

Northwest Workforce Council 2018 Strategic Plan Update

1. *How has the local board (“The Council”) coordinated business engagement in this area, including engagement with small employers and in-demand industry sectors?*

The Council uses multiple strategies in continuing its efforts to coordinate business engagement and, in particular, to align training and service delivery with high-demand occupations and skill clusters in the Council’s identified in-demand industry sectors. Key sectors in the NW region include: health and allied services, manufacturing and construction.

Two *new* strategies to highlight (since the initial 2016-2020 plan) are: 1) a research report, *Workforce Hiring Trends*, identifying the specific skills most in demand in two key industry sectors in the region; and, 2) piloting with one of the region’s small business development centers to expand outreach and coordination of business engagement in the region, particularly with small employers. More detail on both are provided immediately below.

Additionally, the Council has focused on increasing training opportunities and business connections through expanding Apprenticeship activities and opportunities, highlighted throughout this report.

- **Workforce Hiring Trends - Construction and Manufacturing**

In support of the Council’s emphasis on industry engagement, the Council commissioned Western Washington University’s Center of Economic and Business Research to identify employer defined industry trends in desired hiring qualifications. Specifically, the goal was to survey construction and manufacturing businesses in the region, in order to articulate the specific skills, competencies and certifications businesses are looking for in entry-level and incumbent workers. The completed report is intended to create a foundation piece for employers, as well as to inform the Northwest region workforce development system, and further a coordinated industry engagement strategy across the multiple programs seeking to train and place workers with employers in these sectors. In conducting its research, the Center of Economic and Business Research interviewed 39 firms in the NW region: 18 in construction, and 21 in the manufacturing sector. The construction firms were, for the most part, small employers, with an average workforce of 57.

The report, *Workforce Hiring Trends: Construction and Manufacturing in Whatcom, Island and Skagit Counties*, was widely shared among the Council’s regional partners. Key skills and competencies identified by most employers in the Construction sector included: ability to use precision measurement and tools (88% of respondents) and blueprint literacy (77% of respondents). Manufacturing sector employers most often identified: ability to use precision measurement and tools; basic computer literacy; and forklift/scissor lift certification (81% of respondents for all three skills). Employers in both sectors identified additional skills, detailed fully in the report, and also identified specific work (“soft”) skills required, such as teamwork or teambuilding skills, work ethic and ‘work maturity’ as critical skills for success in employment. The report is available on the Council’s website: www.nwboard.org.

These skills and competencies, and other key skills identified in the Report, are integrated into all Council funded training in those priority sectors including Pre-Apprenticeship Training offerings funded by the Council and highlighted later in this Plan update.

- **Reaching New Employers through Contract with Small Business Development Center**

As a means of shoring up the workforce development system's contributions to economic growth and business expansion, the Council has piloted with the Western Washington University Small Business Development Center (SBDC) to equip this business-to-business entity to better identify, assist and refer local businesses that are likely candidates to utilize the workforce development system's resources in hiring and training their workforce. As the vast majority of businesses in the region are small businesses, this contract also aligns coordinated human capital development service for the small employers in the region. Through the contract, SBDC assists their business contacts in, among other tasks: identifying businesses in priority sectors that are considering hiring, as well as in those industries that support the key sectors; providing those businesses with information on resources to hire and train workers; completing preliminary review of skills needed for job openings, and referring those businesses to a single point of contact with the Council to initiate customization of employment and training services with the employer. In this strategy, employers looking to expand, upskill and or diversify their workforce, whether immediate or for future reference, have workforce development resources integrated with other business service offerings to assist with their business decisions.

In addition to these newer strategies, the Council has continued its decades long collaborations with industry associations and priority sector employers to create actionable plans to meet those employer needs.

Notable collaborations, reflective of Council actions to coordinate business engagement over the past several years include:

- **Council Funded Expansion of Medical Assisting Training to Meet Employer Demand**

The Council responded to regional healthcare provider needs to increase the number of trained Medical Assistants (MA). Closure of a local private college abruptly curtailed the number of trained MA graduates. In response, through a partnership with Whatcom Community College, the Council acted quickly to fund additional training slots to increase the number of MA graduates to help fill position openings.

- **Focus on Apprenticeship Training**

Apprenticeship training has long been a proven route to job skills that facilitate strong earnings for job seekers, and well-trained employees for businesses. With a robust construction sector over the past several years in the Northwest region, Preapprenticeship training in construction trades, short term skill building leading to Apprenticeship opportunities, has proven very effective in meeting employer demand for workers in that sector. The Council has recently funded a series of successful Preapprenticeship Training classes to meet employer needs in the Construction Sector, in coordination with training partners and local employers. Training partners have included: Apprenticeship and NonTraditional Employment for Women (ANEW) providing Preapprenticeship classes in the

Construction Trades, and Pacific Northwest Ironworkers and Employers Joint Apprenticeship Training Program #86, providing training to qualify graduates for direct entry into the Ironworkers Apprenticeship Program, with the immediate wages and benefits to job seekers that that trade provides.

- **Career Connected Learning and Registered Apprenticeship Expansion Activities**

The Council and local business and workforce training partners secured funding to support career connected learning that engages and trains young adults on 21st century skills employers need, particularly in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) occupations. The funds also support expansion of Registered Apprenticeship programs in the marine manufacturing sector. A regional Career Connect Team consisting of Business and Industry Champions, a Local School District, a High School Dropout Re-engagement program, and a post-secondary institution provide oversight of grant funded activities, including achievement of the grant goals.

