerations.

As described above in Section 1.4, the Berks County WDB has joined with our local economic and business-education partners to support and promote an innovative 2+2+2 pathway from technical high school to community college to 4-year institutions – The Berks Technical Academy. Through the Technical Academy, RACC reaches back to our County's two high school career and technical centers - Berks Career and Technology Center (BCTC) and Reading Muhlenberg Career and Technology Center (RMCTC) - to build comprehensive Technical Academy career pathways and the associated articulation agreements for high school CTE students to earn college credit for high-end technical coursework. In effect, the Technical Academy serves as an honors program for qualified CTC students, allowing talented students to acquire up to 27 college credits at no cost prior to high school graduation. Such focused and talented students are highly sought after by local employers for paid internships during the school year, while on summer break and again upon high school graduation. Once hired, Technical Academy graduates may receive financial support from their employers while they complete their Associate's degree programs at RACC. RACC has been particularly effective in assisting qualifying students to access federal Pell grants to cover tuition costs. If the students wish to continue their technical training and education beyond RACC, they may do so at aligned 4-year institutions (e.g. Penn State – Berks) through additional articulation agreements that are part of the Technical Academy pathway.

Clearly, the WDB's long-standing commitment to supporting our local CTE partners has led to ever-increasing growth opportunities for students, families, and employers alike. More recently, our comprehensive support of our K-12 schools in Berks County has expanded to include helping educators build greater focus on Career Pathway exploration in key industry sectors such as manufacturing, healthcare, and construction. For example, our local school districts have leveraged the WDB's labor market expertise in developing and implementing their career education and work preparation (Section 339) plans.

As detailed above (see Section 1.3), Berks County's economic prosperity is threatened by relatively low levels of adult literacy and especially numeracy that lag the Commonwealth as a whole and which prevent many adult customers from taking advantage of quality training programs leading to family-sustaining careers. However, we are fortunate to have great partners in addressing this challenge.

RACC is the Commonwealth's local WIOA Title II Adult Educational and Literacy program contractor for the Berks County and is an active partner in the PA CareerLink® Berks County. All partners including our Title I program providers refer adult customers in need of education and literacy support to RACC. The system for such referrals is reviewed at quarterly partner meetings of the PA CareerLink® Berks County. Further reflecting the primary importance of coordinating WIOA Title I and Title II program services and strategies to avoid duplication and maximize our limited local resources, RACC's Director of Literacy

Programs (who leads RACC's Title II program services) was appointed to the WDB where she serves on the WDB's Access and Opportunities Committee. The Executive Director of RACC's key Title II sub-contractor, the Literacy Council of Reading-Berks also is a member of the Berks County WDB serving on the Access and Opportunities Committee. He also is a former President of the Pennsylvania Association for Continuing Education (PAACE) and is recognized as a statewide expert on adult education and literacy and how to coordinate Title I and Title II programs. Accordingly, the WDB's Access and Opportunities Committee is well-positioned to help us coordinate local Title I and Title II services and strategies with all PA CareerLink® Berks County partners.

The Berks WDB also works closely with the Berks County Intermediate Unit (BCIU) which coordinates additional educational services for Berks County's eighteen public school services within Berks County and is also represented on the Berks County WD Board's Youth Committee. The Berks Business Education Coalition (BBEC) is chaired by a local business leader and the BBEC's membership includes the County's six colleges and the eighteen public school districts as well as business leaders. The BBEC is an active partner with the Berks County WD Board on programs to facilitate employer-educator collaboration and to provide local students with valuable work-based learning opportunities throughout the County.

Both the BCIU and the BBEC partner with the Berks County WDB and our 18 local school districts to promote career awareness and preparation programs with a focus on equitable access for all 70,000 K-12 students regardless of which school district their families might reside in. The Berks WDB, BCIU and BBEC together champion the Career Ready Berks (CRB) alliance to promote and sustain wide-scale cooperation between educators, business partners, and workforce and economic development. The strategy of the CRB alliance is not to dictate a "one-size-fits-all" county-wide career pathways model but, rather, to offer well-researched recommendations and supports to enhance and expand K-12 career education. Through an innovative and well-strategized model of oversight, the CRB alliance brings diverse stakeholders and their collective expertise to the table to coordinate the development and delivery of distinct but complementary career exploration activities under one universal "enterprise umbrella."

The Berks County WDB has encouraged and supports our CTE's pursuit of registered status for HPO related pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs and related instruction curricula as a viable means to promote these pathways and connect employers and career-seekers. The Berks County WDB will continue to collaborate with the Apprenticeship and Training Office (ATO) during the next planning cycle to establish best practices and future WDB/CRB/CTE action items to advance pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship a valued and preferred strategy in meeting recruitment and retention needs of Berks employers as well as promote and support entrance into these pathways by current and future career seekers, including disconnected youth and career-seekers with barriers to employment

Finally, the Berks County WDB maintains a close working relationship with the Higher Education Council of Berks County (HECBC) whose membership includes the presidents of the County's six non-profit and public institutions for higher education. The HECBC also serves as the nominating entity for education sector representatives appointed the WDB. The Berks WDB COO serves on the Kutztown University Business Advisory Council where he provides timely and practical guidance on programs and local labor market information (LMI).

4. OPERATIONAL PLANNING: Local Area Workforce System

4.1 *Business and Employer Engagement – What strategies will be implemented in the local area to improve business and employer engagement that:*

A. Support a local area workforce development system that meets the needs of business in the local area

The Berks WDB believes that recruiting and retaining the right local business leaders to serve on the WDB and WDB committees is the most important factor in sustaining the engagement of employers, including small employers and employers in in-demand sectors or who employ workers in high priority occupations. This strategy is reflected in the diversity and positive contributions of the WDBs twelve business sector representatives. The WDB's seven manufacturing employer representatives on the Board range from a Training and Development Director with the County's largest employer of over 7,500 local employees to the HR manager of a much smaller local establishment employing less than 30 full-time employees. The urgent and specific needs of our steadily growing Construction sector are represented by the owner of one of the County's premier mechanical contractors, who sponsors a vibrant registered apprenticeship (RA) program, as well as by two experienced joint labor-management registered apprenticeship leaders for the IBEW Local 743 and for the Sheet Metal Workers Local 19. Leadership from the County's two hospital system and other healthcare executives are engaged with the WDB through our new Healthcare Industry Partnership (IP) helping us understand and respond to the region's rapidly changing healthcare delivery system. The Human Resources Manager for Berks Heim, the County owned and operated assisted living facility, a longstanding member of the Pennsylvania Workforce Development Board (PA WDB), is also an active non-Board member on the WDB's Training & Industry Partnership Committee. With the WDB's continued interest in the Agriculture/Food Production and Transportation & Logistics sectors, members with specialized experience in these areas serve on the WDB as well. Other key business sectors represented on the Berks WDB include Financial Services and Business & Professional Services. As detailed in our local Chief Elected Official's (CEO's) WDB member nomination policy, the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) serves as the business nominating entity for the Berks WDB and has been instrumental in identifying and recruiting an excellent cross-section of business representation on the WDB.

The Berks County WDB continues to be instrumental in assisting local eligible employers engage with Reading Area Community College (RACC) and Kutztown University's Small Business Development Center (KU SBDC), as the PA Department of Community & Economic Development's local Workforce and Economic Development Network of Pennsylvania (WEDnetPA) partners, to access WEDnetPA reimbursement funding for qualifying higher-technology new and incumbent worker training needs.

In response to broader skills gaps across industry sectors, the Berks County Workforce Development Board contracted with Educational Data Systems, Inc. (EDSI) to conduct a comprehensive study of current employer recruitment, retention, development, satisfaction and engagement best practices in the Greater Reading and Berks County area, as described in Section 2.1. The focus of this initiative was to better understand local employer best practices in response to ongoing talent challenges with an emphasis on identifying successful employer strategies leading to lower turnover, higher employee satisfaction, and improved talent development. More than 150 employers in the region participated in the study. Respondents completed a Talent Assessment, rating themselves on five key talent metrics: employee retention, employee development, employee attraction, talent and culture, and overall talent strategies. After completing the assessment, employers were invited to participate in focus groups to discuss specific best practices. The final study with actionable recommendations, published in late 2020, continues to guide our PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST) engagements with local employers. The BST continued these engagements with local employers through Program Year 2023, providing

informed advice and assistance in how to build on the customers' employment best practice areas of strengths and to help in areas where improvement may be needed.

The Berks County WDB utilizes WIOA Title I Adult/Dislocated Worker funds to promote employer engagement in a hiring and retention strategy supported by our Work-Based Training policy. The policy provides eligible employers/employees with financial subsidies for foundational skills development at entry-level through enhanced competencies skills training as incumbents and apprentices. Individual Training Accounts (ITA) can focus the jobseeker on the learning and credentials required for entry into an in-demand career path. On-the-Job Training (OJT) funds can assist the employer in rapidly on-boarding new-hires through intensive short term training plans that will lead the new hire to functionality in their new workplace environment. WIOA guidelines for each level of subsidy are followed and monitored. The ITA → OJT → WIOA Required 6 Month Employment History → IWT (Incumbent Worker upskilling and/or Registered Apprenticeship) progression shows the most advantageous employer process for the utilization of these funds for an optimal entry-level through incumbent employee retention/ layoff aversion strategy. The following tables provide examples of targeted IWT/RA training considered eligible for IWT/RA matching funds. In addition to supporting the employer/employee needs, these funds also provide wider support to CTC, RACC and other educational provider programs through the opportunity for analysis and customization, design/development, and delivery of these programs on a local basis. As noted in Sections 3.7 and 3.8, a combined investment of WIOA Title I ITA, OJT, and IWT matching funds can be utilized to; 1) support Adult/Dislocated Worker jobseekers who enroll in WIOA services in their pre-apprenticeship preparation for entry into RA employment opportunities and; 2) incentivize employers to recruit and retain these apprentices throughout their progression to journeyperson status.

The following training activities are eligible for IWT subsidy based on expressed employer need. Training resulting in industry recognized credentials will receive priority consideration.

IWT Consortia Eligible Training (specific but not limited to)	Sample Eligible Job Titles for Career Pathway IWT Upskilling
Industrial Maintenance/Mechatronics: Hydraulics, Pneumatics, Motor Controls, PLCs, Electrical Circuits, Mechanical Drives, Robotics, Refrigeration Systems, Maintenance Master Certification	Industrial Engineering Technicians Supervisors-Mechanics, Installers & Repairers Industrial Machinery Mechanics Maintenance Workers, Machinery Maintenance & Repair Workers, General
CNC Machine Operation: Milling, Turning, Lathe, Grinding, Engineering Graphics, CAD/CAM, CNC Programming, Electrical Discharge Machining Technician, 3D Printing Welding Technology/Metal Fabrication Commercial Driver License Training	Supervisors-Production & Operating Workers Computer-Controlled Machine Tool Operators, Metal & Plastic Computer Numerically Controlled Machine Tool Programmers, Metal & Plastic Machinists Welders, Cutters, Solderers & Brazers Heavy & Tractor Trailer Truck Drivers (ancillary)
Basic Health, Home & Personal Care Skills Training, Medical Terminology & Anatomy, Nurse Aide & Phlebotomist Pre-clinical Training, Practical Nursing	Home Health/Personal Care Aide Nursing Assistants Medical Assistants Phlebotomists LPN/LVN

Quality Systems: Global Standards for Plastics Certification, Lean Tools Workshop Series, Lean Master Certification, Lean Six Sigma Green Belt & Black Belt, Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) Certification	**Supervisors - Production & Operating Workers Assemblers/Machine Setters/Oprs/Tenders Food Batchmakers/Butchers/Meat Cutters Inspectors, Testers, Sorters, Samplers & Weighers**
Construction Trades Related Training: Carpentry, Cement/Concrete/Masonry, Electrical, Heavy Equipment Operation (CDL), HVACR, Plumbing	**Supervisors - Construction Trades & Extraction Workers Carpenters Construction Laborers Operating Engineers & Other Construction Equipment Operators Electricians Plumbers, Pipefitters & Steamfitters Heating, A/C & Refrigeration Mechanics & Installers**

The following industry sectors and sample High Priority Occupations are eligible for Registered Apprenticeship related instruction grant subsidy to Berks County Employers.

