

CHAPTER 1: ECONOMIC AND WORKFORCE ANALYSIS

- Note: updated data packet, Northern Stateline Regional Data Packet 2026 (Appendix 31), for 2026 Modification Reference

A. Provide an analysis of the factors listed below:

1. Economic conditions, including existing and emerging in-demand industry sectors and occupations (§ 679.560(a)(1)(i));
 - a. What are the targeted industries, high-impact industry clusters, and in-demand occupations in the Region?

Targeted Industries include Manufacturing, Transportation Distribution Logistics (TDL), Construction, Travel and Tourism. The Region's legacy and growing industries help maintain and grow economic resiliency.

The top five High-Impact Industry Clusters as of 2020 include:

1. Educational and Health Services (39,237 jobs)
2. Transportation and Utilities (36,177 jobs)
3. Durable Goods Manufacturing Trade (27,353 jobs)
4. Health Care and Social Assistance (26,268 jobs)
5. Transportation, Warehousing, & Utilities (11,639 jobs)

In-Demand Occupations: The top five in-demand occupations requiring an associate's degree are Registered Nurses, Computer User Support Specialists, Dental Hygienists, Paralegals & Legal Assistants, and Radiologic Technologists. The top five In-demand and requiring a bachelor's degree are Elementary School Teachers, (Example: Special Education). Project Managers, Business Operations Specialists, Accountants & Auditors, and Secondary Teachers for (example: Special Education & Vocational). The top five in-demand industries are Nursing, Merchandising, Warehousing, Auditing, and Marketing.

b. What industries have favorable location quotients?

Per the [U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis](#), "A location quotient (L.Q.) (Appendix 3) is an analytical statistic that measures a region's industrial specialization relative to a larger geographic unit (usually the nation)." According to the data packet (Appendix 1) the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES) provided, "A value greater than 1.0 means that sector's employment is more heavily concentrated in the region than in the nation, while values less than 1.0 indicate employment is less concentrated than the nation."

According to the IDES, industries in the Northern Stateline Region with favorable location quotients (from Leading to Maturing) include Manufacturing, Other Services, Agriculture, Transportation & Warehousing, Utilities, Health Care & Social Assistance, and Retail. Leisure and Hospitality is the leading emerging industry.

NAICS Title	2020 Employment	Projected 2030 Employment	Change 2020-2030	Percent Employment Change	Concentration (Location Quotient)
Manufacturing	34,865	35,996	+1,131	3.2	2
Other Services	9,817	10,400	+583	5.9	1.3
Agriculture	4,056	4,129	+73	1.8	1.8
Transportation & Warehousing	10,001	11,306	+1,305	13	1.4
Utilities	1,638	1,686	+48	2.9	2.5
Health Care & Social Assistance	26,268	27,528	+1,260	4.8	1
Retail	18,158	18,999	+741	4.6	1

Source: [IDES Long Term Industry Projections 2020-2030](#) (Appendix 2)

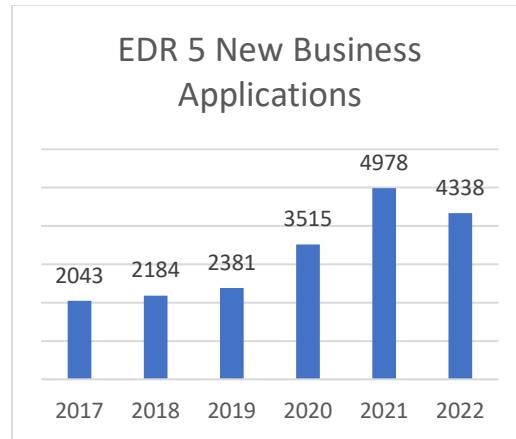
c. What industries and occupations have favorable demand projections based on growth?

In line with the IDES Economic Development Region (EDR) 5 2020-2030 projections (Appendix 2), the following industries and occupations show promising demand for the future workforce:

Top 4 Industries with Favorable Growth:

1. **Transportation & Warehousing:** Industry expansion is expected, driven by a growing emphasis on efficient supply chains and the continued growth of Chicago Rockford International Airport (RFD).
2. **Leisure & Hospitality:** Expansion of leisure and entertainment options is expected. The Hard Rock Casino is under construction off of I-90 and Business 20 in Rockford, IL. The surrounding area will see an expansion of restaurants and hotels.
3. **Healthcare and Social Assistance:** This industry is experiencing growing demand due to an aging population and increased focus on well-being. The area has four healthcare systems: U.W. Health, OSF HealthCare, Mercy Health and Freeport Health Network (FHN).
4. **Professional & Business Services:** There has been a significant increase in the demand for professional services, especially in the consulting and IT sectors. This has been partly attributed to the rise in new business applications in 2021, with many

new or existing companies outsourcing technical or administrative work to specialists.



In-Demand Occupations:

1. Laborers/Freight/Stock & Material Movers
2. Fast Food & Counter Workers
3. Cooks & Restaurant
4. Truck Drivers & Light or Delivery Services
5. Waiters & Waitresses

d. What industries and occupations have favorable demand projections based on replacements?

According to projections from IDES EDR 5 2020-2030 (Appendix 2), some industries and occupations will likely experience high demand due to workforce replacements – employees hired to replace an employee who has resigned, retired, been terminated, or otherwise vacated the position. These projections align with the Region's primary industry clusters, where it is anticipated that employees will switch positions within these industries as they age and their personal circumstances change.

The top four industries in this regard are:

1. Transportation & Warehousing
2. Leisure & Hospitality
3. Manufacturing
4. Professional & Business Services

In-Demand Occupations for Replacements: In-demand occupations based on replacements refer to the projected employment openings in certain occupations due to exits and transfers.

1. Fast Food & Counter Workers
2. Laborers/Freight/Stock & Material Movers
3. Cashiers
4. Retail Salespersons

5. Misc. Assemblers & Fabricators

e. What industries are considered mature but still important to the economy?

According to the 2024 EDR 5 Regional Data Packet (Appendix 1), where Employment and Location Quotients by Sector are shown, the mature industries that are still important to the economy are the following:

- Utilities
- Transportation & Warehousing
- Retail
- Health Care & Social Assistance

f. What industries are considered emerging in the regional economy?

Industries which are considered emerging in the regional economy are:

- Leisure & Hospitality
- Construction
- Financial Activities
- Professional Services

g. What is the projected regional key in-demand occupations?

Key in-demand occupations per IDES Long-Term Occupational Projections 2020-2030 (Appendix 2) are Material Moving Workers, Food & Beverage Serving and Related Workers, Management Occupations, Education, Training, and Library Occupations.

h. What sources of supply and demand data were used to determine the targeted industries occupations and skills?

The supply and demand information sources are the State Data Packet (Appendix 1) and the Lightcast Q4 Data Set for Boone, Ogle, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties (Appendix 3).

2. Employment needs of employers in existing and emerging in-demand industry sectors and occupations (§ 679.560(a)(1)(ii))

Employment needs for existing and in-demand industry sectors Material Moving Workers, Food & Beverage Serving and Related Workers, Management Occupations, Education, Training, and Library Occupations include workers at all levels, encompassing workers at all skill levels and levels of educational attainment.

3. Knowledge and skills needed to meet the employment needs of the employers in the region, including employment needs in in-demand industry sectors and occupations (§ 679.560(a)(2));

The abilities and expertise essential to fulfilling the demands of employers in the Region correspond to those necessary to engage in the area's top industry clusters. In every industry,

digital literacy is an increasing requirement. Soft skills are also mandatory for almost every employment opportunity, which matches the skills required to fulfill the needs of employers in the Region.

a. What are the targeted career pathway clusters in the region?

The targeted career pathways in the Region, as recognized on [The Workforce Connection's website](#), are:

- Healthcare & Social Assistance: The healthcare and social assistance pathway focuses on medical and social service careers, providing vital support to community well-being.
- Transportation, Distribution, and Warehousing: The transportation, distribution, and warehousing pathway offers career paths in logistics, supply chain management, and efficient goods movement.
- Hospitality & Tourism: The hospitality and tourism pathway encompasses careers in the service industry, catering to the diverse needs of travelers and local patrons.
- Manufacturing: The manufacturing pathway involves careers in the production of goods, contributing to the Region's industrial and economic landscape.
- Construction: Construction pathway provides career opportunities in building and infrastructure development, shaping the Region's physical environment.
- Professional and Business Services: The professional and business services pathway includes diverse careers in fields such as finance, consulting, and information technology, contributing to the Region's economic growth and development.

b. What skills are in demand in the region?

According to Lightcast data for Boone, Ogle, Stephenson, and Winnebago (Appendix 3), the skills that are in demand are aligned with the Region's top industries: Nursing, Merchandising, Warehousing, Auditing, Marketing, Accounting, Project Management, Restaurant Operations and Machinery.

c. How well do the existing skills of job seekers match the demands of local businesses?

