



ANNUAL REPORT FOR CALENDAR YEAR 2022

This year's report highlights activities undertaken and lessons learned by the Berks County Workforce Development Board during and in response to a rapidly changing labor market environment as we began to emerge from the pandemic throughout calendar year 2022.

Top Three Accomplishments for 2022

A. Talent Development and Planning: Adult English Language (EL) Proficiency (PA WDB Goal #2)

Despite increasing wages and recruitment efforts throughout 2022, local employers once again ended the year with more open positions than qualified candidates for employment. In response, the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) focused on confirming and documenting how significant gaps in adult English language (EL) proficiency remain a major barrier to realizing the full potential of an emerging population of workers in Berks County, many newly arrived. In addressing this common barrier, the WDB is actively encouraging local employers to link up with our Title II Adult Education partners and other community-based organizations on multiple pilot projects to bring English Language training into the workplace. Such initiatives are showing great promise in expanding career pathways for eager-to-work jobseekers and incumbent entry-level workers alike. While the pilot programs now underway are mostly confined to our largest employment sector of manufacturing, we fully expect similar private-public projects to be launched in the next two years with local employers in healthcare, construction, food production and other growing industry sectors.

To fully understand current basic skills challenges and opportunities with our local adult workforce, the WDB formed the *Ad Hoc Taskforce on Adult English Language Proficiency and Numeracy* under the auspices of the WDB's Planning Committee. The Taskforce launched a series of structured listening sessions from December 2021-April 2022 with employers, adult members of the community, and workforce training providers, to better understand this complex challenge. Feedback was systematically gathered from listening sessions linking virtually with employers by industry and via separate in-person sessions with community members. This feedback, as well as employment trend data, were then reviewed and analyzed by members of the Taskforce in developing actionable recommendations. The full WDB accepted the Taskforce's report in June 2022 and is actively using the report to guide WDB priorities and planning for the next two years. Highlights from the report include the following findings:

- A lack of English Language (EL) proficiency is holding back many willing workers from fully contributing to local employers in key industries right now. Many community members who are English Language learners are often employed, but not in the jobs they most desire nor in jobs that they feel will lead to career paths with sufficient advancement potential to truly thrive and support their families.
- From a public policy and priorities perspective – relatively low/flat state and federal funding for Adult Basic Education (ABE) English Language programs is insufficient to address our local need to upskill our emerging workforce to replace retiring workers and others who have departed the local labor force over the past three years.
- Fully addressing this situation will require sustained shifts in public policy priorities that result in more funding to address this growing challenge. In the meantime, new models must include private employers' making their own investments in English language training. In addition to such investments, employers will need to

review and adjust many of their existing human resources' recruitment and incumbent worker retention and development strategies.

The WDB understands that the need to dramatically improve adult English Language proficiency is now mission-critical for too many of our jobseekers and employers and we are actively promoting that message throughout the community. Meeting this challenge will require a sustained County-wide effort through a problem-solving dialogue with and among our local education partners, elected officials, community organizations, philanthropic funders, and employers going forward. The Berks County WDB looks forward to continuing our local leadership role in this important work.

B. Expansion of the PA Dream Team-Berks County (PA WDB Goal #4)

As detailed in the Berks County WDB's 4-Year WIOA Plan, our Berks singular "Priority A" Industry Sector is manufacturing. The WDB's ongoing industry sector analysis and engagement with local economic development partners leads us to conclude that building an ever-stronger manufacturing workforce in our region will foster an attractive manufacturing investment environment, resulting in expanding economic output and the retention of tens of thousands of good jobs and careers in the sector. Clearly, the decade ahead offers attractive career opportunities for manufacturing workers and employers who are prepared and positioned to compete and ever-growing risks for those who are not.

In 2022, the Berks County WDB continued its commitment to career readiness initiatives in support of our 70,000 K-12 students as they prepare for attractive career opportunities that await them here in the communities where they are growing up. For example, the Berks County WDB secured Business Education Partnership (BEP) IV Grant funds to support our sub-grantees the Manufacturers Resource Center (MRC) and the Berks County Intermediate Unit (BCIU) in launching and expanding the PA Dream Team-Berks County. This best practice program introduces 5th through 12th grade students to the value of technical training and Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) education leading to the many career opportunities available in modern manufacturing. Our local 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, STEM curricula, and technical education opportunities available. The team makeup has grown from an initial cadre of ten members to the current cohort of fourteen diverse young professionals from nine participating Berks County manufacturers. As interest momentum grows, we are actively recruiting new Dream Team members from other Berks County manufacturing employers.