2. *How has the local board facilitated access to services for all jobseekers and employers in their workforce system, including rural and remote areas?*

The Council continues to work with partners in continuous quality improvement activities to develop new effective ways to facilitate access to services to both jobseeker and employer customers. Several of the activities described in the previous section are also applicable here. The Council has facilitated access to job seekers and employers through:

- The contract with Western Washington Small Business Development Center to facilitate employer access to the workforce system.
- The Career Connect Grant activities, including the work of the Career Connect team of representatives of business, career and technical education, apprenticeship training, and secondary and post-secondary schools.
- The coordination of Apprenticeship training offerings, with a focus on outreach to bring in young adults, dislocated workers, and other job seekers to participate in the effective pathways to well paid jobs, filling positions in demand by local employers.

In addition, several of new or recently completed service features, among others, are highlighted here.

- **“WorkSource Wednesday”** is a regularly scheduled, on-site hiring event, developed as a response to employer desire to have better in-person access to WorkSource job seeker candidates. Employers indicated they did not want to wait for large annual or semi-annual hiring events, but instead asked for smaller ongoing events where they could drop in on a regular basis as their business demanded. Job seekers unanimously wanted more businesses onsite. In response, “WorkSource Wednesday” was developed. Data collected since inception indicates value for both the job seekers and the businesses that have participated.

- **WorkSourceWA Live Chat Feature and Related Improved Remote Access.** The Northwest region actively participates in the WorkSource WA Live Chat feature. Live chat provides a business or job seeker with internet access the ability to ask questions and get assistance with their workforce

related needs no matter where they are located. The region's Live Chat agents are involved with a statewide team to assist other regions in improving their dropped call rates to the low levels achieved in the Northwest region. Text messaging and Skype conferencing from libraries and other public access locations are both new and improved methods for facilitating access for all jobseekers and employers, no matter the distance from regional centers.

- **Services in Remote Areas**

While improved electronic access has assisted many new customers to gain access, job fairs and other outreach activities at more remote sites throughout the four county WDA are maintained, utilizing facilities such as libraries, family service centers, tribal facilities and other locations. Individual partner agency staff view themselves as representatives of the WorkSource system of services, and function as a gateway to all partner services for job seekers and employers.

- **Juvenile Justice Outreach**

Accelerated outreach activities in recent months with Juvenile Justice authorities and service providers facilitates access to this group of young adults. Activities include regular visits to the juvenile detention center at the county courthouse to inform the young adults about WorkSource programs and services, and to strengthen relationships with probation officers to facilitate access for this hard to serve population. Expansion of this pilot is underway.

3. How has the local board leveraged their network of workforce system partners to improve the customer service experience for job seekers and employers?

The Council convenes and has long sustained a team-based governance structure from which to ensure the highest performance and integration of the local workforce development system to continually improve the customer service experience for both job seekers and employers.

The Northwest Workforce System (partnership) Management Team and the regional WorkSource Operations Group has recently collaborated on building the region's application for WorkSource Certification. The NWC's application is a rigorous "accreditation" activity which describes recent system work in affording job seekers and employers universal access to services and facilities and an improved customer service experience. The application included continuous quality improvement targets and projects, workforce and process focus, results, and a detailed three-year work plan for the region's three certified WorkSource Career Centers. All strategic objectives in the WorkSource workplan support one or more of the local workforce plan's strategic goals. Key strategic approaches included in the workplan, many of which are well underway, include the following features for improved customer service.

- a. Fully developing and implementing the regional customer flow plan. This plan, developed through a professionally facilitated, cross-functional, multi-agency work team, describes a customer-responsive design of moving to and through services available from the local workforce system. The design is structured to enhance program integration and performance outcomes, as well as the customer's experience with the system.

The flow plan is supported by a design for a robust referral system which meets WIOA compliance for access, as well as providing all system staff detailed, on-demand information and access to program expertise from across the full array of local WIOA required and voluntary programs.

- b. The workforce partnership maintains a secure, online, knowledge management system as a crucial component in assuring customer access to the system and its many services. Known as DAWN, the knowledge management system is the repository for essential information and tools needed by system staff across the region. For example, workforce partners have recently undertaken a reorganization and refreshment of program referral information to ensure each staff member across the system has real time, accurate information on all programs' targeted audience, eligibility, outcome metrics, key individual contact information, and next steps guidance. This desk guide is available to all partnership staff 24/7.

With information such as this at each staff's fingertips, they are well informed on how to assist customers in navigating the complexities of the system and to the programs and services that might offer them the highest value. Additionally, DAWN is the repository of tools, links, and information to assist individuals with a disability, wherever they might seek services within the workforce system. The partners are currently reviewing and updating the content to ensure all system staff have the tools and support they need to provide unconstrained access for all current and potential customers.

- c. A coordinated approach to outreach activities to ensure wide coverage (access), key messaging points, leveraged resources, and alignment of various programs' efforts in reaching shared audiences.
- d. Improving the system's ability to obtain, record, display, analyze and apply data to continuous quality improvement initiatives and performance management is a focus area for the Council. Cross partner organization training by the One Stop System Operator is well underway. In addition, dashboard software was recently purchased by NWC to support these efforts. The software, known as iDashboards, is a data visualization software package. The dashboard software will help to make the complex performance environment of workforce development more approachable and understandable through interactive charts and graphic representation.

WorkSource Centers in the Northwest region continue to grow in their capacity to offer first-door access to the workforce development system. More programs than ever are now represented in the Centers as a residential presence or via a scheduled, itinerant presence. Customers now have on-site access to: vocational rehabilitation services, Labor & Industries return to work programs, Job Corps recruitment and placement, TANF and other offerings of DSHS Community Service Offices, community and technical colleges, energy assistance programs and health insurance navigators.