

1. GENERAL CONTEXT & OVERVIEW

Union County's workforce development system consists of the Workforce Development Board and the American Job Centers, which operate sites in Elizabeth, Plainfield, and a new and highly successful Workforce Innovation Center at the Mills at Jersey Gardens Mall.

Since 2013, WDB has operated within the County's Department of Economic Development and the American Job Center within the Department of Human Services. The staff at the Workforce Development Board (WDB) and the American Job Center entity, with its three America's Job Centers as they are now called, work collaboratively with each other and their partner agencies to implement workforce-related policies and development services in the areas of training and employment. Despite some challenges, this reporting arrangement has ensured a sensible separation of the policy-setting body from the implementation side of the operation and involved the County's Executive, staff, and Board of Freeholders more readily in labor and workforce development.

This Local Plan, which represents the County's strategic priorities, is in direct response to the State's directive for its counties' workforce development systems to prepare their plans consistent with New Jersey's two foundational goals for strategic talent development and in line with its five critical themes.

New Jersey's Talent Development Foundation Goals

1. Building an innovative, skilled workforce to power economic growth
2. Building economic opportunity for all New Jersey residents

Critical Themes:

1. Build Career Pathways with a focus on Industry-Valued Credentials
2. Expanding High-Quality Employer-Driven Partnerships
3. Strengthen Career Navigation Assistance through American Job Centers and Broad Partnerships
4. Strengthen Governance through Effective Workforce Development Boards and Regional Collaborations
5. Ensure System Integrity through Metrics and Greater Transparency.

It should be noted at the outset, however, that the Union County system has been engaged in addressing new WIOA guidelines and had already instituted quite a few strategic changes and improvements consistent with these guidelines. Furthermore, the American Job Center was selected for monitoring review under the WIA-to-WIOA transition process, which expedited the implementation of some of these changes. As such, developing this Plan has preceded the request by the

State and has engaged the Board and its committees in broad conversations within the County and among staff in both WDB and the American Job Center system. The Plan includes far-reaching strategies that will be embarked upon over the next few years and will serve to affirm and advance recent reforms already in place.

In fact, the Board had engaged the Rutgers University Heldrich Center **(Attachments A & B)** to complete a review of the American Job Center services (June 2015), and its Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy to conduct a comprehensive economic assessment of the County (May 2016) **(Attachment C)**. This Strategic Plan has been informed by these reviews, and builds, to a great extent, on the recent 2014-2017 Union County Unified Workforce Investment Plan **(Attachment D)**.

The Union County Workforce Development Strategic Plan is designed to be a stand-alone unified document, which simultaneously meets the State's requirements for Local Plans **(Attachment E)**. It briefly presents the context for the upcoming strategic priorities, describes the current status of services and programming and offers new directions for proceeding forward under WIOA as well as a list of tasks and activities to be completed as the workforce system pursues these strategies.

The Plan will inform the immediate design of a unified plan of action, which will include timelines, measures of progress and performance, and a clear prioritization scheme.

A SNEAK PREVIEW OF IDENTIFIED STRATEGIES

The System is fully cognizant of the two groups of customers it serves:

- Residents of Union County and the region who seek or need its services in the area of training and employment
- Employers across various industry sectors within Union County and the region that require a well-trained, job-ready workforce, need support for its current group of employees in critical situations and rely on advocates within the county and region to facilitate the employers' success and contributions to local and regional economic growth.

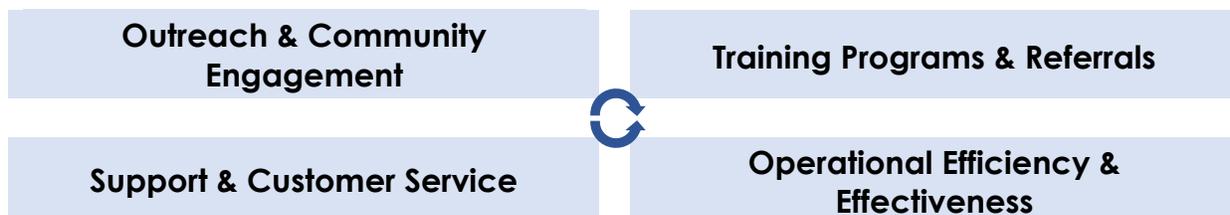
The System sees itself as both an effective catalyst for economic development and a major resource for employment and training. Toward greater economic development, it must help make critical business connections and serve as a bridge between businesses, the County, and the State. Toward better training and employment, it must help residents overcome unemployment,

underemployment, and economic struggles and guide them along a path of successful professional growth. Such a dual vision establishes the ultimate direction and tone for this Plan.