Eligible Industry Sector	Sample Eligible Registered Apprenticeship Occupations
Construction	**Carpenter Apprentice Electrician Apprentice Heating, A/C & Refrigeration Mechanic & Installer Apprentice Operating Engineer/Construction Equipment Operator Apprentice Construction & Maintenance Apprentice Plumber, Pipefitter & Steamfitter Apprentice Sheet Metal Worker Apprentice**
Healthcare	**Dental Hygienist Apprentice Dental Assistant Apprentice EMT & Paramedic Apprentice Medical Records Specialist & Tech Apprentice Medical/Clinical Laboratory Technician Apprentice Physical Therapist Apprentice Pharmacy Technician Apprentice CNA, LPN & RA Apprenticeships**
Manufacturing	**Computer-Controlled Machine Tool Operator Apprentice Computer Numerically Controlled Machine Tool Programmer Apprentice Electro-Mechanical Technician Apprentice Industrial Machinery Mechanic Apprentice Machinist Apprentice Welders, Cutters, Solderers & Brazers Apprentice Water/Wastewater Treatment Plant/System Apprentice**
Logistics & Transportation (as ancillary to the above)	**Heavy & Tractor-Trailer Truck Driver Apprentice Industrial Truck & Tractor Operator Apprentice Mechanic & Diesel Engine Specialist Apprentice**

Information Technology **(as ancillary to the above)**	**Computer Systems Analyst Apprentice** **Computer User Support Specialist Apprentice** **Computer Network Support Specialist Apprentice** **Software Developer Apprentice** **Web Developer Apprentice**

In an ongoing effort to continuously improve the services which support the evolving workforce needs of local employers, in December 2022 the WDB approved a "provisional" Customized Job Training (CJT) policy for calendar year 2023 with training reimbursements to be offered for local employers who plan to concurrently hire three or more enrolled local Title I adult or dislocated workers with similar training needs upon hire into similar positions leading to high priority occupations (HPOs). This provisional CJT policy was modeled on a best practice from a larger metropolitan workforce development area in the Commonwealth and, acting on the WDB Training & Industry Partnership Committee recommendation, was formerly adopted as a permanent WDB policy by the full board on September 15, 2023.

B. Manage activities or services that will be implemented to improve business engagement;

Over the years and across the business cycle, the PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST) has established a reputation as a trusted partner with local employers. The region's growing shortage of qualified candidates for critical and "opportunity" occupations is especially acute and local employers need help. Many local employers across industries continue to adapt to a structural shortage of candidates with the skills and experience to fill open positions at all levels. The Berks County WDB plays a unique role in the ongoing development, sharing, and implementation of long-term solutions through our Business Services Team (BST) and local partners.

In order to avoid "employer fatigue" from multiple outreach activities, the PA CareerLink® Berks County and Berks County WDB formed an Employer Outreach Team (EOT) that meets regularly to share information, coordinate employer outreach, maximize available resources, and tailor responses to the specific needs of individual employers. This team, co-managed by the BST Director of Services and the WDB's Manager for Planning & Partnership Development, is comprised of individuals from Business Services, EARN, Young Adult, OVR, Job Corps, Local Veterans Employment Representative, and Connections Work, who come together, at a minimum, quarterly or at special request of a team member, and independently with relevant interagency members to discuss and share business/employer intelligence and better understanding of employment barriers. The goals of the team are to ensure employers receive a consistent message from the team members, that employer visits are coordinated to maximize outreach efforts, diminish employer program fatigue, and facilitate job seeker placements through the sharing of hiring information. Close interagency collaborative working relationships have developed among local EOT partners, resulting in more frequent, inclusive communication and coordination of the provision of the most relevant and appropriate recruitment and retention solutions that are necessary for addressing the individual needs of our Berks-based employers.

As a core partner, OVR participates in Employer engagement and provides multiple services to the business community designed to assist businesses with onboarding pre-screened qualified employees with disabilities. OVR on-boarding supports for a qualified new hire can include reasonable accommodation consultation, On the Job Training (OJT) wage reimbursement, referral on tax credits or deductions. OVR also works with businesses through connecting students involved in OVR's pre-employment transition services. Services under pre-employment transition services include programs like paid work experiences, job shadowing, workplace tours. OVR also offers no-cost consultation on the

Americans with Disability Act (ADA), accessibility standards and helping a business to retain current employees following an incident, injury or disability. Statewide business services staff can identify resources to assist any organization on how to improve access compliance and steps to diversify their workforce to include citizens with a disability.

The Berks County WDB continuously reviews the monthly Pennsylvania Apprenticeship and Training Office (ATO) Approved Programs Reports regarding status of active programs and the opportunity for outreach with support for local registered pre-apprentice/apprenticeship programs through our WIOA Title I Incumbent Worker Training/Registered Apprenticeship Related Technical Instruction matching funds strategy. Additionally, a WDB staff member regularly attends ApprenticeshipPHL and other regional meetings to offer and receive possible sponsored pre-apprenticeship/apprenticeship program information accessible to Berks County employers. As described in Section 1.4.D, The Berks County WDB has allocated WIOA Title I funds to subsidize costs of registered apprenticeship related technical instruction for eligible priority industry-sector sponsoring employers.

Rapid Response is also another important avenue of business engagement here in Berks County. See a detailed description of our Rapid Response team and its effective in serving employers and displaced workers in Section 4.7 below.

The Berks County WDB utilizes WIOA Title I Adult/Dislocated Worker funds to promote employer engagement in a hiring and retention strategy supported by our Work-Based Training Policy. The policy provides eligible employers/employees with financial subsidies for foundational skills development at entry-level through enhanced competencies skills training as incumbents and apprentices.

Throughout this multi-year plan's implementation, a key emphasis of the Berks WDB will continue to be placed on assisting local employers with good jobs in key industries further develop the skills of their incumbent workers. To sustain longer-term incumbent worker upskilling plans, the Berks WDB has implemented a pro-active Employment Retention/Layoff Aversion Strategy to support local employers and incumbent workers in our top priority advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and construction sectors (see Section 1.4). In ongoing support of this strategy, the Berks WDB annually allocates a budget drawn from its WIOA Title I Adult Worker funding to be used solely for the purpose of incumbent worker training (IWT)/registered apprentice (RA) related technical instruction. Based on the utilization of these funds in the prior program year, the WDB Training & Industry Partnership Committee submits a recommendation to the full board for the upcoming program year's IWT/RA allocation as a company matching subsidy to expand high quality incumbent worker training in support of the Berks County manufacturing, healthcare, and construction employer base. The Training & Industry Partnership Committee annually reviews and establishes appropriate criteria for the reimbursement of employer training costs and eligible training is restricted to criteria validated by expressed industry needs that includes incumbent worker upskilling and registered apprenticeship related instruction.

This focus on incumbent worker training (IWT) will be especially attractive to small and medium-size employers with similar needs and scarce training resources. The strategy will help proven, trained incumbents develop and grow with the companies and allow the hiring of less-skilled new hires into these attractive career pathways. Many of these new hires will need assistance from other WDB-sponsored programs (e.g. OJTs) in order to take advantage of these proven career opportunities.

The Berks County WDB has continuously employed the experience and expertise of the Training & Industry Partnership Committee to frame a pre-apprenticeship statement that was added to our Work-Based Training Policy, effective September 2021, and used to promote and support greater business-education

engagement in the development, implementation, and utilization of pre-apprenticeship models. These models may include condensed versions of existing CTE and/or post-secondary curricula, already being utilized as related instruction programs for established apprenticeships, to attract young adults/adults for entry into in-demand apprenticed occupations in our WDB approved priority industry sectors or new innovative community-based models targeted to populations with barriers. In December 2024, the WDB approved WIOA Title I funds for the competitive procurement of two one-year contracts for results oriented, customer focused entities to develop "Career Building Workforce Training Opportunity Programs". Successful responders to this public Request for Proposals (RFP), will be expected to provide career building training opportunities in the following sectors that can include pre-apprenticeship programs for adults with barriers to employment in Berks County. Approved programs are expected to commence delivery in PY2025 and, following WDB assessment of outcomes, the WDB may exercise its option to extend successful programs into the subsequent program year.

- Manufacturing
- Healthcare
- Construction
- Agriculture and Food Production

As one example of this commitment, the WDB continues to endorse our Connections Work partners in their pursuit of PA Smart Grant and other grant renewal opportunities for their best practice "Rebuilding Re-entrants & Reading (R3)" pre-apprenticeship construction trades program. The Berks WDB will ensure identified local staff meet with the local ATO representative at least annually to review current Registered Apprenticeships in the local area.

Fortunately, for our local employers, the PA CareerLink® Berks County "one-stop" staff increasingly and effectively utilize social media platforms. For example, local one-stop staff utilize social media platforms to perform additional outreach to the community regarding one-stop services, openings with regional employers, and training opportunities with eligible providers. These forums are an excellent means of connecting with individuals that have not been previously with one-stop services as well as reconnecting with those that have not participated in services for an extended period. The strongest of these platforms has proven to be Facebook, as evidenced by the PA CareerLink® Berks County page's current following of 11,700 profiles.

C. Better coordinate regional workforce and economic development strategy, messaging, engagement and programs

The Berks County WDB has a proven track record of coordinating workforce development programs with regional economic development partners. The Berks County WDB has maintained an especially close and successful relationship with the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA). Since PY2018, at the WDB's recommendation, GRCA has acted as the convener of the Greater Berks Advanced Manufacturing Industry Partnership (IP). The fundamental goal of the IP model is business-owner-centric, allowing business owners to be at the very core of the discussion on what their needs will be, and creating actionable ways to present solutions, championed by the businesses themselves. Through this process, employers identify needs that may not be on the community's current radar, and longstanding, recurring issues can be addressed with new perspective and creative problem solving. The Berks County WDB determined that the most effective way to accomplish these goals with one voice is to house the model under the auspices of Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA). The Berks County WDB's ongoing guidance, support of, and involvement in this Greater Berks Advanced Manufacturing IP reflects its confidence that GRCA is uniquely positioned and staffed to build capacity and strengthen the partnership's ultimate reach.

As the benefits of this movement to an Industry Partnership (IP) model have become even more evident statewide over time, the Berks WDB continues to explore additional opportunities for similar IP development in its other priority industry sectors. In November 2022, the Berks County WDB, acting as lead applicant, submitted a proposal for a Pennsylvania Nursing Pathway Apprenticeship Industry Partnership Grant. On February 22, 2023, the WDB was informed by the Apprenticeship and Training Office (ATO) that our proposal was successful for an award of $176,155.01 in grant funds (April 1, 2023, through June 30, 2026). Beginning in April 2023, the WDB enlisted GRCA to act as convener in launching a new Greater Reading Healthcare Connections Industry Partnership (IP) whose focus is to create strategies for employers to develop career pathways, industry credentials and articulation to education partners.

Launched in June 2023, the GRCA, sub-contracted as the Healthcare IP convener, has been working with the two major Berks hospitals, three local colleges, Berks County's two Career & Technology Centers, the Reading Hospital School of Health Sciences, and the Berks Latino Workforce Development Corporation (BLWDC -a.k.a. Tec Centro Berks) which provides healthcare training programs, and multiple independent healthcare support employers. The IP's initial focus is to promote information and updates about local Healthcare educational programs and to promote this information through GRCA's new Healthcare IP webpage and Healthcare IP newsletter. Recently GRCA has added all local healthcare educational programs to their Healthcare IP web page so this information can be easily found in one place. Additionally, the WDB has authorized the allocation of WIOA Adult Title I funds to be leveraged to subsidize eligible IP member training opportunities that are identified through the regularly scheduled IP discussions.

The Berks County WDB has a well-established and ongoing best practice of working closely with our education and strategic human capital development partners to recognize the needs of local employers (see sections 1.2 through 1.4) as a first step leading to effective collaboration with these partners on the planning and delivery of multiple events and initiatives to further and more completely understand those needs. Such Business/Education community events include the annual Berks Manufacturing Summit and the annual "What's So Cool About Manufacturing?" video contest for middle school students, now in its eighth year in Berks County, which has consistently attracted one of the largest audience responses of any of the regional contests statewide.

The Berks Manufacturing Summit is held annually and is designed to celebrate the region's robust manufacturing footprint by providing information on industry trends and peer to peer conversation. The summit is organized by the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA), through the Greater Reading Advanced Manufacturing Industry Partnership, and with partnership support from the Berks County WDB, Reading Area Community College (RACC), Manufacturers Resource Center (MRC), the Ben Franklin Technology Partnership (BFTP) of Northeastern PA, and Penn State University-Berks. Manufacturing business leaders are provided an interactive forum to share insights, concerns, and recommendations for practical solutions to varied workforce and commerce issues, both current and future, impacting the sector's continued sustainability and growth in the Greater Berks County region.

Through continuous pursuit, acquisition, and utilization of PA DOL&I Business Education Partnership Grants, the Berks County WDB partners with and financially subsidizes funding for:

- The Manufacturers Resource Center (MRC) to support the successful Berks/Schuylkill regional annual "What's So Cool About Manufacturing?" video contest. The annual contest has grown to include twenty-one out of twenty-four Berks County middle schools and has become the largest contest in terms of participation of all statewide regional contests. This career awareness program

is designed in collaboration with employers and educators to help improve the image of manufacturing as a career choice and to recruit more young people to vocational and technical schools and community colleges that feed talent to the manufacturing industry. Student-produced short videos profile local companies and the career opportunities that they offer. These videos are then judged by an expert panel and online public voting to determine the best in multiple categories followed by an awards ceremony, attended by students, parents, and the business-education community, to recognize and celebrate each student team's achievement.