According to Lightcast data for Boone, Ogle, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties (Appendix 3), the Region's specialized skills match the in-demand industry sectors based on occupational employment concentration. The following industries have the highest workforce concentration and align with the Region's largest industry clusters: Production, Transportation & Material Moving, Community & Social Service, Healthcare Practitioners, Technical, Installation, Maintenance & Repair, Management, Food Preparation & Serving Related, Educational Instruction & Library, Architecture & Engineering, and Office & Administrative Support.

4. Regional workforce considering current labor force employment and unemployment data, information on labor market trends, and educational and skill levels of the workforce, including individuals with barriers to employment⁴ (§ 679.510(a)(1)(iv) and § 679.560(a)(3))

a. How is the region changing in terms of:

- **demographics,**

- **labor supply and**
- **industry and occupational demand?**

As of 2022, the four-county Region's population was 430,320. Though the population decreased by 3,838 (0.9 percent) from 2017 to 2022, it was expected to increase by 3,775 (0.9 percent) by 2027, effectively unchanged.

The majority of the population is White (71.3 percent). Hispanics make up the next largest group (13.3 percent), followed by Black or African American people (9.81 percent). Multiracial people comprise three percent of the Region's population, and two percent identify as Asian. Less than one percent identify as "Other," American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, and Other Pacific Islander.

Though the population held steady, jobs in the Region declined by 3.7 percent from 2017 to 2022, falling behind the nation's growth rate by 7.5 percent. In tandem with job loss, the labor force participation rate decreased from 63.7 percent to 59.3 percent during the same period.

Educational attainment is similar to the 2020-2024 regional plan. The level of residents holding a bachelor's degree is 14.9 percent, 5.9 percent lower than the national average. However, 9.9 percent have earned an Associate's Degree, a full percentage point higher than the national average.

As of September 2023, unemployment increased to 6.57 percent, growing from 5.48 percent in September 2018.

b. What special populations exist in the region, what is their magnitude, and what are the policy and service implications to meet the needs of these individuals?

Veterans comprise 7.6 percent of the Region's population aged 18 and older. The most significant percentage of veterans are aged 65-74 and served in Vietnam. Of veterans younger than 65, 21.6 percent are 35-54 years old and served during the Gulf Wars. Most of the veteran population has at least a high school education; only 6.6 percent have less education. Veterans face three broad barriers to employment in the civilian sector:

- Personal barriers that relate to the veteran personally that may make return to work more challenging.
- Institutional barriers that constitute systemic challenges that impair return to work.
- Relational barriers are connected to how the veteran communicates in the work environment.

To address these issues, services must acknowledge veterans' unique experiences and skill sets. At the same time, employment specialists/counselors should be able to help identify what skills learned in a military environment are transferable to civilian employment. Civil and military policies should provide resources to help service members transition to civilian life and employment.

ALICE_(Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed), as defined by the [United Way](#), are persons with income above the poverty level who cannot meet the basic costs of living in their county. These costs include housing, childcare, food, transportation, healthcare, a

smartphone plan, taxes, and a small reserve for unanticipated one-time costs. These people struggle to make ends meet despite being employed.

As of 2021, 47,038 ALICE households are in the four-county Region; 66.98 percent are in Winnebago County. Childcare services and transportation are just two costs of living that may cripple ALICE families. Policy and services to reduce these costs should be studied. Solutions may include vouchers or subsidies and expanded service hours for daycare facilities and public transportation.

County	No. of ALICE Households	Income Threshold – Under Age 65	Income Threshold – Over Age 65
Boone	5,161	\$60,000	\$45,000
Ogle	5,341	\$50,000	\$45,000
Stephenson	4,939	\$45,000	\$40,000
Winnebago	31,507	\$50,000	\$40,000

Source: 2024 Regional Data Plan Packet: EDR 5 Northern Stateline (Appendix 1).

B. Describe how the Local Workforce Innovation Board and WIOA partners support the development and implementation of sector partnerships (employer collaboratives) using the US Chamber of Commerce Talent Pipeline Management (TPM) framework for in-demand industry sectors or occupations for the planning region (§ 679.510(a)(1)(iii)). Plans must answer the following questions in the context of the following definition of a sector partnership: A sector partnership is an industry-driven partnership comprising multiple employers within a regionally significant industry sector as well as other key education, workforce development, economic development, and community partners. A sector partnership implements sector strategies that a) address industry talent needs and thereby support employers' economic competitiveness; b) provide comprehensive programming that supports career pathways development and workers' economic well-being; and c) ensure vibrant and thriving local communities and economic regions.

1. How will the workforce partners use the TPM framework to convene or support the convening of regional employers, foundations, educational institutions and other stakeholders to create or maintain sector partnerships?

The Workforce Connection (TWC), in partnership with Region 1 Planning Council (R1), uses the Talent Pipeline Management (TPM) framework to convene and support employer-led sector partnerships across the Northern Stateline Region. TWC and R1 serve as neutral conveners by organizing structured employer engagement, facilitating data driven discussions, and aligning workforce, education, economic development, and community partners around shared talent needs.

Using the TPM framework, employers collectively identify workforce challenges, project hiring demand, define critical job competencies, and establish shared talent pipeline priorities. Workforce and education partners align programs, apprenticeships, and work-based learning opportunities to meet employer defined needs, with continuous feedback ensuring ongoing improvement and collaboration.

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2. Identify established and active sector partnerships in the region (as defined above). If any regional sector partnerships, including TPM employer collaboratives exist, identify:

- a. The sector
- b. The neutral convening organization
- c. The geographic area covered by the partnership
- d. If they are authentically business-led
- e. The LWIBs role in the partnership, if any. (Also list known partnerships that operate without ongoing involvement of the LWIB.)
- f. and what is their role in WIOA planning?

Reference: Talent Pipeline Management (TPM) Framework Overview (Appendix 4)

Sector Partnership	Sector	Neutral Convenor	Geographic Coverage	Business Led	LWIB Role (if any)	Role in WIOA Planning
Rock River Valley Tooling and Machining Association (RRVTMA)	Manufacturing	National Tooling and Machining Association (NTMA)	Northern Stateline Region	Yes, Employers define skill needs, apprenticeship development and implementation, and succession planning strategies.	Provides labor market data, supports funding alignment, and coordinates with Rock Valley College (RVC)	Apprenticeship expansion and support, training investment aligned with employer demand.
Rockford Area Aerospace Network (RAAN)	Aerospace/ Advanced Manufacturing	Greater Rockford Chamber of Commerce (GRCC)	Northern Stateline Region	Yes, employers guide training and workforce priorities.	Supports employer engagement and shares labor market data.	Shapes workforce training and education aligned with aerospace employer needs.
Project First Rate	Skilled Trades	Trade Union Partnership	Northern Stateline Region	Yes, union contractors and tradespeople define workforce needs.	Limited direct involvement coordination and alignment as appropriate.	Supports apprenticeship pathways and workforce board representation.
Winnebago County Mental Health Board	Behavioral Health and Social Services	Winnebago County Mental Health Board	Winnebago County	Yes, employers and system leaders define workforce and service needs.	Shares labor market data aligns funding, when possible, facilitates paid internship opportunities.	Supports development of career pathways and expansion of local training capacity for behavioral health occupations.
Think Big!	Entrepreneurship/Small Business/ Emerging industries	Think Big with Support of Region 1 Planning Council (R1) and The Workforce Connection	Northern Stateline Region	Yes, entrepreneur and employer driven.	Shares labor market data, aligns with workforce strategies to emerging employer needs, and support development of training and talking pipelines for start-up and growing businesses.	Supports development of career pathways and expansion of local training for entrepreneurs and workforce board representation.

3. What public-private partnerships exist in the region that could support sector strategies, and what is their role in WIOA planning?

Public and private partnerships in the Northern Stateline Region support employer-led sector partnerships by aligning workforce, education, and economic development efforts around shared regional priorities. Key partners include R1, Rock Valley College, Goodwill Industries of Northern Illinois, Think Big! and regional employers. Refer to table above in B.2. for specific WIOA planning roles.

4. What neutral conveners with the capacity to help establish sector partnerships exist in the region, and what is their roll in WIOA planning?

R1 provides regional planning leadership and labor market and economic data that inform sector strategies across multiple counties. The Workforce Connection supports sector partnerships by facilitating employer participation, sharing labor market information, aligning funding streams, and supporting the development of career pathways, apprenticeships, internships, and other work-based learning opportunities aligned with employer-defined needs.

These roles ensure sector partnerships remain employer-driven, data-informed, and integrated into WIOA planning while maintaining continuity and geographic reach across the region.