In-school presentation rollout commenced during the 2021-2022 school year and quickly generated great demand from educators in all 18 Berks County school districts. As a result, our PA Dream Team-Berks County members visited 80 classrooms during the initial 2021-22 school year and connected with over 2,100 Berks County students to promote careers in manufacturing. Our 2022-2023 school year activity began rapidly in Fall 2022 and is expected to surpass the previous school year's impressive results. Through the first half of the 2022-2023 school year, the PA Dream Team-Berks County has presented 37 times to 1,200 students. Ongoing requests encompass multiple classroom presentations, community appearances and Career Technology Education (CTE) provider open houses.

C. PA CareerLink® Berks County Active Return to In-Person Job Fairs (PA WDB Goal #4)

During the height of the pandemic, in-person Job Fairs were not a viable option so our PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team switched to organizing virtual platform events and mini outdoor events. These successful outdoor "tent events" creatively reserved available parking lot space in front of the PA CareerLink® Berks County as an alternative option to bring employers and jobseekers back together safely.

With more local job openings than candidates throughout 2022, Berks County employers increasingly requested and embraced traditional in person recruitment events. Not surprisingly, employer interest was off the charts when the PA CareerLink® Berks County returned to hosting large in-person Job Fairs in 2022. Our highly

successful Spring 2022 Job Fair saw 90 employers connect with 552 jobseekers. During the Fall 2022 Job Fair, 98 employers met another 552 jobseekers in attendance. Overall, feedback from participating employers was quite positive for both events.

Success Stories

A. Estefany

In December 2021, Estefany attended the PA CareerLink® Berks County “Welcome Orientation” and expressed an interest in training for her Commercial Driver's License (CDL A). As a single mother who was permanently separated from her last employer due to the expiration of her family medical leave, Estefany applied for federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and received Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Adult program eligibility.

After helping Estefany register for WIOA services, her PA CareerLink® Berks County case manager encouraged Estefany’s enrollment in our “Success Starts Here” course. After securing childcare, Estefany completed a number of our employment workshops including “Success Starts Here.”

Next, Estefany was provided access to a Worldwide Interactive Network (WIN) Learning Career Readiness assessment with which she had some difficulty due to her English language comprehension challenges. As an alternative, Estefany’s case manager arranged for her to take the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) assessment offered onsite at the PA CareerLink® Berks County by our Young Adult Program proctors. Estefany performed well enough on the assessment to initiate an application for CDL training funds through her desired Individual Training Account (ITA). Persevering despite an unfortunate personal loss which delayed her plans, Estefany returned to the program, completed her ITA application and was approved to start training on May 2, 2022 with eligible training provider RCY CDL Training. She successfully completed her CDL A training and passed the Commercial Driver's License road test on July 6, 2022.

Following successful attainment of her valuable Commercial Driver's License, Estefany remained in close touch with her PA CareerLink® Berks County WIOA Adult program employment specialist who provided encouragement as well as appropriate job leads for which Estefany could apply. As a result of her training and persistence, Estefany accepted a position with Dollar General in Bethel, PA as a Yard Jockey, beginning on August 31, 2022 at \$19.00/hour, 40 hours a week.

In October 2022, Estefany returned to the PA CareerLink® Berks County to inform staff that she had been called to interview for a job, applied for prior to her Dollar General employment, with the PA Department of Transportation (PennDOT). The interview being successful, Estefany completed PennDOT’s pre-employment process, readily accepted an offer for a “Transportation Equipment Operator A” position with PennDOT’s Berks County Maintenance Office, and is now working 40 hours a week with a starting wage of \$21.00/hour.

B. Ania

Ania joined the PA CareerLink® Berks County Young Adult Program through our re-entry partnership with Berks Connections Pretrial Services (BCPS) in April 2022. Being involved with the justice system, a single mother of two children and not having a high school equivalency diploma were all significant barriers preventing Ania from finding meaningful family-sustaining employment. Her goals upon entering the program were to obtain her diploma and participate in paid work experience.