- Also under project management of the MRC, The PA Dream Team Berks County program introduces 5-12 grade students to the value of technical training and STEM education, and to the many career opportunities available in modern manufacturing. PA Dream Team is comprised of young adult professionals in STEM careers at area manufacturers who are trained to tell their personal career stories in the classroom and other venues throughout the school year, to educate and excite students about manufacturing careers and the STEM curriculum and technical education opportunities available. Currently, twenty young professional volunteers make up the team and MRC is actively recruiting new members from Berks County manufacturing employers with the intent of growing team membership to thirty in order to accommodate increasing requests from Berks school districts for this highly regarded business/education activity.
- The Berks (BCTC) and Reading-Muhlenberg (RMCTC) Career & Technology Centers to deliver Career Exploration Camps. At the conclusion of the 6th, 7th or 8th grades, students will have the opportunity to participate in a week-long Career Exploration Camp to take place at the career and technology center serving the students' sending school district – BCTC or RMCTC. Each camp is a five-day program, offered after the school year ends in June, designed to engage youth in pathways through career specific hands-on activities and projects with a goal of generating interest among this group to attend the career and technology center. As defined by the PA Department of Education (PDE) and in alignment with the WDB's priority industry sector strategy, Engineering/Industrial Technology and Health/Science/Agriculture Career Cluster pathways, including crossovers to Computer Systems/Information Technology, are considered primary clusters providing STEM related career advancement and will be the priority focal points of the camps.

Through participation in the annual summer *Inside Berks Business (IBB*) educator professional development program, the Berks County WDB supports the Berks County Intermediate Unit (BCIU) and the Berks Business Education Coalition (BBEC)to provide an innovative approach to the coordination and expansion of experiential programs designed to increase Berks County K-12 educator exposure to diverse experiential opportunities in the greater Berks County region for career role in the workplace awareness during a summer five-day format. These experiences serve as a perception-building exercise that will provide educator participants a better understanding of how career-related curriculum development can positively impact the fundamental student knowledge, skills, and abilities that employers consider essential for gaining successful employment. The Berks County WDB will continue to assist BCIU and the BBEC with current labor market information, other career planning resources, and support of an innovative web-based matching platform to help connect local businesses interested in providing a broad range of career development opportunities for teachers, students, and parents/guardians within our 18 local school districts as well as private schools in the area.

D. Strengthen linkages between the PA CareerLink® service delivery system and unemployment insurance (UI) programs.

The local area complies with the Commonwealth's Register for Work and Work Search law by helping unemployed individuals register on the PA CareerLink® system. The resource room computers are available for Unemployment Compensation (UC) Claimants to access the state UC website. Additionally, individuals who are likely to exhaust their benefits are identified by the State through the Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) program. These individuals are directed to come to the PA CareerLink® Berks County for job search assistance.

At the PA CareerLink® Berks County, customers (including UC Claimants) are provided with an orientation of services and are given an initial assessment to determine their specific workforce needs. Based on their unique circumstances, they may be referred to additional services and resources, such as job search workshops, staff-assisted job search activities, partner programs, supportive services, and/or training activities to help them secure a new job or begin a new career. Any potential UC eligibility issues identified during RESEA, or any other UC Claimant interaction are referred to the State's Unemployment Insurance department for resolution.

Unemployment Compensation (UC) representatives are currently deployed in all the PA CareerLink® comprehensive centers. Customers and/or claimants may call a designated number to schedule an appointment with an unemployment compensations agent either in person or on occasion virtually. In the event UC staff are not present, claimants can use the PA CareerLink® Career Resource Center (CRC) to connect with the unemployment compensation filling system. For those UC Claimants looking to file an appeal, forms are provided and submitted via fax at no charge and with limited wait. Staff can provide copies of the confirmation printout for all faxes sent on behalf of the claimants. A kiosk system is being deployed throughout the commonwealth to assist with ID.me connectivity issues some claimants have encountered. The kiosk will assist identification verification in order for the claimant to have full access to their unemployment compensation claim dashboard on the state website.

Moreover, the UC Workforce Development Representative conducts several seminars throughout the year at the PA CareerLink® Berks County for employers to learn more about UC Programs. Typical seminars include UC 101; Separation Issues; UC Appeals and Hearings; Suitable Work; Relief from Charges. A best practice of receiving preapproval from the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) for HR recertification credits is also in place. In addition, a variety of printable resources such as UC postings, signs, pamphlets, handbooks and forms are provided for both Claimants and Employers.

The WDB will continue to work with the Commonwealth to ensure our mutual UC customers receive meaningful access to this required one-stop partner.

4.2 <u>Promotion and Coordination of Entrepreneurial Skills and Microenterprise</u> – How will the local board coordinate local area workforce investment activities with regional economic development activities that are specific to a local area? How will the local board promote entrepreneurial skills training and microenterprise services?

Since 2016, the Berks County WDB has been an active participant in the Southeast PA Partners for Regional Economic Performance (PREP), working with and often leading on regional economic development opportunities that support the local occupations on the High Priority Occupation list. As a result of this collaboration, the region coordinates workforce services with our economic development partners through the regular Southeast regional PREP meetings as well as in special initiatives. For example, the region's Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) present their services in information session with

the areas Industry Partnerships. Reflecting the Berks County WDB's strong collaboration with the statewide SBDC network, in May 2024, the Berks County WDB's Chief Operating Officer was invited to organize and facilitate a successful panel discussion on *Unleashing the Power of Advanced Manufacturing to Drive Regional Prosperity* at the Pennsylvania SBDC Conference held at Kutztown University.

The promotion of entrepreneurial skills and microenterprise are a regional undertaking across our Southeastern PA plannings regions. For example, the Delaware Valley Industrial Resource Center (DVIRC) and Manufacturing Resource Center (MRC) are critical partners in supporting the diversification of employers' manufacturing production and succession planning. These partnerships with economic development agencies provide a broader set of services to employers across the region. The six local workforce development boards comprising the SE PA planning region include Berks, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia will continue to emphasize and respond to the demands of regional employers. To implement and sustain this regional planning and collaboration, the six local WDB directors will continue to meet monthly and convene with their WDB Chairpersons at least annually. These meetings will focus on improving the services to employers, industry clusters and skills sets necessary and in demand to complement and support local county-based efforts.

The two Ben Franklin Technology Partnerships (BFTPs) serving Southeastern PA, with funding from the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED), are also important partners who bring a core competency of promoting entrepreneurial skills across the region. In Berks County, this collaboration is especially close in our high priority manufacturing sector where our regional BFTP of Northeastern PA, headquartered in nearby Bethlehem, PA is a fully engaged partner in our Greater Reading Advanced Manufacturing Industry Partnership (IP) while also serving on the planning committee for our annual Berks County Manufacturing Summit for local employers held each October (Manufacturing Month).

As stated in section 4.1, the Berks County WDB has been and continues to be instrumental in assisting local eligible employers engage with Reading Area Community College (RACC) and Kutztown University's Small Business Development Center (KU SBDC), as the PA Department of Community & Economic Development's local Workforce and Economic Development Network of Pennsylvania (WEDnetPA) partners, to access WEDnetPA reimbursement funding for qualifying higher-technology new and incumbent worker training needs.

The Board has also built partnerships with local economic development organizations/groups (discussed in section 3.1) to better coordinate ongoing economic development and workforce activities. Berks Community Action Program (BCAP) is a required partner of the PA CareerLink® Berks County providing programs to the local community in need. For example, the PA CareerLink® Business Services Team (BST) members and economic development staff at the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) work closely at the regional level to discuss employer expansion plans, new business markets, and equipment purchase options that support growth. These informal discussions between the BST and GRCA have proven quite fruitful and will move to include regular quarterly information sharing meetings in 2025. The BST performance goals (see section 4.3), instituted contractually each program year beginning in PY2022 for the full term of the multi-year service provider agreement, include overall Market Penetration and Manufacturing Sector-specific Market Penetration and recruitment/retention intelligence gathering through employer follow-up to the Employer Best Practices survey, serve to support our regional workforce development efforts.

As described in Section 1.4, the Berks County WDB joins with the five other local WDBs in Southeast Pennsylvania and with the major economic development partners in our six-county region in the SE PA Partnership for Regional Economic Performance (PREP) collaboration with annual grant funding provided

to the region by the PA Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED). These funds primarily support the regional SE PA PREP Engage! Business calling program. While the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) receives Berks County's share of these funds to conduct a consistently successful Engage! business calling program, the Berks WDB supports this important employer outreach through active participation in monthly SE PA PREP calls and by making referrals between GRCA's Engage! staff and local employer customers.

Entrepreneurial skills training and microenterprise services should provide the basics of starting and operating a small business. Some examples of such skill development include, but are not limited to, the following abilities:

- Taking initiative;
- Creatively seeking out and identifying business opportunities;
- Developing budgets and forecasting resource needs;
- Developing a customer-centered environment;
- Understanding various options for acquiring capital and the tradeoffs associated with each option; and
- Communicating effectively and marketing oneself and one's ideas.

Although the WDB provides a variety of workshops each week that include many employment-related topics, the Board has not identified a specific career track for entrepreneurial skills training and microenterprise services. Rather, individuals who are interested in self-employment are referred to our community partners, such as the Kutztown University's Small Business Development Corporation (SBDC) and its associated Jump Start Incubator located in the City of Reading, to receive specialized assistance that includes:

- Entrepreneurship education that provides an introduction to the values and basics of starting and running a business. These programs often guide individuals through the development of a business plan and may also include simulations of business start-up and operation.
- Enterprise development which provides support and services that incubate and help individuals develop their own businesses. Enterprise development programs go beyond entrepreneurship education by helping individuals access small loans or grants that are needed to begin business operation and by providing more individualized attention to assist in the development of viable business ideas.

The strategic priorities of the WDB are reflected in the allocation of limited funds via the annual program year budget. While entrepreneurial skills training and microenterprise services are important economic development strategies, they are not necessarily a major workforce need in the Berks County WDA as compared to the needs of existing enterprises in our key industry sectors for which the WDB prioritizes funding (see above).

Elevate Berks – Entrepreneurship in Berks County is broadly advanced through a collaborative initiative of more than a dozen business support organizations who came together in 2022 to collectively cultivate the somewhat underdeveloped entrepreneurial sector of our local economy. These partners have joined together in the three-year implementation (2023-2025) of *Elevate Berks*, an action plan focused on connecting startups and small businesses with the resources they need to thrive.

In calendar year 2024, *Elevate Berks* bore fruit in three important areas:

- Hosting three free events – topics ranged from leveraging artificial intelligence for business growth to entrepreneurial experiences. Each event averaged 60 attendees, providing valuable networking and learning opportunities for the startup community. Translation services were provided at the events.
- The group continued to meet monthly, building trust and relationships among the partners.
- Launching of the new ElevateBerks.com website – a central hub for information, events, and resources for entrepreneurs.

Elevate Berks' plans for calendar year 2025 and beyond include:

- Through a grant from Wells Fargo, utilize a consultant to add capacity to the structural building and sustainability of *Elevate Berks*.
- Establishing a stronger partnership structure – working groups are now meeting regularly to focus on specific areas, allowing for more targeted collaboration. This approach strengthens referrals, fosters relationships, and enhances collective impact.
- Establishing a leadership team – a small group of partners will guide the initiative's growth and strategic direction.
- Working to establish collective impact metrics amongst the partners.
- Three more events are planned – continuing to provide free, high-value programming tailored to the needs of entrepreneurs and small business owners.

Berks County's enterprising agriculture sector brings a rich legacy of entrepreneurship as detailed in the County's newly released *Agriculture's Impact and Roadmap for Its Future* study (Sections 1.2 and 1.3). The County's Department of Community and Economic Development is leading the implementation of the many action-oriented recommendations emerging from this forward-looking plan. The Berks County WDB enthusiastically embraces our role in joining with the Berks County Department of Agriculture, the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) to help build the talent pipeline with existing agriculture and food production employers, while creating economic and workforce development opportunities and education to nurture a vibrant entrepreneurial and microenterprise in this important industry sector.

4.3 Business and Employer Program Support – What services, activities, and program resources will be provided to businesses and employers in the local area?

The PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST) is a sub-contracted service currently provided by Educational Data Systems, Inc. (EDS)I. The contract pays for three staff members who report to a program supervisor. Additionally, staff from other teams (EARN, WIOA Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker and Youth, Veteran's program) also work cooperatively with this team.

The specific requirements of the Business Services Team in the PA CareerLink® Berks County are:

- Serve as a single point of contact for businesses, responding to all requests in a timely manner
- Assist with disability and communication accommodations, including job coaches
- Conduct outreach regarding local workforce system's services and products
- Conduct on-site Rapid Response activities regarding closures and downsizings
- Develop On-the-Job Training (OJT), Customized Job Training (CJT), Incumbent Worker Training (IWT), and Transitional Employment (TE) contracts
- Provide access to labor market information
- Provide customized recruitment and job applicant screening, assessment and referral services

- Provide employer and industry cluster-driven Occupational Skills Training through Individual Training Accounts with eligible training providers
- Assist with the interpretation of labor market information
- Conduct job fairs
- Develop customized training opportunities to meet specific employer and/or industry cluster needs
- Use of one-stop center facilities for recruiting and interviewing job applicants
- Consult on human resources issues
- Coordinate with employers to develop and implement layoff aversion strategies
- Assist as a back-up to BWPO in posting job vacancies in the state labor exchange system and take and fill job postings
- Provide information regarding disability awareness issues
- Provide incumbent worker upgrade training through various modalities
- Provide information regarding workforce development initiatives and programs
- Provide information regarding assistive technology and communication accommodations
- Develop, convene, or implement industry or sector partnerships

As discussed above in Section 4.1, the goals of our local Employer Outreach Team (EOT) are to ensure employers receive a consistent message from the team members, that employer visits are coordinated to maximize outreach efforts and diminish employer program fatigue, and to maximize job seeker placements through the sharing of hiring information. The EOT is comprised of individuals from PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services, EARN, and Young Adult programs, OVR, Job Corps, Local Veterans Employment Representative, Connections Work, and the WDB, that meet, at a minimum, quarterly or at special team member request, to discuss and share business/employer intelligence and better understanding of employment barriers.