C. Describe economic opportunities in the region within the context of the workforce, education and economic development plans

RFD in Winnebago County is an economic engine and jobs producer for the Region. The airport's favorable landing and takeoff cycle (LTO) makes it attractive to a growing number of cargo carriers. RFD also includes a Foreign Trade Zone (FTZ). Several major retail distribution centers and North America's second-largest UPS air hub are adjacent to the airport. The airport is close to four major highways and railways, making it easy to move freight from the airport and distribution centers to its final destination. The airport also has a large Amazon Hub. Finally, RFD and RVC maintain an Aviation Maintenance Program at the airport. Educational development plans to support growth at the airport include partnerships with RVC and AAR Corp for mechanics, and Amazon and UPS for transportation and logistics.

Large projects from three multinational companies will come online in Boone County in the next five years. These projects will create thousands of jobs in distribution, manufacturing, and related industries.

Stellantis has announced plans to retool and reopen its Belvidere Assembly plant to produce electric vehicles. A related Mopar mega distribution center will be situated nearby. To round out this automotive hub, an electric battery plant by a manufacturer to be determined will be built adjacent to the assembly plant. TWC received Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) grant money that will assist in developing education pipelines for Electric Vehicle (EV) maintenance and repair, and education and training for electric battery manufacturing and installation are being explored.

Walmart is building a 1.2 million-square-foot distribution center in Boone County, which it plans to open in 2027. The facility will be a hub for perishable goods such as fresh produce, frozen foods, and flowers. General Mills will open a new 1.3 million-square-foot distribution facility in the first half of 2024. This growth will bring about additional jobs for economic growth and opportunity in sectors including, but not

limited to, construction and childcare. Truck Driver education training programs exist in all counties, and ways to connect warehousing companies directly with these education programs are being facilitated.

The [Ogle County Economic Development Corporation \(OCEDC\)](#) was established in 2023 to promote industry expansion. This represents a concerted effort between municipalities in the County to attract economic development through public-private collaboration.

Opportunities for economic development within Stephenson County include Mill Race Crossing, a largely undeveloped industrial park. The Winnebago [County](#) and the [City of Rockford](#) are collaborating with others to extend water and sewer infrastructure to the county-owned park. The Greater Freeport Partnership facilitates a variety of incentives to attract development.

D. . Describe economic challenges in the region within the context of the workforce, education and economic development plans.

The Region faces broad challenges to enhancing the intersection of workforce, education, and economic development activity in Northern Illinois. Among the most significant challenges are the Region's low educational attainment, entrenched poverty, transportation barriers, and a significant lack of accessible childcare.

Low educational attainment contributes to a workforce with limited skills, hindering overall economic development. Eleven percent of the population in the Region (Boone, Ogle, Stephenson, and Winnebago Counties) over 25 does not have a high school diploma. An associate's degree is held by 10 percent of the population, while 24 percent has a bachelor's degree or higher.

The prevalence of poverty further exacerbates these issues, creating barriers to educational opportunities and perpetuating a cycle of economic hardship. In 2022, the combined four-county Region of Boone, Ogle, Stephenson, and Winnebago had a 14 percent poverty rate, with 60,270 people living in poverty.

An examination of the Rockford Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) reveals a significant challenge for parents in securing affordable childcare. The struggle is evident, with only 2,581 childcare spots available for the city's 11,769 children under age five. The [National Resource Network's "Equitable Recovery Assessment](#), commissioned by the City of Rockford in 2021 (Appendix 5), highlights that the average monthly cost for full-time childcare in Illinois is \$670 for one child, constituting 30% of a minimum wage worker's income. This burden doubles to 60% for parents with more than one child needing care. Parents seeking to further their education experience the shortage of childcare deeply. Many childcare options only offer full time care and students seeking shorter timeframe care to attend classes face extreme difficulty finding options.

The lack of accessible childcare hampers parents' ability to work and creates a dilemma where childcare costs surpass potential wages. This financial imbalance discourages individuals from investing in childcare, impacting workforce participation and contributing to the Region's economic challenges. The Rockford MSA report analysis can be extrapolated to nearby communities facing similar issues.

If free or subsidized childcare were available, this challenge could be alleviated. As of early 2024, only some such services exist. The YWCA administers a Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) in Boone, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties, and services are provided through Rockford Public Schools District 205 (RPS205) Roosevelt Alternative High School. The Goodwill Excel Center, slated to open by 2025, will also offer free childcare to students.

These issues perpetuate a continuous cycle of difficult circumstances for those seeking to enter or stay in the workforce or for those seeking to further their education. Employers and educational institutions should seek to better understand these dilemmas. Solutions should be explored to offer more childcare options that will offer students and employees more flexibility.

E. Describe how responsiveness, inclusivity and accessibility (RIA) are incorporated into collecting and analyzing labor market information for this plan.

Integrating RIA into local planning requirements for collecting and analyzing labor market information involves a thorough and unbiased approach. It entails examining and addressing the disparities and inequities that exist in the labor market and ensuring that all individuals have equal access to opportunities.

This process involves collecting comprehensive data on labor market trends, including information on employment rates, job vacancies, and skills shortages. The data must be analyzed to consider the diversity of the local workforce, including factors such as race, gender, age, and disability status.

Furthermore, integrating RIA requires a commitment to implementing policies and programs that promote fairness in the labor market. This involves the continued development of training and education programs, creating job placement services, and supporting the growth of small businesses and industries that are underrepresented in the local economy.

Integrating RIA into local planning requirements for collecting and analyzing labor market information is a critical step toward building a more inclusive and equitable labor market that benefits all community members. TWC and its partners are actively working together to collect and analyze this data through various grant-funded programs.

CHAPTER 2: STRATEGIES FOR SERVICE INTEGRATION

A. Analyze workforce development activities, including education and training, in the Region.
This analysis must include the strengths and weaknesses of workforce development activities and the capacity to provide workforce development activities to address the education and skill needs of the workforce, including individuals with barriers to employment and the employment needs of employers (§ 679.560(a)(4)). The plan must address the following areas:

The workforce development system in the Northern Stateline Region Economic Development Region 5 (EDR 5) has a proven track record of effectively linking well-trained individuals with job opportunities. However, the challenges an aging workforce poses, a gap in middle-skilled jobs, and nationwide issues within the Manufacturing sector highlight the need for continued efforts. In the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) regional planning process context, partners have assessed the strengths and weaknesses of workforce development activities based on feedback from employers, customers, and stakeholders.

Recognizing the fluidity of the workforce across counties, Local Workforce Innovation Area 3 (LWIA 3) (Winnebago, Boone, and Stephenson Counties) and Local Workforce Innovation Area 4 (LWIA 4) (Ogle County, for the regional plan's purposes) are dedicated to collaborative efforts in all facets of workforce development. Potential areas of collaboration include partnering on apprenticeship opportunities, sharing pertinent data on provider training, collaborating with employers on Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) training, employing CEJA participants, and maintaining regular communication regarding one-stop activities.

LWIA 3's The Workforce Connection (TWC) takes a proactive approach to outreach and recruitment, ensuring community awareness of available services. Utilizing a community-oriented strategy, TWC ensures it "meets people where they are". TWC staff actively participate in various community events, offering orientation, intake, enrollment, and case management at multiple community agencies, such as Goodwill, YouthBuild, High Schools, Alternative programs, Boys and Girls Club, Parole/Probation, and the Winnebago County Jail. The TWC Executive Director has been instrumental in collaborating with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) to develop a successful plan for reopening a large automobile assembly plant in the Region. To stay attuned to regional employer needs, the TWC Executive Director actively engages as a member of several boards, including OSF St. Anthony, Growth Dimensions, and the Greater Rockford Chamber of Commerce (GRCC).

LWIA 4's Business Employment Skills Team, Inc. (BEST, Inc.) has maintained contact with Highland Community College (HCC) to share referral information to reach as many potential customers as possible. BEST, Inc. will continue to request specific data on the number of students enrolled, specifically for Ogle County, for this plan. Similar efforts are being conducted with Kishwaukee Community College (KC). Printed information has been shared with these institutions to share with Ogle County residents on the services available from the BEST office in Oregon, IL.

BEST, Inc. also references the need to meet people where they are in their local plan and has implemented strategies of mobile case management, public meeting places like the local libraries, and utilizing electronic forms and signatures to ease the transportation barrier for individuals.