Ania worked with our Young Adult program instructors to review materials and study for her exams. Having some time lapse from school, she had plenty of hard work ahead of her. However, through determination and excellent attendance she was able to earn her High School Equivalency diploma in June 2022. This was an outstanding accomplishment achieved within two months of enrolling in the program!

Having achieved her first goal of earning her High School Equivalency diploma, Ania continues to work with our Young Adult program, exploring different career pathways now open to her.

C. Luz

Luz entered the Employment, Advancement and Retention Network (EARN) Program during the summer of 2021, this being her fourth referral to the program. In previous enrollments, she readily found employment and quickly moved on. This time around started similarly, in wanting to get a job immediately to alleviate her financial stress. The EARN team took the opportunity to dig deeper and help her clarify her goals and potential barriers to long-term success including daily stress, and her current frame of mind.

Luz had her difficulties at the beginning of this latest EARN enrollment when it came to attendance, but little by little, she adapted to her schedule and became comfortable with our personalized services. After attending a workshop delivered by the EARN Instructor on the qualitative differences between just “getting a job” and pursuing a career, Luz began to feel differently about finding a position that might provide entry to a long-term career. She worked with our instructor to identify action steps she would need to take to begin pursuing such a career. Along the way, EARN program case managers assisted Luz with barrier remediation, and our EARN family advocate assisted her with stress management strategies

In October of 2021, Luz was very excited to share that she would start employment with Supportive Concepts as a Residential Specialist. This initial position was part-time making \$15.00 an hour. She was happy with this opportunity and eagerly began her employment on October 18th keeping in touch with the EARN team with updates every week. She liked her new work environment and felt welcomed by the team and supervisor, motivating her to explore additional opportunities with Supportive Concepts.

In May 2022, Luz was offered and accepted promotion to her new role as a full-time Supervisor making \$19.49/hour. As Luz began leading her team, the EARN Program continued to mentor her through a successful transition into her new position. Luz was thriving at work, but during the summer of 2022, she encountered a new challenge that would become a significant obstacle to her continued success. Luz shared with the EARN team that she was having transportation issues with her vehicle requiring repairs to be reliable and safely operational. Unfortunately, Luz simply did not have sufficient finances to cover the repairs. While she did not miss a day of work carpooling with a co-worker, Luz now faced the daily stress of hoping the co-worker would not call-off work. The EARN team prepared an allowance request, and between the Berks County Assistance Office (CAO) and the EARN program, Luz received the funding needed for the car repairs to retain her employment. Luz welcomed the financial assistance, thankful that her life became much more manageable once the car was drivable. Luz has since continued to excel at her new position, increasing her earnings to \$23.00/hour full-time and enjoying her work and her place of employment.

Luz now feels ready to prepare academically for her next career step by going back to school for GED instruction in a classroom setting. Her long-term goal is to become a Licensed Practical Nurse and the EARN Program looks forward to continuing support for her along the way.

Luz is just one more example that while the clients’ initial objectives may change along their journey, they can rely on continuing EARN program guidance to sustain their resilience, confidence, and to assist them in reaching their career goals.

Challenges

A. Employer Fatigue/Human Resources Turnover

Our unprecedented local labor market imbalance in favor of jobseekers over employers has continued to grow in severity over the past four years and the pandemic certainly exacerbated this trend. Simply put, we have many more job openings than we have jobseekers, let alone jobseekers with the skills needed by employers in our priority sectors of manufacturing, healthcare and construction. As a result of this imbalance, throughout

2022 we saw increasing signs of fatigue among local human resource (HR) professionals who have been frantically treading water to simply maintain staffing levels much less make measurable progress against the number of open positions with which they began the year. The coinciding “Great Resignation” of many experienced hiring managers, trainers and HR professionals over the past few years has further hindered employer progress in returning to desired staffing levels. At the same time, the WDB has confirmed that such disruptions have created abundant opportunities for talented HR professionals to change employers for better pay, benefits and career opportunities. With so many HR professionals on the move, it has been increasingly difficult for our PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST) as well as the WDB to keep up with the changes. Despite this challenge, we continue to successfully engage with our employers and to help them focus on retaining and developing their existing talent (see *Promising Practices* section below).