Much of the BST performance requirements are based on employer engagement which is measured through the following:

- Overall market penetration: the yearly progress of employer engagement and service provided.
- One Micro job fair for each of the four market sectors – Manufacturing, Healthcare, Construction, and Transportation and Logistics: these four micro job fairs provide each industry sector the opportunity to recruit, interview and hire individuals who are specifically looking for career within each designated sector.
- Follow-up with one-to-one discussion with employers that completed the Employer Best Practice survey. These discussions will present targeted support as appropriate based on the results to the survey.
- In-Person Job Fairs that bring at minimum 75 Employers in attendance. These Job Fairs typically occur in the Fall and/or Spring.
- The production of a monthly Market Intelligence Report providing “intelligence” gained through employer and other contacts.

As a core partner, OVR participates in Employer engagement and provides multiple services to the business community designed to assist businesses with onboarding pre-screened qualified employees

with disabilities (see section 4.1 above. OVR on-boarding supports for a qualified new hire can include reasonable accommodation consultation, On the Job Training (OJT) wage reimbursement, referral on tax credits or deductions. OVR also works with businesses through connecting students involved in OVR's pre-employment transition services. Services under pre-employment transition services include programs like paid work experiences, job shadowing, workplace tours. OVR also offers no-cost consultation on the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), accessibility standards and helping a business to retain current employees following an incident, injury or disability. Statewide business services staff can identify resources to assist any organization on how to improve access compliance and steps to diversify their workforce to include citizens with a disability.

Research conducted by the PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST) at the direction of the Berks County WDB into the local perception of and implementation of sponsored Registered Apprenticeship (RA) programs found that, of 81 employers surveyed by the BST, an estimated 54% expressed interest in considering the adaptation of a Registered Pre-apprenticeship program in their respective workplace. 15% of those surveyed clearly expressed their disinterest or lack of need in establishing a Pre-apprenticeship program within their companies. 10% of the companies appraised were unsure if they would consider the implementation of a Pre-apprenticeship program for their employees.

Each of the 81 employers were assessed according to: 1) Those who do not have an apprenticeship program or are not currently implementing an apprenticeship; 2) those who have an active registered apprenticeship program or; 3) those moving toward implementing an apprenticeship program or have an expired/inactive registered apprenticeship program. Employer respondents indicated:

1. They do not have an apprenticeship program/are not currently implementing an apprenticeship (77%),
2. They have an active apprenticeship program (15%) or,
3. They are in the process of implementing or have expired/inactive apprenticeship programs (9%).

The Berks County WDB collaborates with the Apprenticeship and Training Office (ATO) during this and subsequent planning cycles to identify best practices. These include staff registered apprenticeship (RA) training and the development of specific metrics associated with employer outreach to make pre-apprenticeship and registered apprenticeship a valued and preferred strategy in meeting the recruitment and retention needs of Berks employers and a time-tested pathway for current and future career seekers. In accordance with L&I's guidance, the Berks WDB will ensure BST members are provided the Registered Apprenticeship Desk Guide for PA CareerLink® Staff. This guide provides PA CareerLink® staff with an overview of strategies to connect jobseekers and employers to Registered Apprenticeship (RA) programs. It includes detailed information on how to utilize various WIOA funding streams to support RA programs, subject to local policy, procedures, and funding availability. This guide also provides detailed instructions on how PA CareerLink® staff may help their local area meet targeted Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) indicators.

The WDB will also leverage AT0's Apprenticeship Strategic Plan Guide designed to help Workforce Development Boards map and support the apprenticeship ecosystem in their regions and identify strategies to connect individuals to opportunities within it. The guide also provides overview of strategies to connect jobseekers and employers to Registered Apprenticeship (RA) programs. It includes detailed information on how to utilize various WIOA funding streams to support RA programs, subject to local policy, procedures, and funding availability. This guide also provides detailed instructions on how PA CareerLink® staff may help their local area meet targeted Workforce Innovation and Opportunity (WIOA) indicators.

WDB staff administers the WIOA Title I "Employment Retention/Layoff Aversion Strategy" incumbent worker training (IWT)and Registered Apprentice (RA) related technical instruction funds budget, employer request for funds application and approval process, and applicable matching funds reimbursement. BST and WDB staff cooperatively participate in new employer recruitment and often jointly participate in tours of employer facilities. After these initial joint efforts, the relationship is "handed-off" to the logical staff (BST, WDB) to maintain, based on employer level of engagement in the workforce system. Beginning July 1, 2025, the BST will assume greater responsibilities for initiating and administering employer agreements for these funds subject to WDB policy, budgets and oversight.

With regards to Wagner/Peyser**, s**ee Section 3.6 of this plan for detailed information regarding how the activities and services are accessed by business, employers or their legal representatives. The Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry (L&I) is the provider of Wagner-Peyser services at the PA CareerLink® Berks County. Job search and placement assistance is provided by conducting L&I inter-agency communication of matching information within PA CareerLink® Berks County, either from within a job seeker's folder or within an employer's job posting. Integration at PA CareerLink® Berks County happens at both the staff and team manager levels. Some teams have mixed staff from multiple partners. Some teams have staff from a single partner organization. All teams have a dedicated manager/supervisor. Integration occurs through twice-monthly full staff meetings, twice-monthly team manager meetings and various staff development activities. Partners whose employees participate as integrated team members are:

- PA Department of Labor and Industry - Bureau of Workforce Partnership and Operation (BWPO),
- EDSI Adult and Dislocated Worker,
- EQUUS Youth Services,
- EDSI Business Services Team, and
- EDSI EARN program. Functional supervisors/managers are individuals who make work assignments and supervise the work of individuals regardless of payroll attachment.

4.4 <u>Continuous Improvement</u> – Describe how the local board will ensure the continuous improvement of eligible providers through the system and that such providers will meet the employment needs of local area employers, workers and job seekers.

The Berks County WDB circulates a monthly national, state, and local Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) labor market report incorporating data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the PA. Dept. of Labor & Industry Center for Workforce Information & Analysis. This monthly LMI report is formatted in an easy to comprehend, condensed format distributed to county leadership and stakeholders directly, and available to the public-at-large online via the County of Berks WDB webpage. In addition to overall Reading MSA employment, LMI specific to targeted priority industry sectors is included so that critical industry employment trends can be clearly monitored.

The Berks County WDB verifies the relevance of the training activities associated with the targeted occupations through outreach to employers. The WDB develops a detailed understanding of the skills and experience related to current and future employment projections by utilizing print and on-line job ad analysis, employer surveys, employer feedback via in-person, phone and email interviews, and by active WDB participation in educational provider Occupational Advisory Committees (OACs) and Industry Partnerships (IPs). Active partnership with economic development agencies is solicited to promote the growth of a competent workforce in support of economic development initiatives.

Active engagement of our Southeastern PA PREP and local economic development partners in identifying in-demand occupations that will support economic growth is continuously solicited, researched, validated, and shared with relevant WDB committee membership, PA CareerLink® Berks County and one-stop partner staff, and to educator, OACs, and IP partners as appropriate.

The Berks WDB Training & Industry Partnership Committee meets quarterly to review opportunities for occupational growth and outcomes of in-force training initiatives. The committee membership is made up of industry sector employers, educators, and labor representatives. WDB staff with industry sector research expertise is assigned to support the work of the committee.

All training activity, including WIOA Title I eligible Incumbent Worker and Registered Apprenticeship, Individual Training Account, Customized Job Training (CJT) for New-Hire Cohorts, New-Hire On the Job (OJT) and Transitional Work Experience, and Apprenticeships are linked to High Priority Occupations (HPOs), or occupations within a career path leading to these HPOs. HPOs are linked to their relevant wage and educational attainment levels, within the priority Industry Sectors as defined by the full board (See Section 1.2). Requisite credentials are industry-recognized and are in great demand.

The WDB's Training & Industry Partnership Committee reviews each new annual draft Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA) HPO list for relevance and alignment to local labor needs. Petitions with supporting rationale are submitted for occupations that may have dropped off the new list but that, due to a variety of factors (board business relationships, the number of past training completion and training related employment, other business intelligence), the board is confident are still in-demand locally. Petitions are also submitted during the same Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA) nomination period for in-demand occupations that are newly brought to the attention of the board, and which comply with the CWIA consideration criteria. The Berks WDB works with WDBs across the Southeast PA (SE PA) region who share our level of concern surrounding the supply versus demand for occupations in a shared labor market and the need for their continued proper classification as High Priority Occupations. Accordingly, the Berks County WDB has annually supported a collective SE PA regional petition initiative for the inclusion of mutually agreed-upon Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes on the CWIA approved HPO lists for all six local WDBs (Berks, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia WDBs) comprising our SE PA planning region.

Each new program year, the Berks County WDB effectively manages the Local Workforce Development Area responsibilities of the Commonwealth Workforce Development System (CWDS) Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL) applicant process by reviewing training submissions for adequate content description, alignment with the current Berks Workforce Development Area HPO List, and acceptable performance prior to approval. It is the policy of the Berks County Workforce Development Board to concentrate its training resources on key industry sectors (see section 1.2) and on training which prepares people to enter high priority occupations and/or which provides recognized and portable certifications or credentials for higher wage, higher skill jobs offering real opportunities for self-sufficiency. Only after new ETPL applicants have satisfied the WDB review criteria, including ascertained job openings and credentialing needs, will new programs be approved by the WDB for the ETPL and posted on the PA CareerLink® website. All ETPL training providers, local and/or statewide, must enter into a written and binding Master Agreement with the PA CareerLink® Berks County services provider for program delivery prior to the start of any training to be funded with Berks WDB WIOA funds.

Customer satisfaction surveys of individuals in training are reviewed for satisfaction with the training experience, case manager, etc. These surveys are compiled by the PA CareerLink® Administrator and

shared with the WDB and WDB staff. Program with sub-par satisfaction are provided technical assistance by the WDB.

4.5 <u>Technology and Remote Access</u> – Through the use of technology, how will the local board facilitate access to services provided through the one-stop service delivery system, including remote areas?

As a tightly organized and integrated single county workforce development area, Berks County has no remote areas without ready access to one-stop services delivery. In fact, Berks County has a well-developed internal system of public and private transportation services with available public transportation connecting the core with the surrounding suburban communities. The PA CareerLink® Berks County is located within the central urban area with a bus stop directly in front of the building and free ample parking. Many Berks job seekers take advantage of regular public bus route service provided by the Berks Area Regional Transportation Authority (BARTA) during their job search and once placed in new employment. BARTA also offers one-way trips via Special Services (Para transit).

In order to meet the needs of as many residents as possible, the Berks County WDB continues to encourage the offering of remote access to services, in addition to available virtual services as described in Section 3.1. PA CareerLink® staff are able to provide assistance to individuals who might have challenges utilizing technology, by providing services virtually, or further assisting them in the resource room within the one-stop. In addition, the WDB has an expectation of all local contractors to implement outreach within their programming, developing a yearly Outreach Plan on how they will reach the community regarding services within the one-stop. Utilization of purchased I-Pads will be part of the outreach efforts in collecting future participant information via the Digital Intake form, that information can be accessed by staff to conduct outreach for program services.

PA CareerLink® Berks County, at no cost to Limited English Proficient (LEP) individuals or families, provides interpreter services to all LEP individuals or families applying for, participating in programs or receiving services/benefits through the PA CareerLink® Berks County the following means:

- Bi-lingual staff capable of translation and interpretation responsibilities.
- Telephone interpreting services.
- Translation services.
- TTY and sign language interpreters.

The interpreter services are provided in an efficient and timely manner so as not to delay a determination of eligibility for an individual or family, receipt of eligible services/benefits or participation in a Department run program beyond that of an English-speaking individual or family. The PA CareerLink® Berks County makes this policy known to the LEP through the following methods (e.g. posters in other languages, Babel cards, etc.).

- Voicemail selections on the main office phone number
- The PA CareerLink® Berks County local website, www.careerlinkberks.com
- Brochures and notices
- Presentations at schools and community organizations
- Presentations at dislocated worker / Rapid Response meetings
- Orientations for various PA CareerLink® programs
- Outreach with Berks County Justice System agencies

- Tag lines on materials, handouts, brochures

PA CareerLink® Berks County addresses phone calls and voice mail by LEP individuals in the following manner: The greeting on our main phone number directs customers to English or Spanish greetings. All Spanish speaking bilingual staff have English/Spanish voicemail greetings. Messages left in Spanish on non-bilingual staff voicemails are transferred to bilingual staff for interpreting. All non-Spanish non-English calls are interpreted through Propio Language Services or Language Services Associates. Additionally, the PA CareerLink® Berks County provides interpretation services to approximately 1% of One-Stop customers who have needed interpretation services in their native Haitian or Ukrainian languages. In the event that individuals need sign language interpretation services, Berks Deaf & Hard of Hearing Services is contacted. External PA CareerLink® signage outside is in braille, along with all directional guidance and room numbering within the building. Upon request, documents can be translated into braille print. Additionally, PA CareerLink® Berks County offers access to a Teletypewriter mode (TTY) device that is used for callers who are hearing-impaired. Hearing-impaired customers may also choose to use PC headsets, TTY phone or 711 Relay Services. Twice annually, all PA CareerLink® Berks County staff receive training on how to use 711 Relay Services.