- 1. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of workforce development activities in the Region.**

Strengths of the Regional Workforce System:

- **Employer-Driven Initiatives:**
 - The workforce development system is recognized for its employer-driven initiatives, particularly within Targeted Industry clusters. This ensures that training programs align with local businesses' current and future needs.
- **Collaboration with Educational Institutions:**
 - The collaboration between The Workforce Connection Board (TWC Board) and the local community colleges Rock Valley College (RVC), HCC, and other educational institutions has resulted in longstanding partnerships with major manufacturers. This collaboration enhances training opportunities and expands the pool of accessible training providers.
- **Partnerships with Major Manufacturers and Hospitals:**
 - Longstanding partnerships with significant manufacturers and collaboration with hospitals demonstrate a proactive approach to addressing specific industry needs, fostering a symbiotic relationship between workforce development and critical employers. Some examples of partnerships include the Winnebago County Mental Health Board, the Rockford Area Aerospace Network (RAAN), and the Rock River Valley Tool and Machining Association (RRVTMA).
- **Private Sector Leadership and Engagement:**
 - The private sector demonstrates robust leadership and engagement with the workforce development boards. Business leaders actively participate in planning, identify workforce needs, and advocate for system improvements.
- **Active Involvement of Government Leaders:**
 - Chief Elected Officials (CEOs) on the Board actively participate in the workforce development system, providing valuable feedback on plans and policies. Their involvement ensures alignment of priorities with identified workforce needs.
- **Youth Development Programs:**
 - CareerTEC in Stephenson County and Career Education Associates of North Central Illinois (CEANCI) in Winnebago and Boone counties provide youth with diverse career-focused programs, offering dual credit opportunities with HCC and RVC. This helps bridge the gap between education and workforce readiness.
 - Local Area 4 has three contracts for youth services that offer High School Equivalency or credit recovery for high school diplomas. Additional services are offered with each contract to ensure that all the required elements are in place for the students.
- **Certification Programs and Dual Credit Opportunities:**
 - Educational institutions like RVC, HCC, Sauk Valley Community College (SVCC), and Whiteside Area Career Center (WACC) offer certification programs and dual credit opportunities, providing students with practical skills and credentials. Additionally, pre-apprenticeship programs with school districts provide exploration

and assistance in getting into the skilled trades.

- **Career Focus of Educational Institutions:**
 - The Region's educational institutions are committed to implementing the Illinois State Board of Education's Career Cluster Framework. Strong existing Career Pathways programming in manufacturing, food manufacturing, healthcare, transportation, distribution, and logistics enhances career-focused education.
- **Integrated Education and Training Models (ICAPS):**
 - Educational partners are actively involved in the Illinois Integrated Education and Training Models (ICAPS), addressing the needs of adults requiring a high school diploma and technical skills for the workplace. These short-term programs offer dual enrollment, industry certifications, and support services.
- **Pathways to Higher Education:**
 - The ICAPS programs include pathways for students to continue their education, leading to a degree. This approach encourages continuous learning and skill development beyond the initial training programs.
- **Innovative Partnership with Rock Valley College and Winnebago County:**
 - The co-location of the training program at the Winnebago County jail demonstrates a commitment to providing equal opportunities for returning citizens.
 - Offering manufacturing training specific to computer numerical machines and cold-forming machines addresses the needs of the local job market.
- **Collaboration with the Winnebago County Jail:**
 - Monthly visits by TWC to provide services at the Winnebago County jail show a proactive approach to supporting individuals in need.
- **Utilization of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System for business services:**
 - Implementing a CRM system through Salesforce is a positive step to enhance data sharing and coordination among the business services team.

By capitalizing on these strengths, the regional workforce system can continue to evolve, effectively meeting the demands of the local job market and ensuring the success of both employers and individuals in the workforce development system.

Weaknesses of the Workforce System:

- **Lack of Coordination Between Workforce and Economic Development:**
 - Coordination between workforce development, economic development, and other partners, particularly in employer outreach, needs to be increased.
 - Employers feeling over-surveyed and needing clarification about organizational roles indicate a need for more straightforward communication and collaboration strategies.

- **Challenges in Meeting Skill Demands:**
 - Finding qualified workers in high-demand sectors, especially with specific skills, is difficult. This reflects a mismatch between the skills employers seek and those being developed.
 - The aging workforce and population decline further contribute to the challenge, suggesting a need for strategic planning to address the impending skills gap.
- **Perceived Disconnect Between Skills and Hiring Practices:**
 - A reported disconnect between the skills employers claim to seek and their actual hiring practices implies a need for better communication channels and alignment between workforce development efforts and industry requirements.
- **Unemployment Despite Program Resources:**
 - Despite the development of manufacturing-related programs, participants still need help finding jobs, indicating potential gaps in the effectiveness of these programs or a need for better linkage with employers.
- **Employer Outreach Concerns:**
 - Employers feeling overwhelmed by surveys and meetings signals a need for streamlining communication and engagement efforts to avoid redundancy and improve the overall effectiveness of workforce development initiatives.

Opportunities and Recommendations:

- **Enhance Coordination:**
 - Continue to enhance coordination between workforce and economic development entities, ensuring a clear understanding of roles and reducing redundancy in employer outreach.
- **Strategic Skills Development:**
 - Conduct a comprehensive skills gap analysis to align training programs with employers' needs. This will ensure that participants are equipped with the right skills for available job opportunities and that opportunities are accessible to participants.
- **Improve Communication Channels:**
 - Strengthen communication channels between employers and workforce development professionals to bridge the gap between perceived skills demand and actual hiring practices. Advocate and share information on best practices to alleviate concerns and reduce misconceptions.
- **Evaluate and Enhance Program Effectiveness:**
 - Assess the effectiveness of existing manufacturing-related programs to identify areas for improvement and ensure that participants are adequately prepared for the workforce.
- **Promote Regional Economic Development:**

- Leverage the TWC Board Executive Director's involvement in the Region 1 Planning Council (R1) to promote comprehensive economic development strategies that holistically address workforce challenges and opportunities.

2. Analyze the capacity of the regional partners to provide workforce development activities to address the education and skill needs of the workforce, including individuals with barriers to employment.

Educational Institutions:

- **Community Colleges' Contribution:**
 - RVC, HCC, and other community colleges provide education and skills training. With 1,183 associate degrees and 859 certificates awarded in the 2020-21 school year, they significantly contribute to the regional workforce.
- **Partnership and Engagement:**
 - Collaboration with TWC Board showcases a commitment to addressing workforce needs. Including these institutions on the TWC Board indicates a strong partnership and alignment with regional workforce development goals.
- **Diverse Higher Education Landscape:**
 - The presence of four-year institutions, including Rasmussen University Rockford (RUR), Rockford Career College (RCC), Rockford University (RU), and Northern Illinois University (NIU), enriches the educational landscape. Additional flexible options for adults include online programs like MedCerts, and vocational programs, which add to the range of training adults can participate in. The involvement and number of possibilities extend the range of programs and resources available to individuals seeking higher education.

Economic Development Corporations:

- **Public/Private Partnerships:**
 - The involvement of economic development corporations such as the Greater Rochelle Economic Development Corporation, Growth Dimensions Economic Development, GRCC, Greater Freeport Partnership, and others demonstrates a collaborative effort between public and private entities in addressing workforce development needs.
- **Advocacy for Employers:**
 - These organizations provide businesses with an additional voice and actively engage in regional workforce development activities. Their participation in planning ensures that employers' needs are accurately identified and addressed.

Capacity to Address Barriers to Employment:

- **Diverse Programs for Specific Populations:**
 - Various programs target populations facing barriers to employment, including the long-term unemployed, individuals with disabilities, out-of-school youth, veterans, migrant and seasonal farmworkers, returning citizens, English Language Learners,

older individuals, low-literacy adults, and low-skilled adults. TWC has a Community Navigator on site to help individuals reduce barriers to enrollment in programming.

- **WIOA-Funded Workforce Programs:**
 - Workforce development programs funded by the WIOA cater to the unemployed, including long-term unemployed and those likely to exhaust Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits (Dislocated worker, trade/rapid response) and individuals out of the workforce or who have not yet entered the workforce (Adult program) due to a myriad of reasons. This demonstrates a proactive approach to supporting individuals facing significant barriers.
- **Youth Programming:**
 - Comprehensive youth programming under WIOA includes career exploration, guidance, educational support, skills training, and pathways to further education or employment. Flexibility in programming ensures ongoing support based on the evolving needs of youth, particularly out-of-school/opportunity youth.
- **Priority for Veterans:**
 - Specialized assistance for veterans, including full-time on-site Veterans' service representatives, ensures prioritized support for this population in adult employment and training activities.
- **Services for Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers:**
 - Specialized services for migrant and seasonal farmworkers by the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES), include staff-assisted services for job development, career guidance, and referral to training and supportive services to address the unique needs of this population.
- **Holistic Support for Returning Citizens:**
 - A targeted population standing committee focusing on individuals with barriers to employment, including returning citizens, demonstrates a commitment to addressing specific challenges. Developing workshops for citizens with criminal background issues is a positive step to support the reintegration process.
- **English Language Learners Support:**
 - Multiple options for English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, work readiness training, and work-based training for adult English Language Learners, funded by WIOA, showcase a comprehensive approach to support individuals with language barriers.
- **Programs for Older Individuals:**
 - Specialized services through the Senior Community Services Empowerment Program (SCSEP) for individuals aged 55 and up demonstrate an understanding of the unique challenges older job seekers face.
- **Literacy Programs for Low Literacy Adults:**

- Collaboration with literacy program providers, including The YWCA Literacy Council, RVC, HCC, Goodwill Industries, and Rockford Public Schools District 205 (RPS205), ensures support for low literacy adults, including those without a high school diploma.
- **Skilled Training for Low-Skilled Adults:**
 - Career services through American Job Centers (AJC) and access sites, along with occupational training programs offered by various community colleges, provide specialized training for low-skilled adults to enhance their fundamental and occupational-specific skills.

