

Rural Policy Plan –*Workforce Needs Focus Area Draft*

Section 1 - Goal for Enhancing Rural Conditions for the Workforce Needs Focus Area

Massachusetts needs to better address the unique needs of employers and current and prospective employees in rural areas through education and workforce system support that reduces barriers to employment.

Section 2 – The Key Issues related to Workforce Needs

The workforce development system serving large, rural geographic areas are disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of both funding and client accessibility. Funding for Career Centers is tied to the unemployment rate, which fluctuates and does not provide for a minimum level of staffing or facilities. As a result, a Career Center with a small staff or serving a large region is disproportionately affected when unemployment rates go down, despite the continued need to assist dislocated, unemployed or under-employed workers. Rural Career Centers must continuously apply for competitive grants from other sources, which are usually focused on innovative programming and not designed to provide core services.

Rural regions typically have fewer public and private educational institutions. Fortunately, community colleges are present and incorporated in rural workforce training systems. However, support is still needed to ensure and strengthen this connection. In addition, rural residents need more access to vocational and occupational education, Adult Basic Education, and including English as a second language (ESOL). Due to a variety of barriers, rural residents are disproportionately hindered in accessing jobs, career services, educational and training opportunities, due to a variety of barriers. These barriers include limited transit, limited childcare, and issues related to substance use disorder and/or criminal backgrounds, and digital literacy and limited access to internet/computers.

- The combined Franklin-Hampshire Workforce Development Area (WDA) and Berkshire WDA encompasses a 2,315 square mile geographic area or 30% of the state's total land area. Each of these WDAs have only one full-time Career Center, in Greenfield and Pittsfield respectively. These cities also host the only Transitional Assistance Offices, which is an essential state office that assists individuals and families with low incomes, in this geographic area.
- The Berkshire Hospitality Industry partnered with Berkshire Community College to develop three new noncredit certificates taught by industry experts. This program is designed to provide skills and experiences to meet the acute shortage of service professionals in the region, and to elevate the Berkshire experience for visitors and residents alike.
- The Cape & Islands Labor Market Blueprint highlights the “Blue Economy,” which includes all businesses that are either directly dependent on the water or are likely

located in the region because of the proximity to water. While the region's environment is a driver of the economy, it is also constrains it. Attracting a younger workforce or new businesses will require new development, which cannot be accommodated until the wastewater infrastructure is addressed.

- The Central Mass Labor Market Blueprint highlights the challenge for residents without a dependable vehicle to access job opportunities. There is a limited amount of fixed route public transit available outside of the cities of Fitchburg and Worcester.
- Community Action Pioneer Valley reports a significant decline in the number of child care services providers in their service area in recent years. This trend is consistent with a 2018 report from the Center for American Progress that stated "overall, rural areas have the highest concentration of child care deserts."¹ Working parents often have to drive farther distances to find childcare or may not be able to return to work at all because of the dearth of childcare options, creating barrier to success not found in more suburban and urban areas.

Section 3 - Relevant Existing Policies and Programs in Massachusetts

- *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* – This is a federal program that provides funds to support employment and training programs provided by regional MassHire Workforce Boards and MassHire Career Centers across the Commonwealth. This program provides the majority of funding for Career Centers in rural MA and is calculated based on the unemployment rate, which does not provide for a minimum service level. If the unemployment rate decreases, funds are reduced, which results in the loss of skilled staff and programming. When unemployment rates rise, Career Centers are not prepared to address the increased need for services.
 - *Workforce Training Fund Program* – A state program that provides grants to businesses, employer organizations and similar entities to train their current or new employees.
 - *Workforce Skills Cabinet* – The Baker-Politio Administration's initiative to better align education, labor and workforce development, and economic development systems across regions and the Commonwealth, which resulted in the creation of new five-year regional labor market blueprints in 2018. Through this initiative a more coordinated system is being established that seeks to more efficiently and cost effectively address worker and employer needs. However, due to rural areas being combined with their urban counterparts, rural workforce needs were difficult to highlight.
 - *Massachusetts Skills Capital Grant Program* - A competitive grant program to support vocational and technical training programs that funds the purchase and installation of
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equipment and related improvements and necessary renovations to install or use the equipment. This program provides the investment needed to keep up with employment sectors of particular importance to rural areas, such as manufacturing, construction, and hospitality.