PA CareerLink® Berks County addresses walk-ins to the one-stop who are LEP individuals in the following manner: The receptionist is bilingual Spanish/English and can direct Spanish speaking customers. Non-Spanish speaking limited English proficient visitors are directed to the language assistance poster in the reception area and a staff member call Propio Language Services or Language Services Associates for over-the-phone interpreting services using a dedicated dual-handset phone in room 301.

PA CareerLink® Berks County does not require, suggest, or encourage LEP individuals or families to use friends, family members or minor children as interpreters. If an LEP individual or family insists that a friend or family member serve as interpreter, PA CareerLink® Berks County will document that choice. PA CareerLink® Berks County will then, on a case by case basis, consider factors such as: competence of the family or friend used as the interpreter; the appropriateness of the use in light of the circumstances and ability to provide quality and accurate information, especially if the interview could result in a negative effect on the individual or family's eligibility for benefits/services; potential or actual conflicts of interest; and confidentiality of the information being interpreted to determine whether PA CareerLink® Berks County should provide its own independent interpreter.

The PA CareerLink® Berks County provides direct workforce services for public assistance recipients through our EARN program. EARN provides comprehensive case management, remediation, education with special emphasis on individuals with limited English proficiency, skills training, work activities, job placement and retention activities, as well as providing supportive services, including payment for childcare. Services especially designed to meet the needs of out-of-school pregnant and parenting youth between the ages of 18 to 22, as well as non-assistance custodial or non-custodial fathers are provided by the Berks County Intermediate Unit (BCIU) through the Education Leading to Employment and Career Training (ELECT) Program. Work activities in EARN include unsubsidized employment, subsidized employment, paid work experience, and community service. EARN staff are co-located in the PA CareerLink® Berks County and they are also active members of the PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST). If it is determined that an EARN participant can benefit from education or training programs offered under WIOA, then co-case management and co-enrollment occurs. The WIOA Title I case manager determines eligibility and both WIOA and EARN case managers work together with the client to make sure they receive all services for which they are determined eligible.

All partner programs such as ELECT, KEYS, Work Ready have the opportunity to attend our local PA CareerLink® Berks County Welcome Orientation (detailed above in Section 3.3. The Welcome Orientation would allow any individual the opportunity for co-enrollment into programs within the one-stop. Co-enrollment across community partner programs and programs within the one-stop assist the individual with multiple resources to overcome barriers and achieve success.

To ensure that individuals participating in basic education and English learning programs have direct connections to career pathways leading to high-quality jobs, the WDB works with its Adult Education partners, including Reading Area Community College (RACC) and the Literacy Council of Reading-Berks, to identify strategies that improve access. For example, RACC is the local operator of the KEYS Program which is designed to assist students who receive benefits through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF/Cash) and/or Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP/Food Stamps) attend, and succeed, in community college. The WDB will explore the creation of a cross-referral process among one-stop partners and other community entities to direct customers to the right service at the right time as well as the development of coordinated outreach efforts in the upcoming year.

RACC is utilizing digital learning platforms (Essential Education and Ellii) for both their General Education Diploma (GED) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. All students have access to the platforms for their course of study and can use it as a supplemental practice or assigned work, depending on the class structure. In addition, remote classes are offered for real time instruction with digital platforms. The Literacy Council of Reading-Berks uses a virtual platform (Burlington) for ESL students, the application allowing time to be assigned for the completion of assignments online that takes place outside of regular class hours. The Literacy Council employs a part-time digital navigator who can offer one-one-one support for students needing assistance with the platform or other technology issues. This part-time employee also supports individuals who participate in Title II services at the PA CareerLink® Berks County.

The career pathways model was first introduced as a result of the Berks WDB's prior National Emergency Grant (NEG) Sector Strategies funding for ITAs and OJTs and has since been adopted as standard practice for all PA CareerLink® Berks County job seeking assistance clientele. Based on an initial assessment for enrollment for an ITA training program or a subsidized OJT employment opportunity, customers are provided with a comprehensive transferrable occupational relationship pathway for new career progression, beginning with the entering employment into which they initiate the pathway and on to positions of significantly higher growth potential that could be obtained with additional training and/or experience. This career pathing strategy is incorporated into their Individual Employment Plan/Individual Service Strategy and, as a result, customers will benefit from understanding how they can progress in their chosen career beyond the initial training they receive. Pathways have been created by WDB staff or Business Services Team members. Current career pathways include career areas such as, but not limited to, Auto Diesel Technician, Building Property Maintenance, CDL-Transportation, Healthcare Support Services, Industrial Maintenance Technician, Manufacturing Production Operations, as well as skilled trades and Information Technology.

Management Information Systems

The PA CareerLink® Commonwealth of Workforce Development System (CWDS) is the system of record for WIOA Title I programs. WIOA Title II uses a separate system of record. Partner and program provider staff enter customer data into PA CareerLink® resource accounts as appropriate, necessary, and required to track program activity, case notes, individual employment plans, etc. Under all circumstances, data is entered within thirty days of occurrence as required by Commonwealth of Pennsylvania protocol. Monitoring is conducted by the local workforce board to ensure that the appropriate WDB staff have been

advised, have reviewed, and have approved this activity and have advised responsible PA CareerLink® program staff to ensure that the mandated time frame is met. OVR utilizes a module of PA CareerLink® that is confidential and only accessible by authorized PA CareerLink® Berks County program staff.

WIOA Title I case managers have the ability to utilize the workforce program enhancements in PA CareerLink® to refer customers to services within the PA CareerLink® office (internally) and to outside community agencies (externally).

- Internal referrals

  Each PA CareerLink® office is able to designate which staff members will receive internal program referrals from within their office as well as other PA CareerLink® offices. These staff members are managed in the system by an individual with the "Program referral POC manager" role (ES Team Supervisor). Staff members who are designated to receive referrals for their program will see their names in a drop down under "Referral POC List". When a case manager would like to refer a customer to an internal staff member for services, the case manager navigates to the appropriate customer within PA CareerLink® and presses the plus (+) button on the "Program Referrals" tile. A screen with several fields will open. This is where the case manager will fill in the reason for referral, the agency that the customer is being referred to, and any additional comments. At the completion of the fields in the "Program Referrals" screen, the case manager presses "Send Referral". A green banner will appear to indicate that the referral has been sent. This referral will now appear on the internal staff member's PA CareerLink® dashboard as a "New Referral". The internal staff member who received the referral is able to change the status of the referral to "Active" to acknowledge the receipt of the referral. Staff are able to communicate back and forth through the referral. When services are complete, referrals are assigned an outcome of "successful" or "unsuccessful" and are closed out.

  Referral to the WIOA Title II provider (RACC) is accomplished directly through communication between the WIOA Title I program case manager and the WIOA Title II program support specialist.

- External referrals

  Each PA CareerLink® office is able to designate external agencies that will receive external program referrals. These external agencies are managed in the system by an individual with the "Program referral POC manager" role (ES Team Supervisor). External agencies must first fill in a form agreeing to be added to the external agency point of contact list. This form is retained by the individual with the "Program referral POC manager" role (ES Team Supervisor). Individuals from the external agency who are designated to receive referrals for their agency will be identified in a drop down under "Referral POC List". When a case manager would like to refer a customer to an external agency for services, the case manager navigates to the appropriate customer within PA CareerLink® and presses the plus (+) button on the "Program Referrals" tile. A screen with several fields will open. This is where the case manager will fill in the reason for referral, the agency that the customer is being referred to, and any additional comments. At the completion of the fields in the "Program Referrals" screen, the case manager presses "Send Referral". A green banner will appear to indicate that the referral has been sent. This referral will now be emailed to the external agency's point of contact. This email will ask that the point of contact press a button found within the email to acknowledge the receipt of the email. PA CareerLink® staff and point of contacts from the external agencies are able to communicate back and forth through the referral. When services are complete, referrals are assigned an outcome of "successful" or "unsuccessful" and are closed out.

Staff will be trained to provide services to all, regardless of range of abilities, mobility, age, language, learning style, or comprehension or education level. All requests for accommodations must be addressed and reasonable accommodations will be made available to customers as necessary to ensure physical and programmatic accessibility to all customers within the PA CareerLink®. Such accommodations will include but are not limited to an interpreter provided in real time or, if not available, within a reasonable timeframe to any customer with a language barrier, assistive devices, such as screen-reading software programs (e.g., JAWS and DRAGON), and assistive listening devices. Additional ADA facility requirements can be found below in Section 4.9.

4.6 Transportation and Supportive Services – How will the local board coordinate WIOA Title I workforce investment activities with the provision of transportation and other appropriate services in the local area?

PA CareerLink® Berks County WIOA Title I Staff are responsible for coordinating services and providing referrals to other state and local agencies offering supportive services such as:

- Linkages to community services,
- Assistance with transportation (normally through the provision of bus passes or gas cards),
- Childcare and dependent care,
- Assistance with housing,
- Needs-related payments,
- Assistance with educational testing,
- Reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities,
- Legal aid services,
- Referrals to health care,
- Assistance with uniforms or other appropriate work attire and work-related tools,
- Assistance with books, fees, school supplies, and other necessary items for students enrolled in postsecondary education,
- Payments and fees for employment and training-related applications, tests, and certifications.

Providers of WIOA Title I services in the PA CareerLink® Berks County must develop a resource network insuring that the availability of supportive services in Berks County is made available to participants in the one-stop delivery system.

The PA CareerLink® Berks County WIOA Title I Staff will meet with each participant to assess the need for supportive services. The following are supportive service requirements:

- Participant must be a WIOA Title I eligible individual.
- Participant must be participating in WIOA Title I Adult/Dislocated worker training services or Title I Youth services.
- Participant must be unable to obtain supportive services through other programs providing such services.

Each participant will be given individualized case management services and plan development in order to eliminate possible dependency on supportive services. Supportive services award should be based on individual participant needs, plan development, and in compliance with this policy and WIOA and any subsequent Federal and/or Commonwealth of Pennsylvania clarifications.

WIOA Title I Youth

The provision of support services is one of the fourteen youth elements in WIOA. It is the policy of the WDB that the provider of WIOA youth services in the PA CareerLink® Berks County will budget an appropriate amount of funds to provide those supportive services that may not be readily available from community resources.

WIOA Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker

It is the policy of the Berks County WDB to provide funds for supportive services that may not be readily available from community resources in the following cases:

- When funds have been specifically budgeted for supportive services.
- As a requirement of specific funding.
- From time-to-time non-WIOA formula funding may be acquired by the WDB. If supportive services are to be offered as a requirement of such funding the WDB will ensure such services are offered and provided.

4.7 Rapid Response – How will the local board coordinate workforce investment activities to ensure they are carried out in the local area with statewide rapid response?

The Berks WDB's Rapid Response Team is made up of experienced PA CareerLink® Title I and Wagner-Peyser staff, and the state-assigned regional Rapid Response coordinator. The Berks WDB Rapid Response Team is especially competent and assertive in meeting the needs of dislocated workers impacted by layoffs and plant closings.

Our Rapid Response team's proactive and coordinated efforts include access to Pennsylvania's economic development assistance resources, such as helping businesses that are at risk of closing to keep their doors open, as well as helping employers reduce the size of, or prevent a layoff. It is important to note that the state-assigned Rapid Response representative works with the PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST) to identify the labor needs of new and existing employers. During layoff events, BST representatives often attend initial fact-finding meetings to learn about the dislocating workforce and identify suitable new employment opportunities for that group. Knowledge of the skill sets of the available dislocated workers is valuable to the BST representatives in helping them to market to those employers who are hiring. BST members also assist the Rapid Response staff to coordinate dedicated job fairs for large groups of dislocated workers with the goal of returning the dislocated workers to suitable new employment as soon as possible. We are fortunate that our local Rapid Response Team members as well as our regional coordinator assigned to our area from L&I are quite experienced and are fully capable of offering a full range of Rapid Response services to impacted workers in both English and Spanish.

Calendar year 2023 was a relatively normal year which saw four local formal WARN notifications, each resulting in well over 100 displaced workers. Our local Rapid Response team also effectively responded to five smaller public notices of layoffs or facility closings. In total, the team assisted 678 dislocated workers connect with many local employers who were in an active hiring mode throughout 2023.

Calendar year 2024 saw a slight moderation in hiring activity among local employers as Berks County's unemployment rate remain at or below 3.6 % for the year. Accompanying this low unemployment rate, local employers prioritized retaining their existing workers and Berks County was quite fortunate in avoiding major layoffs and plant closings. In fact, our area had just one local WARN in 2024 with the

closing of Appeeling Fruit impacting 68 employees, many of whom primarily spoke Spanish. Our regional Rapid Response Coordinator and our local PA CareerLink® Berks County team effectively coordinated services for these dislocated workers in English and Spanish, ensuring that most soon had other good employment options. Our local Rapid Response team received only six other Public Notices all year- none larger than 30 employees and four less than 20 impacted employees. The team effectively reached out to the workers dislocated from these smaller employers as well.