In conclusion, the regional partners, including educational institutions and economic development organizations, demonstrate a robust capacity to provide diverse and targeted workforce development activities. The comprehensive approach to addressing barriers to employment for various populations reflects a commitment to inclusivity and creating opportunities for everyone in the Region. Ongoing collaboration and flexibility in programming further enhance the effectiveness of the workforce development system in the Region.

3. Analyze the capacity of the regional partners to provide activities to address the needs of employers.

- **Collaboration Among Workforce Innovation Boards and Training Providers:**
 - The presence of two workforce innovation boards, TWC Board and Northwest Central Illinois (NCI) Works, along with multiple WIOA-approved training providers and community colleges, highlights a comprehensive network dedicated to workforce development.
 - Collaboration among these entities enhances the capacity to address the needs outlined in the Northern Stateline Region's workforce development and local plans.
- **Community College Engagement:**
 - The involvement of community colleges such as RVC, SVCC, HCC, and KU ensures a diverse range of educational resources and training opportunities for the Region.
- **Services for individuals with disabilities:**
 - The Department of Rehabilitation Services Vocational Rehabilitation (DRS-VR) provides services for individuals with disabilities who want to work in the community. DRS-VR coordinates with service providers to offer evaluation and assessment, guidance with job readiness skills, and help finding and keeping a job. A robust and diverse group of organizations provide services for individuals in this Region, including DRS-VR, RAMP, Goodwill, Bridgeway, and others. Many are partners with TWC and work collaboratively to serve this population.
- **Collaboration with Community Organizations:**
 - Partnerships with community organizations like Zion West, Awaken Foundation, and Think Big!, supported by DCEO CEJA grants, demonstrate a commitment to providing equitable training opportunities, particularly clean energy.
 - Partners regularly meet to share information, updates, and best practices and ensure ease of referrals. Over 50 agencies collaborate with the Partner Connection monthly meetings TWC holds. Agencies range from small local agencies to larger non-profits and are diverse in size, scope, and leadership. The collaboration expands

opportunities for underserved populations, aligning with a broader goal of inclusivity in workforce development.

- **Focus on Higher-Wage Jobs and In-Demand Occupations:**
 - The emphasis on getting individuals into higher-wage jobs and training for in-demand occupations and targeted industries aligns with regional economic needs. It ensures that workforce development efforts contribute to the growth of the local economy.
- **Expansion of Work-Based Training:**
 - Expanding work-based training, including On-the-Job Training, Apprenticeships, Customized Training, Transitional Jobs, Internships, and Work Experience, provides a holistic approach to skill development, catering to various learning styles and preferences.
- **Increased Incumbent Worker Training:**
 - The increased focus on Incumbent Worker Training demonstrates an understanding of the importance of upskilling existing employees to maintain competitiveness and productivity in the evolving business landscape.
- **Tracking Return on Investment (ROI):**
 - The ROI tracking, including wage growth for populations served, growth of Gross Regional Product in Targeted Industries, and required WIOA performance metrics, showcases a commitment to accountability and evidence-based decision-making.
 - Collaborative efforts to ensure goals are being met, and proactive communication with businesses about ROI contribute to the sustainability and success of training programs.
- **Proactive Communication with Businesses:**
 - Proactive communication with businesses, providing examples of ROI, supports continued investment in training programs. This transparent and proactive approach fosters strong partnerships between workforce development entities and local businesses.
- **Regional Impact and Measurement:**
 - The consideration of the impact on the Region as a whole and the measurement of ROI in terms of wage growth and economic metrics reflects a comprehensive approach to assessing the effectiveness of workforce development initiatives.
- **Ongoing Collaboration and Goal Monitoring:**
 - The commitment to ongoing collaboration among partners and the collective monitoring of goals ensures that workforce development efforts remain responsive to the Region's dynamic needs.
 - In conclusion, the workforce development system in the Northern Stateline Region is well-positioned to address the education and skill requirements of the workforce while contributing to the economic vitality of the region. This is attributed to its recognized strengths in collaboration, diverse training options, a dedicated focus on inclusivity, and a firm commitment to monitoring return on investment.

4. How well do existing training programs in the Region and local areas prepare job seekers to enter and retain employment with regional businesses?

All training programs approved for participant funding under the Region's WIOA must align with high-growth, high-demand industries. The Local Workforce Innovation Boards (LWIB) oversee the approval process for training programs, necessitating a thorough review of wage projections and job growth data. This ensures that the programs address employment demands in relevant industries. Initial approvals are granted for one year, during which the programs undergo rigorous assessment to verify quality and industry-relevant training delivery. Providers may be eligible for an additional two years of approval following this initial period and further analysis.

An essential requirement for training programs is that they must lead to an industry-recognized certification or a degree, such as an associate or bachelor's degree. This stipulation stems from employer feedback, emphasizing the need for individuals to be job-ready upon completing training programs. The ongoing scrutiny of training programs by LWIB ensures that career seekers are equipped to enter and sustain employment with regional businesses.

Disruptions in business momentum and negative impacts on organizational culture have been attributed to factors affecting organizations nationwide. Occupations such as material moving workers, food and beverage service workers exhibit some of the highest turnover rates across multiple industry sectors. Strategies to advance entry-level workers toward higher skills include incumbent worker training and work-based learning, both of which have demonstrated success. The Region is also actively focusing on expanding apprenticeship models as this type of learning is more accessible for adult customers who must work when most training programs operate. Leveraging the outreach methods outlined in this plan, TWC Board and BEST, Inc. consistently bring together industry leaders through board meetings to discuss trends and best practices. They offer employers retention services, such as Incumbent Worker Training, and provide accessible training and workshops to individuals, ensuring alignment with employer needs.

5. Summarize the commitments of each program partner to implement the selected strategies described in the “Action Plan for Improving Service Integration in the Region.”

LWIAs' statewide were required to submit a Service Integration Self-Assessment to the DCEO by March 31, 2024. The action plan for improving service integration is as follows:

LWIA 3

Several strategies are being implemented to enhance collaboration and streamline operations among partners in the LWIA. These strategies include:

- **Offering Relevant Staff Development:**
 - Providing ongoing staff development opportunities for core and required partners to ensure they are well-equipped and informed about the latest practices and initiatives.
- **Increasing Career Pathway Knowledge:**
 - Facilitating a common understanding among partners by utilizing a shared language to enhance knowledge and communication related to career pathways.
- **Strengthening Sector Partnerships:**
 - Identify sector champions within each partner organization to lead industry efforts, fortify sector partnerships, and foster collaboration.
- **Administering Common Needs Assessments:**

- Implementing common needs assessments for all customers when applicable, ensuring a standardized approach to understanding and addressing the needs of individuals accessing services.
- **Regular Committee Meetings:**
 - The Program Operations Management Advisory Committee of the LWIB convenes WIOA Core and Required Partner leadership every other month. This forum informs partners about WIOA-related topics and initiatives.
- **Monthly Front-line Staff Convenings:**
 - The One-Stop Operator (OSO) convenes front-line staff from various partners monthly for cross-training, sharing program information, and discussing service resources.
- **Partner Guide and Training:**
 - Providing a comprehensive partner guide and training that shares information on all services offered by partners. This guide is regularly updated and distributed to all partners.
- **Informed Partner Connection Meetings:**
 - Ensuring that teams receive advance notice about guest speakers during Partner Connection meetings is essential. This enables the correct team members to effectively learn and apply the shared information.
- **Updated Referral Guide:**
 - Updating the referral guide, including a referral document, and distributing it throughout TWC. Partners will provide TWC with current contact information for distribution.
- **Quarterly Data Sharing:**
 - We are initiating quarterly data sharing among partners, with each partner sharing customer data based on the services provided. TWC will distribute the compiled data to all partners.
- **Universal Intake Process Discussions:**
 - A universal intake process and application must be improved due to the diverse services offered. Partners commit to follow-up meetings to discuss assessments for their organizations, addressing barriers such as assessment complexity, confidentiality, and different guidelines. The goal is to explore effective ways to streamline all partners' intake and assessment processes.