B. Post-pandemic Job Seeker Outreach

As we emerge from the depths of the pandemic into a new and different labor market, the Berks County WDB remains committed to jobseeker outreach in hopes for a sustained recovery in visitor traffic to the PA Career-Link® Berks County office. In developing our PY2022 contractor and WIOA negotiated performance goals, outreach was a top priority to ensure the measures would be met. We continue to work closely with all of our contractors, prioritizing staff and resources to complete outreach for their respective programs. This includes the WDB providing timely and effective technical assistance to the program contractors in support of reaching our program year enrollment goals.

Promising Practices

A. Biannual Review and Amendment of Berks County WDB’s Priority Industry Sectors Strategy

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. 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, employer recruitment and retention of 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 these common critical skills needs.
- Improved alignment which breaks down “silos” among the WDB and our partners in economic development, education, community-based organizations, etc. as we collaborate to meet the common skills needs identified in conjunction with local employers.

In keeping with this employer engagement strategy and in preparation for the post-pandemic modification of our WIOA four-year local plan, the WDB updated its most recent bi-annual analysis of local industry sectors in September 2022. Using the latest economic data and labor market information, the WDB confirmed and approved six priority industry sectors to focus on through 2027:

1. Priority A Sector – Manufacturing
2. Priority B Sectors – Healthcare and Construction
3. Priority C Sectors – Agriculture, Transportation & Warehousing, and Educational Services

B. Promoting Employer Best Practice Employee Development and Retention Strategies.

Two years ago, the Berks County WDB published our *Employer Retention and Development Best Practices Study*. The study’s most important recommendation was that we integrate its findings and recommendations into our

annual goals and future strategic plans. Subsequently, the Berks County WDB has been quite encouraged by the implementation of our increased focus on identifying and sharing employer best practices during the first two years of our WIOA 2021-2024 Local WDB multi-year Plan. For example, in response to a specific goal set for our Business Services Team (BST) in program year 2021, the BST identified the Distribution Center of Boscov's Department Store, LLC as an exemplary "best practice" local employer in implementing numerous best practices strategies such as those recommended in the study. One such area of best practice at Boscov's DC was the company's translating of all signage and work-related documents into Spanish and hiring numerous bilingual supervisory staff and a bilingual Human Resources/Training Supervisor. These and a long list of other best practices were detailed in a formal resolution adopted by the full Berks County WDB on June 17, 2022 recognizing the company as a "Best Practice Local Employer." We have tasked the BST with identifying additional best practice employers for recognition in the current program year.

C. Berks County Employer Outreach Team (EOT)

The Berks County labor market has continued to experience shortages of willing and available talent for new and replacement jobs that preceded and were only exacerbated by the pandemic. In order to avoid "employer fatigue" from multiple outreach activities, it is critical that employer outreach activities are coordinated and communicated among various PA CareerLink® Berks County program teams and one-stop partners. This is accomplished through a structured Employer Outreach Team (EOT). The EOT is comprised of representatives from the Business Services Team, the Employment, Advancement and Retention Network (EARN) and Young Adult programs, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), Veteran's Services, Job Corps, Berks County Workforce Development Board, Berks Connections/Pretrial Services, and other community agencies 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 and diminish employer program fatigue, and to maximize job seeker placements through the sharing of hiring information. Two of the most obvious benefits from this collaboration during 2022 was corroboration of critical in-demand hiring needs directly expressed by healthcare employers and sharing information of known second-chance employers for job-seeking individuals who have criminal history barriers to employment.

Request for Additional State Guidance

As a best practice for providing technical assistance, the PA Department of Labor & Industry has developed a financial management guide and implemented monthly fiscal trainings to review federal and state (L&I) compliance requirements with all local WDBs.

However, local WDBs have been unable to receive similar technical assistance from the PA Department of Human Services (DHS) on the passed through Employment, Advancement and Retention Network (EARN) funds. We would like to see DHS develop and implement a financial guide and similar training practice to eliminate the any improper use of EARN funds and to assist in meeting compliance requirements set by DHS.