The team also coordinates efforts with the regional Strategic Early Warning Network (SEWN) Coordinator. To assist with this coordination, the COO of the Berks WDB serves on the SE PA Regional SEWN Advisory Council. The Berks WDB will continue to support such effective local and regional coordination going forward.

4.8 Individuals with Barriers to Employment – What services, activities and program resources will be provided to participants, including those outlined in WIOA Sec. 3(24), individuals with a Barrier to Employment, and WIOA Sec. 188, in the local area?

The PA CareerLink® Berks County Welcome Orientation and Initial Assessment process was detailed under Section 3.3 and 3.7.

The Operator and its Partners will develop and implement a strategic affirmative outreach plan that may include:

- Specific steps to be taken by each partner,
- An affirmative outreach plan to the region's human resources professionals,
- An affirmative outreach and recruitment plan to the region's job seekers, including targeted efforts for populations most at-risk or most in need,
- An affirmative outreach and recruitment plan for out-of-school youth,
- Sector strategies and career pathways,
- Connections to registered apprenticeship,
- A plan for messaging to internal audiences,
- An affirmative outreach tool kit for Partners,
- Regular use of social media,
- Clear objectives and expected outcomes, and
- Leveraging of any statewide affirmative outreach materials relevant to the region.

Current affirmative outreach efforts include:

- All new applicants for unemployment compensation are directed to register on PA CareerLink® and told they can come to the PA CareerLink® Berks County office to accomplish this task. Claimants who are placed on Labor & Industry's Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) list are sent letters inviting them to a local Orientation. During 2021, 190 individuals attended RESEA followed by increased attendance of 448 in 2022 and 1087 in attendance during 2023. 2024 saw continued participation growth to 1264 individuals.
- Job seekers are invited to sign up for email notifications at orientation, at workshops, and with signage in the reception area and the resource room. Those who sign up receive information about job fairs and employer recruitment activities. As of December 1st, 2024, there were 1,341 contacts on the list. 40% or 542 contacts were currently active. The average

email open rate for November 2024 was 52%. Stats from mailings show that 5% of the emails are opened on mobile devices, 95% are opened on computers. The PA CareerLink® Berks County Administrator manages the affirmative outreach through a subscription to Constant Contact.

- Information about local job fairs and recruitment events is shared with any community organization that requests to be part of the Constant Contact email group. Organizations currently on the list include
    - All libraries in the Berks County Library System,
    - Reading Public Library,
    - County of Berks Domestic Relations Office,
    - Child Care Information Systems,
    - Reading Muhlenberg Career and Technology Center (RMCTC),
    - Connections Work,
    - Abilities in Motion,
    - PathStone,
    - Opportunity House,
    - Reading Area Community College,
    - County of Berks Veterans Affairs,
    - Friend Inc.,
    - Hope Rescue Mission,
    - Reading Housing Authority,
    - Berks Community Health Center,
    - Joseph's People,
    - YMCA,
    - United Way of Berks County,
    - Berks County Intermediate Unit,
    - Berks Community Action Program,
    - AARP Senior Community Service Employment Program,
    - Berks County Assistance Office,
    - Berks Coalition to End Homelessness,
    - Kutztown University,
    - Berks County Jail System Community Corrections Center,
    - New Person Ministries,
    - Clare of Assisi House,
    - Service Access Management,
    - OVR,
    - UPMC Community Care,
    - Manufacturers Resource Center (MRC), and
    - the Hispanic Center of Reading/Berks.

In 2024, the PA CareerLink® Berks County resoundingly demonstrated the power of well-planned regional in person Job Fairs to connect local employers with large numbers of eager jobseekers, many of whom are underemployed or facing significant barriers to employment.

- Job Fair location and venue are critically important, especially for jobseekers with limited transportation options. Two 2024 Job Fairs were held at the highly accessible, world-class DoubleTree by Hilton in downtown Reading. Both Job Fairs drew well over 1,000 jobseekers to meet with over 100 employers.

- Equally important in our region is to ensure that Job Fairs are welcoming to many Berks County adults who are often under-employed English Second Language (ESL) Learners. PA CareerLink® Berks County staff, who are uniquely experienced in working with a diversity of jobseekers. Staff are equally effective in working with our many employers who, increasingly, have good career opportunities and can appreciative the benefits of the high level of service that they receive at such events.
- Likewise, our PA CareerLink® Berks County staff are quite capable and accommodating in meeting the needs of Job Fair participants with a wide range of disabilities. Our local OVR team is present at Job Fairs to help. One local parent was especially complimentary of the PA CareerLink® Berks County staff member providing an encouraging "practice interview" for his yet to be employed young adult with a neurodevelopment condition. The parent remarked that he never saw his son so excited to be at such a large public event and to meet with the employers present. Classified ads in English and Spanish are placed in the Sunday edition of the Reading Eagle newspaper featuring selected job postings on the PA CareerLink® website; this ad includes the PA CareerLink® logo and address.
- Staff members participate in regularly scheduled community affirmative outreach activities throughout the program year. For example:
    - County Human Services orientations (quarterly),
    - Veterans Expos (as scheduled),
    - Berks Agricultural Resource Network job fair (yearly),
    - Connections Work Community Resource Network (quarterly),
    - Connections Work job fair (twice a year),
    - Berks Coalition to End Homelessness meetings (monthly Sept - May), and
    - Be Wise (yearly).

  Participation in these events is based on staff availability.

- Welcome Orientations, workshops, recruitments and job fairs are posted in PA CareerLink® "events".
- Staff participate in rapid response information sessions for dislocated workers as scheduled by Rapid Response Coordination Services in Harrisburg.
- PA CareerLink® Berks County utilizes Social Media Platforms (X formally known as Twitter, 250 followers; Facebook, with over 11,000 followers; Instagram with over 1,700 followers; and LinkedIn to our employer network of 330 followers) to market job fairs and other events occurring at the one-stop.
- The Business Services Team has goals for affirmative outreach and services to employers. Business Services uses various methods to perform affirmative outreach to employers including:
    - attending regional networking events,
    - cold calling / e-mailing points of contact,
    - advertisement on social media,
    - employer visits, and,
    - yearly contracted goals based on the local employer sector demand.

All learnings from these ongoing affirmative outreach activities will be assessed, reviewed, and incorporated in our next local WDB planning cycle.

A full discussion of the one-stop commitment to equal opportunity follows in Section 4.9.

As detailed above, eligible OVR customers receive multiple services from qualified Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and OVR's approved community providers that may include but not be limited to; diagnostic, vocational counseling and guidance, vocational evaluation, restoration, Social Security benefits counseling, training, job placement and pre-employment training services for eligible and potentially eligible high school students with disabilities. OVR also provides multiple services to the business community designed to assist businesses with onboarding pre-screened qualified employees with disabilities. OVR on-boarding supports for a qualified new hire can include reasonable accommodation consultation, On the Job Training (OJT) wage reimbursement, on-the-job 1 on 1 supports, referral on tax credits or deductions. OVR also offers no-cost consultation on the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), accessibility standards and helping a business to retain current employees following an accident, injury or disability.

4.9 <u>Non-discrimination</u> – How will entities within the one-stop service delivery system, including one-stop operators and the one-stop partners, comply with WIOA Sec. 188 (as applicable) and applicable provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (42 U.S.C. 12101, et seq.) regarding the physical and programmatic accessibility of facilities, programs and services, technology and materials for individuals with disabilities.

The Berks County WDB's full commitment to Equal Opportunity and Non-discrimination is detailed above in section 3.2.

Adaptive Equipment available at the PA CareerLink® Berks County:

- Adjustable height table for PC
- Adjustable height chair with adjustable height arm rests
- Alternate mini keyboard
- Alternate track ball mouse
- Foam wrist rest
- Large print/braille keypad stickers
- Monitor arm
- ZoomText
- JAWS Speech output software
- Closed circuit TV
- Assistive listening devices with disposable covers
- Dedicated telephone line for TTY
- Readers and writers
- Optical wheel mice
- Signature guide
- Sign language interpreting
- Footstool
- AT&T Telecommunications Relay Service
- Automatic doors
- Standing desk
- Light film for fluorescent lights
- Request for accommodation

Accessibility to the services provided by the PA CareerLink® Berks County and all Partner agencies is essential to meeting the requirements and goals of the PA CareerLink® Berks County. Job seekers and businesses must be able to access all information relevant to them via visits to physical locations as well as in virtual spaces, regardless of sex, age, race, religion, national origin, disability, veteran's status, or on the basis of any other classification protected under state or federal law.

The one-stop will maintain a culture of inclusiveness and the physical characteristics of the facility, both indoor and outdoor, meet the latest standards of accessible design. Services are available in a convenient, high traffic, and accessible location, with a very reasonable distance from public transportation and plentiful free parking (including parking clearly marked for individuals with disabilities). Indoor space is designed in an "equal and meaningful" manner providing access for individuals with disabilities.

The WDB will work with the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry to ensure that job seekers and businesses have access to the same information online as they do in the physical facility.

All Partners agree that they will not discriminate in their employment practices or services on the basis of sex, age, race, religion, national origin, disability, veteran's status, or on the basis of any other classification protected under state or federal law. Partners must assure that they have policies and procedures in place to address these issues, and that such policies and procedures have been disseminated to their employees and otherwise posted as required by law. Partners further assure that they are currently in compliance with all applicable state and federal laws and regulations regarding these issues. Additionally, staff members are trained to provide services to all, regardless of range of abilities, mobility, age, language, learning style, or comprehension or education level. An interpreter will be provided in real time or, if not available, within a reasonable timeframe to any customer with a language barrier. Assistive devices, such as screen-reading software programs (e.g., JAWS and DRAGON) and assistive listening devices are available to ensure physical and programmatic accessibility within the PA CareerLink® Berks County.

The PA CareerLink® Berks County is certified in OEO compliance through 12/31/23 as the WDB was notified of this certification on August 20, 2024. The PA CareerLink® centers and any affiliated sites are no longer certified every three years for compliance with EO/ADA requirements. Rather, the EO compliance reviews are to be completed annually.

The WDB also reviews compliance with Equal Opportunity and Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility requirements each year during the PA CareerLink® Berks County quality assurance review. All programs operating out of the PA CareerLink® Berks County are part of this review.

To ensure compliance with WIOA Sec. 188 is maintained, the PA CareerLink® Berks County provides twice per year training in Equal Opportunity and Americans with Disabilities Act requirements including the accommodations available at the PA CareerLink® Berks County, types of discrimination, civil rights, the local Language Assistance Plan, the Equal Opportunity complaint policy and process, and information privacy guidelines. In addition to these bi-annual trainings, staff receive additional trainings throughout the year to help keep training at the forefront in serving our customers. Periodically the PA CareerLink® Berks County also provides equal opportunity and nondiscrimination training with all on-site partners participating in this training. OVR has and will continue to provide no-cost consultation on the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) and accessibility standards, as does the Office of Equal Opportunity. OEO also provides training to the WDB (staff and members) and conducts a yearly compliance review and provides technical assistance as necessary.

Locally, within the PA CareerLink® Berks County, employee accommodations have been requested, reviewed with the PA CareerLink® Berks County Site Administrator and completed. Some examples of those accommodations have included placement of light covers to assist with vision impairments, dress code exceptions for foot injuries, wrist wrests for computer keyboard use, anti-glare green for computer monitors, standing desk attachments and alternate work schedules.

The PA CareerLink® Berks County has an internal Community Outreach Team, operated by the Site Administrator, and attended by all program supervisors operating programs within the One-Stop. This team meets regularly to discuss the outreach efforts within programming to serve customers and respond to the requests of community agencies and partners to learn more about PA CareerLink® Berks County services. This team is responsible for training all staff within programming that is conducting outreach efforts on behalf of the PA CareerLink® Berks County.

Efforts related to **affirmative outreach** can be found in **Section 4.8**.

5. COMPLIANCE

5.1 <u>MOU assessments</u> - Describe the cooperative agreements that define how all local area service providers will carry out the requirements for integration of and access to the entire set of services available in the local area one-stop delivery system.

In general, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is executed between the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB), PA CareerLink® Berks County One-Stop Partners (Partners), and the Chief Elected Official (CEO), of the County of Berks. They are collectively referred to as the "Parties" in the MOU.

This MOU is developed to confirm the understanding of the Parties regarding the operation and management of the PA CareerLink® Berks County. The WDB provides local oversight of workforce programming in Berks County.

The WDB, with the agreement of the CEO, has selected Educational Data Systems Inc. (EDSI) to be the one-stop operator of the PA CareerLink® Berks County through a competitive procurement process in accordance with the OMB Uniform Guidance, WIOA regulations, and local procurement policies and procedures.

The One-Stop Operating Budget and Infrastructure Funding Agreement establish a financial plan, including terms and conditions, to fund the services and operating costs of the PA CareerLink® Berks County. The Parties to the MOU agree that joint funding is an essential foundation for an integrated service delivery system and necessary to maintain the PA CareerLink® Berks County.

The Vision, Mission, System Structure, Terms and Conditions, One-Stop Operating Budget, and Infrastructure Funding Agreement outlined in the MOU reflect the commitment of the Parties to their job seeker and business customers, as well as to the overall success of the PA CareerLink® Berks County.