In LWIA 3, a dedicated effort to enhance service integration in the Region, the commitment of core and required partners. These partners have pledged to address the strategies outlined in the Service Integration Self-Assessment by actively participating in relevant board committees. These committees are the primary vehicles for implementing, tracking, and reporting the outlined strategies.

The Employer and Public Engagement Advisory Committee will mainly concentrate on fortifying sector partnerships, promoting registered apprenticeships, and fostering relationships with employers. The overarching goal is to bolster business initiatives and educate employers on how the workforce system can effectively meet their needs.

LWIA 3 benefits from a Community Navigator, whose position is partially funded through the WIOA and Job Training and Economic Development (JTED) grants. The Community Navigator is a valuable resource, always available to assist partners with various matters. A comprehensive directory of partner program descriptions and contact information is accessible to all partners and is regularly updated. The Community Navigator plays a crucial role in sharing programming information and, throughout the process, can aid customers in obtaining necessary documentation and verification. Moreover, the Community Navigator is equipped to assist with the cost of documents if needed, further enhancing support for the community.

LWIA 4

The creation of the Program Service Team (PST), which meets quarterly and conducts a deep dive into the training needs of all program partners.

- Share written information and educate front-line staff of all workforce partners.
- PST works very closely with the OSO and leadership team.
- PST meetings to share information.
- Created an electronic referral system and reports to the Oversight Committee of the workforce board.
- Training and implementation of follow-up procedures.
- Leadership team is developing an evaluation tool to show the effectiveness of referral and follow-up processes and procedures.
- Enhance engagement with NCI Works by developing and implementing an educational and interactive action plan involving partner staff and board members. The One Stop Partner Committee will be the front-line committee with the workforce board.

In LWIA 4, the workforce partners will use their PST to develop and implement service integration strategies. They will work through NCI Works and its appropriate committees to ensure compliance with the action plan's next steps as they progress.

The AJCs' will continue to convene cross-training for all partners and hold quarterly meetings on-site to engage all on-site partners and serve customers via direct linkage. The OSO will also focus on increasing the knowledge regarding career pathways. Through this process, team members will be better trained and able to share consistent information, and partners will better see the value of integrated services. Partners will also be more knowledgeable about in-demand career options.

B. Describe how transportation and other supportive services are coordinated within the Region 679.510(a)(1)(vi)). The plan must address the following sections:

1) What regional organizations currently provide or could provide supportive services?

Transportation Services:

- Rockford Mass Transit District (RMTD) provides fixed-route and limited demand-

response service for Rockford, Loves Park, and Machesney Park. RMTD's fixed-route service area is roughly 155 square miles, with a potential service population of just over 260,000. This includes 40 fixed-route buses over 17 routes Monday through Saturday. RMTD also makes four trips into Belvidere Monday through Friday and runs night routes Monday through Friday and five on Sunday (in Rockford only). Bus rides are \$1.50, with discounts for veterans and senior citizens.

- The Paratransit service is an origin-to-destination service for persons with disabilities such that their disability limits their ability to ride the fixed route. Customers must sign up and have approval before making ride reservations.
- In addition to RMTD, the Boone County Council on Aging operates the Keen Age Center and Transportation service, which offers transportation to anyone living in Boone County. Reservations must be made, and each trip is \$2.00. The service can help individuals connect with the RMTD lines.
- Stephenson County offers the Pretzel City Transit, which operates Monday through Friday from 6 a.m. to midnight and Saturday from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. Currently, no Sunday service is provided. This demand-response service requires reservations and costs \$3.00 per ride.
- RMTD is one of the policy committee members of the R1. R1 conducts transportation and transit planning for most of Winnebago and Boone counties and a portion of Ogle County, representing most of the Northern Stateline Region's population. R1 oversees a Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan that assesses the transit needs and gaps for transit-dependent populations. R1's Mobility Subcommittee includes representatives of RMTD and other service and transportation providers. As such, R1 is a prime convener of coordinating transportation services in a large part of the Region.
- Transportation and supportive services are offered through WIOA programming, and LWIA 3 has implemented additional support through the Community Navigator. This position started through a service integration grant and is integral to the workforce system. The community navigator helps individuals connect to resources in the community, leveraging and maximizing all the resources the community offers and assisting individuals to navigate systems. The Community Navigator has been a critical addition to TWC team, which connects participants, partners, and the community, ensuring wrap-around support so the individuals can succeed once enrolled. The community navigator assists individuals in obtaining IDs and documents, helps with transportation assistance, helps complete forms, provides referrals, and connects individuals to programming and resources that meet their needs.
- Transportation is undoubtedly the most common barrier seen in the Region. Many programs provide basic assistance, including access to bus passes. The WIOA program has expanded options in recent years due to the needs of participants and the limitations of the public transit system. This includes providing bus passes, gas cards, car repair assistance, Uber/Lyft/rideshare support, and funding. In the regional area, even with various public transit options, some training locations and employers are challenging to get to through public transit.
- The Lee-Ogle Transportation System provides Ogle County demand-response service, while Pretzel City Area Transit serves Stephenson County. The workforce system OSO, partner agencies, and educational institutions provide information about the various

transit services and communicate regularly with the transit providers in their service territories.

Supportive Services:

- TWC Board coordinates supportive services in LWIA 3 through its Supportive Services policy (Appendix 20), which ensures the appropriate use of supportive services and that eligible individuals receive the supportive services necessary to enable them to participate in activities authorized under WIOA. This policy was updated in 2023 to ensure ease of use for staff and participants. The policy includes "not-to-exceed" payments toward childcare, transportation, and various supplemental support items for workplace success.
- In addition to the support services offered, the Community Navigator connects individuals to other programs to leverage other programs and services provided. This includes ensuring access to Community Action funding, housing support, Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) Utility support, and other local services to ensure we maximize funding and reduce duplication. Additionally, the JTED program, which TWC received barrier reduction funding from in 2022-2024, provided additional support for individuals enrolled in WIOA or other complimentary partner programs. This barrier reduction funding helped many individuals who otherwise could not attend or succeed in training, including assisting with rent and utilities, providing additional support for transportation outside of WIOA Limits, and helping with documentation and other needs. JTED served 173 individuals from 4/2022 through 1/2024, exceeding our goal of serving 100 customers.
- Supportive services are coordinated with AJC Partner programs and other community-based and faith-based organizations. If supportive services are not readily available through different organizations, WIOA workforce development funds are available to provide them for enrolled participants.

2) What policies and procedures will be established to promote coordination of supportive services delivery?

Various strategies are being implemented in the LWIA to enhance collaboration and understanding among partners. These include:

- **Customer Demographics Sharing:**
 - All partners collect customer demographics at intake for services using different systems as required by funding agencies. Partners have committed to sharing data and demographics at quarterly meetings to gain insights into the populations served and identify any gaps in services within the Region.
 - Partners will continue to collect necessary data, and with a release of information, will share data points between partners.

Feedback Collection Methods:

- Partners actively collect customer feedback and input through informal means, formal surveys, and secret shopper evaluations completed monthly for each site. This valuable feedback is incorporated into service improvements to meet customer needs

better.

- Partners continue to collect customer input in the Center and throughout the system. This feedback will be presented to the Oversight and One Stop Partner Committee.
- **Employer Services Evaluation:**
 - Employer services are systematically evaluated through surveys after specific events or services are utilized. This allows partners to assess the effectiveness of services offered to employers and make informed adjustments based on employer feedback. Partners have committed to sharing this feedback more regularly with one another.

Data Sharing Agreement:

- Partners agree to share data and information, with each partner responsible for providing the relevant data. TWC will compile this data and distribute the information to all partners, fostering a collaborative approach to understanding the impact of services.
- LWIA 4 will continue to look toward obtaining funds to gather and collect data for all partners.
- **Committee Covenings:**
 - The LWIB's Program Operations Management Advisory Committee regularly convenes WIOA Core and Required Partner leadership every other month. These meetings serve as a platform to inform partners about WIOA-related topics and initiatives, ensuring alignment and coordinated efforts.
 - The NCI Works and Oversight Committee meets every other month, and the One Stop Partner Committee follows the same schedule. The OSO, PST, and Business Service Team (BST) meet management as they deem necessary.
- **Front-line Staff Covenings:**
 - The OSO convenes front-line staff monthly or quarterly for cross-training, sharing program information, and discussing service resources. This ensures that front-line staff are well-informed and can provide comprehensive customer support.
- **Partner Guide and Training:**
 - A partner guide and training program have been established to share information on all services offered by partners. This guide is regularly updated and shared with partners, providing a comprehensive resource for understanding the range of services available.
- **Informed Partner Connection Meetings:**
 - Partners have agreed to notify teams about guest speakers from partner agencies ahead of time during Partner Connection meetings. This ensures that appropriate team members are present to learn and apply the information provided.