Within this context, the Plan is based on the strategic premise that by focusing deliberately and systematically on both employers and trainees, a few scenarios and outcomes are possible. In essence, this constitutes the Theory of Change that supports the Plan:

- Engaging them in shaping local training activities and structuring relevant work-experience programs makes employers active participants in the workforce system.
- When they participate in job-seeking activities, such as coursework, internships, on-the-job training, [pre-apprenticeships/apprenticeships](#), and customized training, job seekers become adequately qualified to secure and retain locally available jobs.
- Going “vertical” and engaging employers and educators on a sector-by-sector basis, with a sharp focus on growing sectors, ensures that subject matter experts from those sectors participate in decision-making and planning.
- Using technology to streamline connections between job seekers, employers, the American Job Center Employment Centers, and educators accelerates time-to-job placement and results in more suitable, sustainable matches between job seekers and employers.
- By participating in planning and professional development, American Job Center staff becomes empowered and to see their role as “career counseling” rather than “job placement” and makes accessing data on changing workforce/sector trends relevant.
- Adopting a collaborative regional approach toward systemic changes that involves business and educational partners enhance coordination and sharing of resources among workforce development professionals and policymakers.

With these outcomes in full view, the Plan identifies key strategies in a number of work areas of the Board and American Job Center, as displayed in the next diagram. One feature of the strategies is that they are and interdependent. They address the State’s Strategic Workforce Themes while introducing a very specific discussion around workforce improvement opportunities and strategies at both management/operational levels of the Union County Workforce System, as well as public-facing strategies from training to outreach.



The Plan is ambitious in that it seeks, through its goals and strategies, to shift the workforce development's service paradigm, according to the model below.

| From Pre-WIOA Model | >> | To Post-WIOA Model |
|---|----|---|
| Independently-operating systems | | Regional collaboration/coordination |
| Supply-driven/Employer Advisors | | Demand-responsive/Employer Partners |
| Attention to outputs | | Data-based, outcome-oriented thinking |
| Space-located training | | Self-paced, anywhere, anytime e-Learning |
| Focus on job placement | | Focus on long-term career building |
| Staff-assisted job search | | Online employment marketplace |
| Staff as case managers | | Staff as career-planning coaches |
| Paper-based processes | | Web-based processes linked to data system |
| Innovation initiated by leadership | | A culture of learning innovation within |
| (*) Inspired by a Corporation for Skilled Workforce Concept paper, Ed Strong, 3/2012. | | |

Informed by this framework and by the deliberations and documentation presented in the Plan's process section, six strategic goals have been identified and are presented in this Plan with tentative priorities set at the level of High/Urgent **(H/U)**, Medium/Needed **(M/N)**, or Lower/Desired Level **(L/D)**.

In support of these strategies, sub-strategies follow in the body of this Plan to guide the "next steps" of action planning.

Goal 1. Increased Emphasis on Career Pathways, Industry-Credential Attainment and Pre-apprenticeship/Registered apprenticeship participation. (Level: M/N)

WIOA makes the development of career pathway strategies a function of the local workforce board. Combining high-quality education, training, and other services that align the skill needs of industries requires rigorous system realignment. A local career pathway partnership might encompass multiple educational settings (e.g., adult education, post-secondary remedial instruction, post-

secondary credit instruction, work-based learning) and multiple funding sources (e.g., WIOA Titles I and II, Carl D. Perkins CTE). The noted emphasis of credential attainment as a performance measure within WIOA further exemplifies the importance of funding training that delivers industry demanded skills.

Union County will prioritize participant enrollment into registered apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs and initiatives. These two program areas incorporate by design both theory and experiential learning that businesses and industry often request, simultaneously establishing career pathways for participants to pursue.

Action Planning

Continue to support the growth of the health care and TLD sectors and expand efforts in other target industries by examining methods to expand attainment of industry credentials and support employers as they seek skills that they require to compete effectively in today's global economy.