OVR will be a signatory on the WDB/One-Stop Partners Memorandum of Understanding. This agreement encourages cooperation and collaboration among all partners in the effort to make the PA CareerLink® Berks County a seamless operation regarding customer flow, service delivery and customer referral.

An example of the effort towards integration will include the creation and ongoing collaboration of the Employer Outreach Team in the PA CareerLink® Berks County.

Two examples of the effort towards integration include:

- The OVR Job Developer in Berks County is a member of the Employer Outreach Team in the PA CareerLink® Berks County. This team is comprised of individuals from Business Services, EARN, Young Adult, Connections Work, OVR and the WDB who come together monthly to discuss and share business/employer intelligence. The goals of the team are to ensure employers receive a consistent message from the team members that employer visits are coordinated to maximize outreach efforts, diminish employer program fatigue, and to maximize job seeker placements through the sharing of hiring information.
- On January 1, 2025, the Berks County WDB took a big step forward with the establishment of a new standing committee, the *Access & Opportunities Committee.* This new standing committee includes experienced WDB members with non-WDB members of our community with expertise in assisting a broad spectrum of local adults with barriers to employment.

5.2 What is the process the local board uses to ensure the collection of the debts of lower-tier sub-recipients, because of audits?

The Berks WDB requires all subrecipients subject to the Single Audit provisions of the OMB Uniform Administrative requirements to submit a copy of the audit report and corrective action plan to the board. The WDB will review the audit report and corrective action plan for any findings related to WIOA or state funds provided to the subcontractor to determine if it contains any questioned costs.

The WDB will issue, in writing, the results of its review, giving the audited entity 30 days from issuance of the letter to submit an appeal of any findings. That appeal will be a request for a formal review of the final determination before an impartial hearing officer of the Berks WDB. The debt collection process will be stayed pending a decision regarding the appeal. However, the debt becomes delinquent on the first day following issuance of the letter, whether or not an appeal has been filed.

Interest on the delinquent debt will begin to accrue at that time according to the prevailing rate determined by the U.S. Treasury and will accrue during the entire time of the appeal process. This interest is waived if the debt is paid before the 31st day following issuance of the final determination. If the appeal is upheld, all interest will also be waived. However, if the appeal results in any disallowed costs, interest will be assessed on the amount disallowed.

If no appeal of the final determination is filed, a lump-sum repayment from non-federal funds is due to WDB within 30 days after issuance of the final determination. The board, with approval from the PA Department of Labor & Industry, Bureau of Workforce Development Administration (BWDA), may negotiate short-term installment agreements in lieu of lump-sum payment as long as the disallowed cost were not a result of:

- Willful disregard of the requirements of WIOA, gross negligence, or failure to observe accepted standards of administration;
- Incidents of fraud, malfeasance, or misfeasance; and
- Illegal actions or irregularities that must be reported under OMB Uniform Guidance.

Upon full repayment of the outstanding debt, the Berks WDB will issue a satisfactory resolution letter acknowledging receipt of repayment, closing the audit process. However, the board reserves the right to reopen the audit in the event the BWDA disagrees with the final resolution. Should repayment not be received within the 30-day period, a second notice will be sent by certified mail. This notice will state that repayment must be submitted within 30 days of issuance of the letter. It will also state that interest on the outstanding debt began to accrue on the first day following issuance of the final determination.

If repayment of the outstanding debt is not received within 30 days after issuance of the second notice, a final notice will be sent by certified mail. The final notice will state that the board must receive repayment within 10 days of issuance. It will also list the amount of accrued interest due on the debt. The notice will also state that should repayment of the debt and interest not be received, appropriate legal and/or programmatic sanctions may be instituted. Any legal action will be initiated by the County of Berks Solicitor's office.

5.3 What action(s) is the local board taking (or will take) towards becoming or remaining a high-performing board?

The WDB will implement the actions necessary to become or remain a high-performing board once the Commonwealth has released guidance related to high-performing local boards.

The Board is currently functioning as a high-performing Board in that it consistently achieves the following:

- Attains the Governor's goals as described in the PA Combined Plan;
- Meets the local area negotiated federal performance goals;
- Sustains fiscal integrity;
- Receives successful monitoring reports and other evaluations by federal and Commonwealth oversight staff;
- Research new and/or improved methods to assist individuals with barriers to employment;
- Achieves training expenditure targets; and
- Develops sector initiatives

5.4 - What is the process the local board uses to provide a 30-day public comment period prior to plan submission of the plan, and describe the opportunity for input into development of the local plan, particularly for representatives of business, education, labor organizations, program partners, public agencies, and community stakeholders?

To obtain the best possible input from our key stakeholders in the development of this 4- year plan, the Berks WDB began our planning process nearly a year ago (in March 2024). As described in Section 1.4 (F) above, the President of a key economic development partner, the Greater Berks Development Fund (GBDF), is a Berks County WDB member and chairs the WDB's Planning Committee, which has oversight in the development of the four-year plan. GBDF is a partner agency in the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA).

Our Planning Committee membership consists of Board Members and non-Board members experienced in WIOA and other strategic plans. This talented planning team included leaders from economic development, county government and planning, higher education, community-based organizations (CBOs) engaged in workforce development, and local employers - including our County's largest employer. Our broader WDB Committee structure encourages ongoing stakeholder engagement with Board members as well as knowledgeable non-Board members in developing plans and priorities. Two other standing committees have also provided special input during this current planning cycle – (1) Youth, (2) Training & Industry Partnerships.

The first step in preparation of this plan consisted of our regular two-year review and update of our Industry Sector Priorities by the Planning Committee and the Training & Industry Partnership Committee. The WDB discussed and approved the revised Industry Sector Priorities in a public meeting on 6/21/2024. Following the meeting, the WDB's sector priorities were posted on our public webpage and distributed to our two local industry partnerships and to our education and training providers. Feedback over the past six months from all stakeholders confirms that these are the appropriate priority sectors for inclusion in the plan.

The Planning Committee and the Youth Committee next focused on developing and recommending five WIOA Local 4-Year Plan Goals which were also discussed and approved by the WDB in a public meeting 9/20/2024.

The Berks County WDB posted the proposed local plan on the County of Berks website – Berks County WDB page for public review and comment from May 2, 2025 to June 1, 2025. The posting of the plan was

advertised by official public notice published in The Reading Eagle on May 2, 2025. Public notice also advertised the Southeast PA Regional public meeting for comment held virtually April 28, at 2:00pm.

The Southeast PA regional plan comment period began April 21, 2025 and is posted on the Montgomery County Website. As mentioned above, the Berks County WDB participated in the Southeast PA Region's April 28, 2025, virtual meeting. During the meeting, there was no Berks County WDB plan comment.

The public notice of the local plan specified that public comments be submitted to the designated WDB staff member at acolumbo@berkspa.gov. There were xx public comments received for the Berks County local plan during the public comment period.

Local Area Plan Instructions

ATTESTATIONS
By checking the box adjacent to each line item, the local board attests to ensuring the compliance components and documents listed are (or will be) in place and effective prior to June 30, 2025. In the rare circumstance that something is not applicable, the local board must write "N/A" next to adjacent line item.

The following components and documents, including local workforce system policies, must be reviewed and revised as to be aligned with WIOA for the current planning cycle unless it is established as a best practice. Each item must be available to L&I at any time during the planning process and monitoring or auditing processes. L&I is not requiring copies of such documents to be attached to regional or local area plans at this time.

X The Berks County Local Workforce Development Area attests that each of the below referenced policies contain any required language or content and were last revised, if necessary, by this plan's effective date.

N/A Agreement between all counties and other local governments, if applicable, establishing the consortium of local and chief elected officials.

N/A Agreement between the chief elected official(s) and the fiscal agent, if a fiscal agent is designated.

X Agreement between the local area elected official(s) and the LWDB.

X LWDB policy and process that provides for nomination, appointment and removal of board members; resolutions; bylaws; code of conduct; and conflict of interest.

X Financial management policy and process including cost allocation plan; internal controls; cash management; receipts of goods; cost reimbursement; inventory and equipment; program income; travel reimbursement; audit requirements and resolution; annual report; property management; debt collection; and allowable costs.

X Local area procurement policy that must describe formal procurement procedures.

X Local area MOU.

X Program management policies and processes must include equal opportunity for customers; complaints and grievances; supportive services; one-stop operator local firewall (if applicable); file management; eligibility determination and verification; self-sufficiency criteria; self-attestation and certification random sampling; priority of service; training verification/refunds; individual training accounts; contracts for training services; statewide training providers list and eligibility verification; local area training provider list and eligibility criteria and process; "additional assistance" definition; work-based training policies including incumbent worker training, OJT, CT, and apprenticeship.

X It is best practice to have a risk management policy and process including records retention and public access; public records requests; monitoring, grievance; incident; and disaster recovery plan.

X It is best practice to have a human resources policy and process including employee classification; benefits; holidays and PTO; recruitment and selection; employee development; discipline; layoffs, terminations and severance; sexual harassment; and equal opportunity and non-discrimination.

N/A It is best practice to have professional services contract(s) for administrative services such as staffing and payroll, if applicable.

Attachment 1: Local Area WIOA Title I Programs Performance Accountability Tables

The Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry (L&I) negotiates WIOA Title I programs performance goals with the U. S. Department of Labor on a two-year program cycle, which aligns with the WIOA planning requirement of reviewing WIOA Local Area Plans every two years. In an effort designed to meet or exceed the state WIOA performance goals, PA negotiates these same goals with PA's local workforce development areas (LWDA) to optimally set each local area's WIOA Title I performance goal levels so that, collectively, the state negotiated performance goals are met or exceeded.

The *Local Area WIOA Title I Programs Performance Accountability Tables* are for the benefit of the public and Table A or Table B must be updated **annually with L&I supplied information as it becomes available**. The completed tables must be publicly posted with the local area plan. The local workforce development board (LWDB) does not need to perform a WIOA plan modification as the tables are revised; email notification to local area workforce development stakeholders including L&I will suffice.

Table A instructions: LWDBs must use Table A during initial local area plan development (i.e., PY25) and planned modification (i.e., PY27). LWDBs must edit the table's three columns with the appropriate program year(s) to correctly match the attained performance results from the most recent program year and LWDA-negotiated performance goals for the next two program years.

Table A	**LWDA Name: Berks County Workforce Development Board**		
WIOA Title I Programs (Adult-Dislocated Worker-Youth) Performance Measures	**Attained Performance Results**	**Negotiated Performance Goals**	**Negotiated Performance Goals**
	***Program Year 2023**	***Program Year 2024**	***Program Year 2025**
Employment (Second Quarter after Exit)			
Adult	82.3%	77%	77.5%
Dislocated Worker	81.8%	80.5%	81%
Youth	65.8%	71%	71.5%
Employment (Fourth Quarter after Exit)			
Adult	80.0%	75%	76%
Dislocated Worker	81.3%	80.5%	81%
Youth	57.9%	68%	68.5%
Median Earnings (Second Quarter after Exit)			
Adult	$8,783	$8,000	$8,100
Dislocated Worker	$12,406	$11,000	$11,500
Youth	$3,540	$3,000	$3,500
Credential Attainment Rate			
Adult	81.5%	80.5%	81%
Dislocated Worker	100%%	82%	82%
Youth	48.4%	52%	56%
Measurable Skill Gains			
Adult	96.9%	74%	75%
Dislocated Worker	95.0%	73%	74%
Youth	59.9%	60%	60%