- **Contact Information Sharing:**
 - Each partner will provide TWC with the most current contact information, and TWC will distribute the list to all partners. This facilitates effective communication and collaboration among partners.
- **Referral Guide Updates:**
 - The referral guide, including a referral document, will be updated and distributed by TWC. This ensures that partners have access to current and relevant information for effective referrals.

By implementing these strategies, partners in the LWIAs aim to create a collaborative and informed environment, ensuring that services are tailored to the needs of customers and employers in the Region.

C. Describe the coordination of services with regional economic development services and WIOA service providers (§ 679.510(a)(1)(vii)). The plan must address the following sections:

1) What economic development organizations, WIOA service providers, or businesses are actively engaged in regional planning?

The collaborative development of this plan involved input from diverse stakeholders representing economic development organizations, workforce representatives, government leaders, and private sector representatives across key sectors. Economic development organizations, including Growth Dimensions Economic Development of Boone County, Greater Freeport Partnership for Stephenson County, and the GRCC for Winnebago County, played a vital role in providing insights and feedback. Meetings were organized and attended by all partners and economic development organizations, fostering discussions on the regional plan with varying levels of engagement and valuable suggestions.

Furthermore, the Blackhawk Hills Regional Council's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) plan, encompassing Ogle and Stephenson Counties, added another layer to the collaborative effort. The CEDS plan specifically aims to strengthen collaboration with NCI Works "to find ways to economically train our existing and future advanced manufacturing workforce.".

WIOA Core Partners are committed to cultivating and developing working relationships with economic development and education entities. This ensures that program and training offerings align with employers' expressed needs, as communicated through economic development retention and expansion activities, as well as the requirements of potential growth and attraction industries.

The representation of economic development corporations and workforce development agencies on each other's respective boards further emphasizes the commitment to continuous coordination and collaboration. This multi-stakeholder approach enhances the plan's effectiveness by incorporating diverse perspectives and aligning strategies with the evolving needs of the economic landscape. The Executive Directors of the LWIAs regularly engage with economic development agencies in the attraction and retention of business to the region. Most notably, in 2023, there was significant engagement in the retention of a large automobile assembly plant that

resulted in the corporation making a decision to remain in the region.

2) What economic development organizations, WIOA service providers, or businesses were invited to participate but declined?

During the planning process, the TWC Program Operations Management Advisory Committee engaged all providers to participate in various ways, including surveys and meetings. In LWIA 3, all partners attended meetings or completed the online survey.

D. Describe the coordination of administrative cost arrangements, including the pooling of funds for administrative costs, as appropriate (§ 679.510(a)(1)(v)).

All required partners participating in the development of this Regional Plan have agreed that the strategies and goals identified for EDR 5 do not require coordination of administrative cost arrangements at this time. As specific projects and activities emerge, the pooling of funds for administrative costs will be addressed among partners. If projects require additional administrative support, partners will identify in-kind resources and grants (i.e., Community Foundation support) and pool administrative costs, as needed and appropriate, to implement the project and activity.

E. Describe how a responsiveness, inclusivity and accessibility (RIA) is or will be incorporated in the regional service integration strategies, including job seekers and employers.

Incorporating RIA into regional service integration strategies involves a deliberate and systematic approach to ensuring fair and inclusive practices for both job seekers and employers. This approach aims to address disparities in employment opportunities and outcomes among different demographic groups, such as race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status.

Ways in which the Region uses RIA includes:

- striving for inclusive policy development and implementation of policies that address systemic barriers to employment,
- ensuring that they do not disproportionately affect any particular group,
- ensuring that staff are equipped to understand and address the unique needs and challenges faced by diverse job seekers,
- providing additional support services, mentorship programs, and resources to marginalized groups to address specific barriers they may face,
- providing resources for employers to create equitable workplaces, including addressing biases in recruitment and promotion processes,
- pledge to work collaboratively with community organizations, advocacy groups, and employers to ensure that RIA is consistently applied and that strategies are responsive to the needs of the community.

CHAPTER 3: VISION, GOALS AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

A. Describe the local strategic vision to support state and regional economic growth (§ 679.560(a)(5)). Describe how this aligns with the State of Illinois' vision and principles (page 1). Include a description of how the region and local areas will accomplish the local strategic vision and support state and regional economic growth.

Workforce development has emerged as a pivotal aspect in discussions centered around attracting employment opportunities to the region and facilitating residents' access to these jobs. The strategic vision for the Northern Stateline Region (Economic Development Region 5 (EDR 5)) extends beyond conventional workforce development goals and is committed to adapting regional and local strategies to foster state and regional economic growth. The vision statements below align along key metrics and support businesses and individuals in providing equitable, sustainable living wage employment.

State Vision Statement

"Illinois' workforce system will meet employers, job seekers, and community members where they are, centering the customer experience in an interoperable, equitable, and accessible manner to ensure all customers achieve their goals. We will support employers by building diverse, quality career pathways and provide effective training, education, and economic opportunities for job seekers and communities to thrive."

EDR 5 Vision Statement

"Provide a fully integrated and accessible workforce development system that balances the needs of individuals and businesses to ensure our region has a skilled workforce to effectively compete in the global economy."

The local vision aligns with the state vision in several key pillars that collectively contribute to a comprehensive and effective system. A demand-driven orientation ensures responsiveness to evolving needs, aligning education and career pathways with current market demands. Establishing strong partnerships with businesses at all levels fosters collaboration, ensuring educational initiatives are closely tied to real-world requirements. Pathways to careers of today and tomorrow emphasize the dynamic nature of career development, preparing individuals for evolving job landscapes. Cross-agency collaboration and connections facilitate a cohesive approach, breaking down silos to enhance the overall effectiveness of the system. Integrated service delivery streamlines processes, providing a seamless experience for individuals seeking education and career opportunities. Clear metrics for progress and success establish a framework for evaluation, allowing stakeholders to measure the impact of initiatives. Finally, focusing on continuous improvement and innovation drives the system's evolution, adapting to emerging trends and maximizing its effectiveness over time.

Various concerted efforts are undertaken at the regional and local levels to accomplish the local strategic vision and support state and regional economic growth in EDR 5. The region strongly emphasizes fostering economic development through collaboration and strategic planning. Local areas within the region work with regional entities to align their goals with broader state and regional economic objectives.

One key aspect involves cultivating a business-friendly environment, encouraging entrepreneurship, and attracting industries that align with the region's strategic vision. This may include offering incentives for businesses to establish or expand operations within the area, creating a favorable climate for investment and job creation.

Additionally, EDR 5 emphasizes workforce development initiatives to ensure the local labor force is equipped with the skills needed for emerging industries. This involves collaboration between educational

institutions, economic development agencies, businesses, and government entities to design and implement training programs that align with the demands of the evolving job market.

Infrastructure development is another crucial component, focusing on enhancing transportation, utilities, and other critical facilities to support the efficient movement of goods and services. This not only improves local connectivity but also contributes to the overall economic vitality of the region. Furthermore, EDR 5 actively engages in regional partnerships, collaborating with neighboring areas to address shared challenges and leverage collective strengths. This regional cooperation facilitates the exchange of ideas, resources, and expertise, fostering a more robust and interconnected economic landscape.

In summary, EDR 5 achieves its local strategic vision and contributes to state and regional economic growth through a multifaceted approach that includes fostering a business-friendly environment, investing in workforce development, enhancing infrastructure, and participating in collaborative regional initiatives.

B. Describe the local goals for preparing an educated and skilled workforce (including youth and individuals with barriers to employment) and goals relating to performance accountability measures based on performance indicators (§ 677.155(a)(1)). Include a description of how the region and local areas will accomplish these goals and goals relating to performance.

- **Regional Goal 1:** Unite workforce partners around regional cluster strategies designed to enhance employers' ability to hire and retain skilled workers.

Regional cluster strategies will focus resources on the industries with the highest potential to add jobs and increase prosperity in regions across Illinois. These strategies combine each region's public and private sectors to build on their unique strengths.

- **Strategy 1.1:** Increase collaboration, communication, and shared resources between workforce, education, and economic development efforts to move the region's strategies forward.

- Activity 1.1A: Initiate and attend regular meetings between economic development and workforce development agencies to align and coordinate strategies on current and future workforce needs, including participation in business attraction and retention efforts as confidentiality allows, including sharing timely and relevant workforce data.

- **Strategy 1.2:** Increase communication between all partners.

- Activity 1.2A: Regional workforce development partners will collaborate to share resources and strategies and meet regional business service needs. Regional Local Workforce Innovation Areas (LWIAs) will lead this effort.