Strategies

- a. Transform job seekers into job candidates and connect them to the labor market through skill-enhancement training.
- b. Begin to examine expanding the stackable credential leading to degrees into the procurement process at both the ITA/ETPL and class-size RFP levels.
- c. Explore practical ways to enhance front-end's ability to incorporate "Informed Choice Career Coaching" while working closely with job seekers.
- d. Focus training on increasing awareness around the advantages of attaining industry-recognized credentials/degrees.
- e. Strengthen the career pathways approach by further engaging industry, literacy, and experiential learning solutions to fill talent needs.
- f. Prioritize the competitive procurement process for class-sized training and the use of ITA's for industry-recognized credentials.
- g. Continue to identify existing pre-apprenticeship and registered apprenticeship opportunities for our clients and expand the availability of such opportunities that lead to nationally- recognized industry credentials.

Goal 2. Expanded OS Integration of Service Delivery (Level: M/N)

WIOA's definition of an American Job Center would necessitate that all customers have access to high-quality centers ready to connect them with the full range of services available in their communities, whether they are looking to find jobs, build basic educational or occupational skills, earn a post-secondary certificate or degree, or obtain guidance on how to make career choices, or whether they represent businesses and employers seeking skilled workers.

Integrated service delivery means that American Job Center staff is organized by function into work teams, regardless of the funding resources. The concept of service integration drives the establishment of new or enhanced processes.

Progress Update

The Union County Workforce Development Board approved a series of staff and partner development activities for the American Job Center in 2018 and 2019. Workshops included such topics as "Enhanced Partner Engagement" and "Expanded Role of Career Counselors" specifically designed to break down system silos and provide greater staff/partner coordination of services.

Action Planning

Deliver seamless customer service to both individuals and employers, regardless of funding streams, actively [increasing access throughout Union County](#) to serve all target populations within an integrated flow with an emphasis on services, not programs to guide them in advancing their careers.

Strategies

- a. Continue holding American Job Center partner and AJC staff meetings on a monthly basis.
- b. Increase Coordination of Services by investing more time in staff cross-training.
- c. Broaden the use of Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to include all American Job Center partnering entities.
- d. Adopt an "Affiliate Partner" status initiative to expand the visibility and reach of the two AJC Centers out into our partner community. This will require modification to current MOU's broadening existing partner services to include many of the front-end and back-end AJC services. Examples of these expanded partner services would include outreach, recruitment, pre-eligibility information gathering, distributing basic AJC orientation information, post-program follow-up, and post-program support.

Goal 3. Broadened Use of Technology in Operation & Customer-Facing Processes (Level: M/N)

Technology has dramatically reshaped the average workplace over the past couple of decades. The office environment has been influenced by rapid and extensive technological advancement. Updated use of technology is critical to ensure a higher quality of service and training, and should result in a significant number of improvements, among them: efficiency and increased productivity; increased collaboration; improved case management; reduced costs; and a heightened level of security.

Progress Update

The Workforce Development Board has authorized the procurement of new data management software that will be used system-wide, all partner organizations included. The system, anticipated to be set up and operational in July 2019, will be shared by the AJC and Partner Organizations as a common workforce management system, significantly improving real-time reporting and analysis regarding client, program, finance, and outcome information.

Action Planning

Infuse technology in the workplace to improve communications as well as operational efficiency and workflow.

Strategies

- a. Enhance American Job Center/WDB online presence including website redevelopment, and effective use of social media.
- b. Adopt a “Less Paper” technology plan within the WDB and American Job Center by establishing a 21st Century document management system.
- c. Examine adoption of “anywhere” online pre-enrollment and consider other technologies to simplify and expedite the “triage” waiting process and enhance customer service environment, including the use of computer tablets or kiosk station(s).
- d. Install new System-Wide Client Management System providing essential training along a rapid implementation time table.

Goal 4. Expanded Access to Services Level (Level: M/N)

WIOA legislation prioritizes services to out-of-school youth and vulnerable low-income adults and youth who have limited skills or lack work experience. The Act provides new and expanded definitions to improve service to individuals with

barriers to employment. Additionally, the act expands and improves the eligibility requirement for youth services. Adopting a model of career pathways, co-enrollment, and attainment of stackable credentials is encouraged and will be incorporated in the upgraded system.

Progress Update

The WDB authorized several trainings in 2018 and 2019 including workshops on:

1. Relevance and Benefits of WIOA Customer Co-enrollment;
2. Designing an Effective Individual Service Strategy;
3. Placing Customers onto Career Pathways;
4. Relevance of Stackable Credentials; and
5. Value of Attainment of Industry-Recognized Credentials.