Section 4 – Best Practice Examples for Workforce Needs

- **Career Education for Youth.** The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s School-to-Career/Connecting Activities Initiative, places workforce board staff in partner public schools to help implement an array of career development activities. Through this program, future workers are informed of the variety of careers available to them in the region.
- **Coordinated Government Services.** The Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and Career Center collaboration to provide work readiness skills, job search, and job placement assistance to DTA cash and work required recipients. By having organizations working collaboratively, individuals are able to leverage resources more efficiently, which is key given the limitations rural residents have to access services.
- **Connecting Community College Students to Jobs.** The Community College and Career Center TRAIN (Training Resources and Internship) Program, funded by the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, includes 60 hours of job readiness, occupational training, internship, and job placement for unemployed/underemployed residents in high demand manufacturing and food service/hospitality positions.
- **State-Funded/Subsidized Pre K and Childcare.** Approximately 5 states in the U.S. provide funding for universal Pre K or to ensure children in high need receive early education. This provides critical educational advantages to children, allows parents and guardians easier opportunity to rejoin the workforce, and subsidized early childcare salaries and professional development. The State of Washington provides preschool services and subsidizes private childcare providers. Contingent with this funding is an assessment of quality care. High quality providers are eligible for grants to be used for salary increases and tuition for ongoing staff education. North Carolina subsidizes childcare providers based on a licensing system that ensures level of care standards and provides higher subsidies to higher quality caregivers.¹

Section 5 - Policy, Program or Investment Recommendations to Enhance Rural Conditions

- **Provide state funding to stabilize and provide core funding to rural MassHire Career Centers.** The federal WIOA funding formula is tied to unemployment rates and to areas of significant unemployment that have a population of 10,000 or more. Both of these factors disproportionately impact Career Centers in regions of small population size but large geographic area.

- **Ensure an equitable distribution of workforce funds and program opportunities to rural areas.** Often state programs are out of reach for rural workforce providers because of sparse population density. These programs should be revised to include a rurality factor or waiver process. Rural areas are hindered by a lack of population density, which often is a disadvantage for meeting program thresholds. A waiver that allows for an expanded geography (such as a group of neighboring towns, rather than just one city) or for an expanded cohort of disadvantaged populations (for example, not solely disabled veterans, or solely long-term unemployed, or solely those on transitional assistance) should be considered.
- **Foster greater collaboration among public education and training institutions.** Enhance investment in program development and staffing of training programs that connect regional workforce boards, Career Centers, community colleges, and technical high schools.
 - **Develop and invest in MA universal pre K and childcare.** MA should be a leader in addressing universal childcare needs and addressing the childcare “dessert” in rural MA. Meeting the needs of the Commonwealth’s children, attracting people to the early childcare workforce with competitive salaries and training, and meeting the workforce needs of parents and guardians should be equal priorities.
- **Address unique rural barriers that prevent workers from joining the workforce.**
 - Public transportation is an essential economic and workforce development partner. **Invest in non-traditional transit models in rural areas to enhance workers' ability to commute to jobs and training**, such as flexible and dynamic transit services that use technology to adjust to real time demand by riders.
 - Access to early education/child care services in rural areas is a significant barrier for current and prospective workers. **Increase the Commonwealth’s child care reimbursement rate policies** to allow for-profit and non-profit providers to pay workers more, which would incentivize more people to work in the industry.

For Appendix

Stakeholders consulted: Many people, agencies and organizations were consulted in the drafting of this Plan. Recommendations contained in this document are not necessarily supported or endorsed by all parties listed below.

MassHire Career Centers and Workforce Boards – Berkshire County, Franklin-Hampshire, North Central
 BRPC
 CCC

Community Action Pioneer Valley

i “The Road to High Quality Early Learning: Lesson from the States”, Learning Policy Institute, June 2016.