Attachment 1: Local Area WIOA Title I Programs Performance Accountability Tables

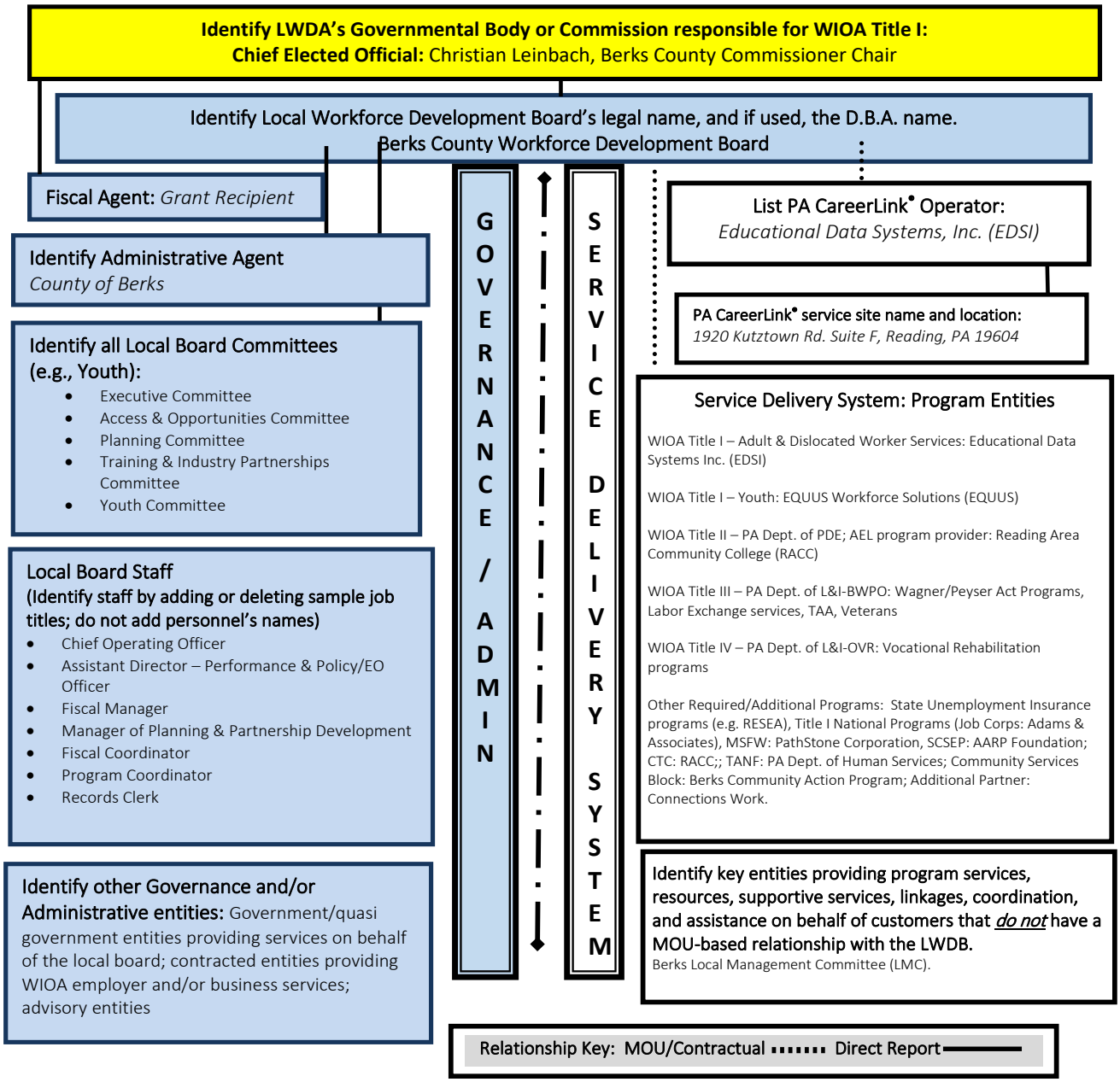
Table B instructions: LWDBs must use Table B for annual updates during "in-between" plan development (i.e., PY26 & PY28). LWDBs must edit the table's three columns with the appropriate program year(s) to correctly match the attained performance results from the most recent two program years and LWDA-negotiated performance goals for the upcoming program year.

Table B	LWDA Name: Berks County Workforce Development Board		
WIOA Title I Programs (Adult-Dislocated Worker-Youth) Performance Measures	**Attained Performance Results**	**Attained Performance Results**	**Negotiated Performance Goals**
	***Program Year 2023**	***Program Year 2024**	***Program Year 2025**
Employment (Second Quarter after Exit)			
Adult	%	%	%
Dislocated Worker	%	%	%
Youth	%	%	%
Employment (Fourth Quarter after Exit)			
Adult	%	%	%
Dislocated Worker	%	%	%
Youth	%	%	%
Median Earnings (Second Quarter after Exit)			
Adult	%	%	%
Dislocated Worker	%	%	%
Youth	%	%	%
Credential Attainment Rate			
Adult	%	%	%
Dislocated Worker	%	%	%
Youth	%	%	%
Measurable Skill Gains			
Adult	%	%	%
Dislocated Worker	%	%	%
Youth	%	%	%

Attachment 2: WIOA Local Workforce Development System Organizational Chart model

The organizational chart is for the benefit of the public and must be used to describe the attributes of the local workforce development system. The local workforce development board (local board) may supplement this model with clarifying charts. If multiple pages are needed to represent the local system, ensure that "Governance/Administrative" and "Service Delivery System" information is displayed on separate pages respectively. Use of model sub-titles is required. Do not list key governance personnel within the chart. Publicly post Attachment 2 with the local area plan.

This chart should be reviewed annually for revisions. If further revisions are required after a local area plan (or subsequent plan modification) is approved, another separate plan modification is not required.



Attachment 2: WIOA Local Workforce Development System Organizational Chart model

OPTIONAL Organizational Chart Point of Contact List

Title	Point of Contact Name	Telephone and/or Email
Example: Executive Director	Example: Jon Smith	Example: 717.727.1234
Chief Elected Official	Christian Leinbach	CLeinbach@berkspa.gov
Chief Operating Officer	Daniel Fogarty	610-898-5574 X2099 & DFogarty@berkspa.gov
Assistant Director – Performance/Policy & EO	Amber Columbo	610-898-5574 X2098 & AColumbo@berkspa.gov
Fiscal Manager	Megan Noll	610-898-5574 X2096 & Mnnoll@berkspa.gov
Manager of Planning & Partnership Development	Rory Stevenson	610-898-5574 X2095 & RStevenson@berkspa.gov
Fiscal Coordinator	Alycia Arters	610-898-5574 X2094 & AArters@berkspa.gov
Program Coordinator	Jesenia Santos	610-898-5574 X2097 & JSantos@berkspa.gov
Records Clerk	Karen Epler	610-898-5574 X2093 & Kepler@berkspa.gov

Local boards have the option to use the Organizational Chart point of contact list in lieu of inputting this information into a local area plan as narrative (e.g., into the plan proper).

Points of contact listed below, and the general office contact information (i.e., the associated phone numbers and/or email addresses), must align with entities identified on the WIOA Local Workforce Development System Organizational Chart. This includes but is not limited to: CEO and/or LEOs, local board main POC, fiscal agent, administrative agent, local board staff, equal opportunity officer, and contact information for PA CareerLink® operator(s), PA CareerLink® offices, and the Business Service Team).

Attachment 3: WIOA Local Workforce Development Delivery System Program Partner-Provider List

Local Workforce Development Area Name: Berks County LWDA

Effective Date (must align with current MOU): 07/01/2023

Local workforce development boards (local boards) may supplement this template with their own version if all required template information is reflected. Local boards must publicly post this list to address the public's need for access to service as mandated by the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA).

Required programs (as listed in WIOA sec. 121(b)(1)) and the corresponding program authorization information are pre-filled for convenience. In the event multiple providers provide the same program, it is the local board's responsibility to add this information accordingly. WIOA also specifies that one-stop centers may incorporate additional partner programs. Thus, the local board must ensure this document reflects the current PA CareerLink® Memoranda of Understanding and include any necessary additional partner program(s) contact information.

This list should be reviewed annually for revisions. If further revisions are required after a local area plan (or subsequent plan modification) is approved, another separate plan modification is not required.

Program Name	Program Authorization	Local Area Partner/Provider
POC address	POC telephone	POC website/email & POC Name (if known)
EXAMPLE: WIOA Title I Adult/DW	EXAMPLE: WIOA Title I program	EXAMPLE: ABC Inc.
EXAMPLE: 123 Main St. Anytown, PA 17001	EXAMPLE: XXX-XXX-XXXX	EXAMPLE: ABC.com / manager@abc.com
Adult Employment and Training Activities	WIOA Title I, Subtitle B, Chapter 3	Educational Data Systems Inc. (EDSI)
1920 Kutztown Rd. Suite F Reading, PA 19604	610-988-1314	www.edsisolutions.com dtissera@careerlinkberks.com Dilika Tissera
Dislocated Worker Employment and Training Activities	WIOA Title I, Subtitle B, Chapter 3	Educational Data Systems Inc. (EDSI)
1920 Kutztown Rd. Suite F Reading, PA 19604	610-988-1314	www.edsisolutions.com dtissera@careerlinkberks.com Dilika Tissera
WIOA Youth Workforce Activities	WIOA Title I, Subtitle B, Chapter 2	EQUUS Workforce Solutions

1920 Kutztown Rd. Suite F Reading, PA 19604	610-988-1320	www.equusworks.com Tprostovich@careerlinkberks.com Tristin Prostovich

Job Corps	WIOA Title I, Subtitle C	Keystone Job Corps
1920 Kutztown Rd. Suite F Reading, PA 19604	570-788-1164 Ext: 161	www.keystone.jobcorps.gov Kking@adamsaai.com Kelly King
Native American Programs	WIOA Title I, Sec. 166 (29 U.S.C. 3221)	Council of Three Rivers American Indian Center
1855 New Hope St. Norristown, PA 19401	1-800-341-3577 412-782-4457 Ext. 219	www.cotraic.org Kjevsevar@cotraic.org Kerry Jevsevar
National Farmworker Jobs Program (NFJP)	WIOA Title I, Sec. 167	PathStone Corporation
Local Location: 121 S. 2nd St. Reading, PA 19602 Partner Provided Services: 1920 Kutztown Rd. Suite F Reading, PA 19604	610-376-2850	www.pathstone.org Tjones@pathstone.org Tracy Jones
YouthBuild Program*	WIOA Title I, Sec. 171 (29 U.S.C. 3226)	*
*	*	*
Wagner-Peyser Act Employment Services Programs	Wagner-Peyser Act (29 U.S.C. 49 et. seq.), as amended by WIOA Title III	PA Department of Labor & Industry
1920 Kutztown Rd. Suite F Reading, PA 19604	484-280-0463	www.dil.pa.gov Ddopkin@pa.gov David Dopkin
Adult Education and Family Literacy Activities (AEFLA)	WIOA Title II Adult Education and Family Literacy Act program	Reading Area Community College
Local Location: 10 S. 2nd St. Reading, PA 19602 Partner Provided Services: 1920 Kutztown Rd. Suite F Reading, PA 19604	610-372-4271 Ext. 5122	www.racc.edu Cline@racc.edu Cindy Line

Vocational Rehabilitation State Grant Programs	Title I of the Rehabilitation act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 720 et. seq.), as amended by WIOA Title IV	PA Department of L&I, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
Local Location: 3602 Kutztown Rd. Ste 200 Reading, PA 19605 Secondary Location: 1920 Kutztown Rd. Reading, PA 19604	610-621-5800	www.dli.pa.gov KBaskett@pa.gov Kimberly Baskett
Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP)	Title V of the Older Americans Act of 1965 (42 U.S.C. 3056 et. seq.)	AARP Foundation
147 N. 5th St. 2nd Floor Reading, PA 19601	484-949-8716	www.aarp.org VBrown@aarp.org Veronica Brown
Postsecondary Career & Technical Education (Perkins V)	Carl D. Perkins Vocational & Applied Technology Act of 2006 (20 U.S.C. 2301 et. seq.) and (as amended Pub. L. No. 155-224)	Reading Area Community College (RACC)
Local Location: 10 S. 2nd St. Reading, PA 19602 Partner Provided Services: 1920 Kutztown Rd. Suite F Reading, PA 19604		www.racc.edu LKline@racc.edu Laura Kline
Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA)	Title II of the Trade Act of 1974 (19 U.S.C. 2271 et. seq.)	PA Department of Labor & Industry
1920 Kutztown Rd. Suite F Reading, PA 19604	484-280-0463	www.dil.pa.gov Ddopkin@pa.gov David Dopkin
Jobs for Veterans State Grant Programs	38 U.S.C. Chapter 41	PA Department of Labor & Industry
1920 Kutztown Rd. Suite F Reading, PA 19604	484-280-0463	www.dil.pa.gov Ddopkin@pa.gov David Dopkin
Employment and Training Activities—Department of Community Economic Development	Community Services Block Grant Act (CSBG) (42 U.S.C. 9901 et. seq.)	Berks Community Action Program, Inc. (BCAP)
645 Penn St. Reading, PA 19601	610-376-6571	www.bcapberks.org Lberringer@bcapberks.org Lawrence Berringer

Employment and Training Activities--- Department of Housing and Urban Development	Employment and Training activities carried out under Department of Housing and Urban Development	N/A *See explanation below
State Unemployment Insurance (UI) Program	Social Security Act 9 of 1935 (Title III, IX, and XII) and Federal Unemployment Tax Act (FUTA) of 1939	PA Department of Labor & Industry
1920 Kutztown Rd. Suite F Reading, PA 19604	717-783-3295	www.pa.gov Krkessler@pa.gov Kris Kessler
Reentry Employment Opportunities (REO) Programs	Second Chance Act of 2007, Sec. 212 (42 U.S.C. 17532) and WIOA Title I, Sec. 169	
N/A	N/A	N/A
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	(43 U.S.C. 601 et. seq.)	EARN Program – Educational Data Systems Inc. (EDSI)
1920 Kutztown Rd. Suite F Reading, PA 19604	610-898-6846	www.edsisolutions.com Ereadinger@careerlinkberks.com Elizabeth Readinger
		Department of Human Services
		www.dhs.pa.gov Ewhissler@pa.gov Edward Whissler
Rebuilding Reentrants in Reading (R3)	***Additional Partner*** *(provides reentry services)*	Connections Work
19 N. 5th St. 4th Floor Reading, PA 19601	484-260-3860	www.connectionswork.org Pkershner@connectionswork.org Peggy Kershner

* The following required partners are not located in the Berks County local workforce development area and therefore not represented in the local service system. Referrals to neighboring service providers are available upon request: Youth Build Program; Employment and Training Activities carried out by the Department of Housing and Urban Development; Reintegration of Offenders Program. As mentioned in section 4.2, the PA CareerLink® Administrator has had communication with both local housing agencies (Reading Housing Authority and Berks County Housing Authority), neither provide local Employment and Training Activities. Continued efforts will be made to search local HUD recipients.