Action Planning

Adopt the WIOA legislation's increased flexibility in eligibility criteria, especially in serving youth, considering that 14 diverse populations were recognized and designated under WIOA as groups in focus as they face challenges and barriers to obtaining employment and living-wage jobs that lead to self-sufficiency and economic prosperity.

Strategies

- a. Continue to provide additional guidance to career coaches on options for co-enrollment to stretch funding while offering increased diverse educational and occupational services.
- b. Provide local planning and policy guidance, followed by continued staff training, to OS Career Coaches in order to comply with necessary system adaptations required to expanded services using WIOA provisions for core programs.

Goal 5. Enhanced Employer Engagement / Employer Related Activities (Level: M/N)

Workforce professionals have to figure out how to best involve employers in their programs. They can also work toward developing deeper partnerships so that they can help participants build the skills they need to secure employment. Engaging employers has been a key provision in the last two Job Training Bills, JTPA and WIA, yet it has been a concern that employers remain reluctant to actively participate in public job initiatives. [The workforce professionals need to better understand how to utilize other than traditional occupational training models and begin to provide job seekers with employer-related services such as OJT, Pre-](#)

apprenticeship Training, Apprenticeship Training, and Customized Training, placing the EMPLOYER and EMPLOYER SKILL REQUIREMENTS at the core of each activity.

Action Planning

Union County will look to increase emphasis on the nationally recognized and portable credentials and will identify Registered Apprenticeship and Pre-Apprenticeship program opportunities for our job seekers.

Strengthen and increase employer engagement by strengthening and expanding existing business initiatives. At the same time, establish credibility by ensuring adequate resources are available, as well as making sure participants gain appropriate skills and experience.

Strategies

- a. Fortify the Union County Workforce Innovation Business Center.
- b. Expand Business Services Representatives team to facilitate the connections between employers and the American Job Center.
- c. Further, develop regional Business-2-Business networking events.
- d. Survey employers to verify their skill and credential requirements.
- e. Involve employers in Soft Skill presentations where possible.
- f. Survey availability of existing Registered Apprenticeships and Pre-Apprenticeship Programs accessible to Union County WIOA eligible job seekers. Incorporate these opportunities into our menu of services to our customers.

Goal 6. Expanded Use of Evaluation Metrics beyond National Performance Standards/ Systematic Oversight (Level: H/U)

Some of the most significant changes in the new law apply to the area of performance accountability. WIOA establishes a set of common performance indicators on which core programs and other authorized programs will be required to report. These core indicators for adult and dislocated formula programs, adult education, Wagner-Peyser employment services, and vocational rehabilitation include:

- Percentage of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program

- Percentage of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after exit from the program
- Median earnings in unsubsidized employment.

The Union Workforce System will institute processes that capture such data and inform decision-making as well as address the new provisions of the law around credential attainment, the achievement of measurable skill gains for those enrolled in an education or training program, and effectiveness of core programs in serving employers.

Evidence-Based Data Evaluation

Union County will begin using new criteria for measuring success. We will begin examining evidence-based data on what is working and what is not working. We will begin to answer “what works for whom.” Beyond using only single identifiers (Youth, Adult, Dislocated), data will be more specific; for example: Youth with a HSD, Youth without a HSD, Youth with HSD w Criminal Record, etc. We will look at what combination of services has the best outcomes for specific job-seeker groups. With an expanded analysis of components of successful outcomes, we can then adopt and promote proven approaches to our job seekers.

Action Planning

Improve the system of data-driven decision-making by instituting a series of updated metrics, relevant to the regional setting and local activities, as an important complement to national performance standard (Attachment I).

Strategies

- a. Model for continuous improvement throughout its internal operations and customer-facing processes, guided by a new certification and recertification program (Attachment R).
- b. Examine National Measures down to subrecipient and vendor levels.
- c. Measure credential attainment down to subrecipient and vendor levels.
- d. Introduce employer and job-seeker satisfaction surveys.
- e. In addition to vendor monitoring, conduct internal monitoring and oversight to ensure that center operator(s) meet certification standards.
- f. Begin to collect data on outcomes accounting for a wider assortment of training strategies over varied job seeker “PRE” intervention situations.