- Activity 1.2B: American Job Center (AJC) staff will coordinate the appropriate resources for career seekers, including connecting them with the Illinois Department of Employment Security (IDES) and ensuring the participants have assistance with applying/certifying for unemployment as necessary, which strengthens the linkage between the AJCs and IDES.

- Activity 1.2C: All core partners will connect bi-monthly through LWIA committees to collaborate and support one another's programs.
- **Strategy 1.3: Strengthen sector partnerships by identifying sector champions to lead industry efforts.**
 - Activity 1.3A: Support industry initiatives related to regional workforce needs.
 - Activity 1.3B: Identify existing career pathways in identified regional clusters.
- **Regional Goal 2: Measure meaningful outcomes and continuous improvement using customer-centered and data-informed practices.**

The emphasis on measuring outcomes that genuinely matter goes beyond merely considering dollars spent or the number of participants involved. Instead, it prioritizes the impact on the lives of individuals, the community, and the broader economy. This approach aligns with a results-oriented perspective, where the effectiveness of investments is assessed based on tangible and lasting benefits.

- **Strategy 2.1: Improve data tracking and analysis to provide relevant information to measure progress with various metrics.**
 - Activity 2.1A: Conduct a data evaluation to analyze the efficacy of our data collection and program models.
 - Activity 2.1B: All compliance staff will receive updated training and reports on all grant activities.
- **Strategy 2.2: Analyze and improve activities related to educating and supporting job seekers in navigating the labor market.**
 - Activity 2.2A: Educate career planners on current regional cluster strategies.
 - Activity 2.2B: Analyze results of customer services with the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) partners through the LWIA Program Operations Committee.
- **Strategy 2.3: The customer assessment tool and referral system will undergo a continuous improvement process through the LWIA Program Operations Management Advisory Committee.**
 - Activity 2.3A: Share best practices regarding assessments and referrals.
 - Activity 2.3B: Consider implementing a method of tracking referral sources through the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) applications.
- **Strategy 2.4: Work with employers to develop additional work-based employment models such as apprenticeships.**

- Activity 2.4A: The One-Stop-Operator (OSO) will promote and educate career-seekers on work-based models, specifically with General Educational Development (GED) students.
- Activity 2.4B: Apprenticeship Navigators and Business Services Teams (BST) will educate employers in our region on apprenticeships.

- **Regional Goal 3: Prepare Illinois workers for a career and employer's abilities to hire and retain skilled workers by providing excellence in customer service.**
Regardless of background, life circumstances, or education level, Illinois workers can be prepared for high-demand careers by developing core academic, technical, and essential employability skills throughout their lifetimes.
- **Strategy 3.1: Increase communication with all of the AJCs' Partners.**
 - Activity 3.1A: The AJCs will connect bi-monthly with all partners through a connection meeting to address issues and collaborate.
- **Strategy 3.2: Support the implementation of the Illinois State Board of Education's Career Cluster Framework, which includes career clusters, career pathways, and programs of study.**
 - Activity 3.2A: Local Workforce Innovation Board (LWIB) committees will work on initiatives, projects, and marketing of career pathways and knowledge around them.
 - Tactic 3.2A(1): LWIB staff will provide updated career pathways information on Local Workforce Innovation Board 3 (LWIA 3)'s The Workforce Connection (TWC) website.
 - Tactic 3.2A(2): LWIB and program staff will inform career-seekers and employers of career pathway opportunities in targeted industries through regular communications of newsletters, social media posts, and website blogs.
- **Strategy 3.3: Increase workforce skill level through bolstered education and training opportunities.**
 - Activity 3.3A: Provide training-choice guidance, career counseling, and virtual or in-person career services.
 - Tactic 3.3A(1): Career counseling will be provided to each individual as needed by career planners and job coaches.
 - Tactic 3.3A(2): Virtual presentations on high-growth and in-demand careers will be delivered.
 - Activity 3.3B: Offer the most relevant and accredited education and training options, which the LWIBs review and approve.
 - Tactic 3.3B(1): LWIBs will receive a rigorous assessment matrix to approve new training programs as they arise and vote to approve or re-approve training programs.

- **Strategy 3.4: Increase retention efforts for recently employed individuals to ensure long-term in the workforce.**
 - Activity 3.4A: Regular classes for career-seekers to build essential workplace skills will be offered regularly.
 - Activity 3.4B: Share employer best practices in monthly newsletters and at LWIB meetings.
- **Strategy 3.5: Better coordinate resources to address barriers to employment and education.**
 - Activity 3.5A: Services will continue to be offered within County jail(s) to provide easy access for re-entry individuals.
 - Activity 3.5B: “Train the Trainer” will be offered to partner organizations to ensure they can assist participants in navigating through services.
 - Activity 3.5C: The Community Navigator/Service Integration Specialist will continue to assist career-seekers with enrollment, transportation, housing, and other barriers to training and employment.
- **Strategy 3.6: Educate/inform career seekers on reliable transportation options to get employed and maintain employment.**
 - Activity 3.6A: “Train the Trainer” will be offered to partner organizations to ensure they can assist participants in navigating through available transportation assistance services.
- **Regional Goal 4: Promote responsiveness, inclusivity and accessibility (RIA) by connecting career seekers with employers.**

Illinois businesses can find productive workers they need through more efficient training and better services for career seekers and employers.

 - **Strategy 4.1: Promote cohort training models for targeted sectors to employers and employees.**
 - Two cohort trainings will be provided annually for targeted sectors.
 - **Strategy 4.2: Increase outreach and engagement with small to mid-sized employers in identified high-growth sectors.**
 - Activity 4.2A: Hiring events and resource fairs will be offered monthly in collaboration with partners and businesses.
 - Activity 4.2B: The BST will engage or develop relationships with employers monthly.
 - **Strategy 4.3: Partner and collaborate with business associations and business development agencies.**

- Activity 4.3A: The BST will develop a list of business associations each county can engage and collaborate with.
- **Strategy 4.4: Bridge the gap between employer expectations and the workforce pool to build trust between career seekers and employers.**
 - Activity 4.4A: Industry champions will be identified to facilitate the knowledge of their talent pipeline. These champions will be featured by speaking at meetings and highlighted in newsletters.
 - Activity 4.4B: Career-seekers will be developed to meet employer needs through classes and the Certificate of Essential Workplace Skills.
- **Strategy 4.5: Ongoing employer engagement to increase knowledge about state resources to support their efforts. (Incentives to work with special populations and Illinois Job Link to find qualified talent).**
 - Activity 4.5A: All employer contacts will be logged in the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) database to track metrics and conversion rates of efforts.
 - Activity 4.5B: OSO and LWIB staff will collaborate with economic development partners to enhance community knowledge about resources.
 - Activity 4.5C: Staff will be trained on engagement strategies and the tools available to businesses.

C. Provide a description of the regional and local strategies that will achieve the vision and principles. This section must include a description of the strategies and services that will be used in the local areas:

1. To facilitate engagement of employers in workforce development programs, including small employers and employers in in-demand industry sectors and occupations (§679.560(b)(3)(i));

Our region is committed to continually working with critical stakeholders in the community to assist in finding solutions to employment needs by connecting employers with highly trained individuals. The LWIAs have representatives from the following regional stakeholders on our LWIBs who can assist us in reaching out to employers in all industries in our region to develop apprenticeships: Chicago Rockford International Airport, Highland Community College, Rock Valley College, Growth Dimensions, Greater Freeport Partnership, Region 1 Planning Council, OSF Healthcare, Freeport Health Network, Belvidere Area Chamber of Commerce, Plumber and Pipefitters Local Union 23, Project First Rate, Rock River Valley Tooling & Manufacturing Association, Goodwill of Northern Illinois, Berner Food and Beverages, Bourn & Koch, LLC Custom Metal Works, Sinnissippi Centers, F.N. Smith Corporation, Blackhawk Hills Regional Council, Northwestern Illinois Community Action Agency and Area Health Education Center and other representatives of manufacturing, banking, education and community organizations.

2. To support a local workforce development system that meets the needs of businesses in the local area (§ 679.560(b)(3)(ii));

Both LWIAs (LWIA 3 and LWIA 4) in our Economic Development Region have extensive experience in the development and execution of work-based learning, including On-The-Job (OJT) training and Incumbent Worker Training (IWT). These programs assist businesses in filling vacant positions and allow individuals to receive the training they need to succeed in a high-growth, high-demand field. Career pathways will be developed with employers, education providers, and training providers. They will align in multiple directions across secondary education, adult education, workforce training and development, career and technical education, and post-secondary programs.

3. To better coordinate workforce development programs and economic development (§679.560(b)(3)(iii));

LWIA 3 continuously engages with economic development agencies in the region. The Executive Director sits on the LWIB of two of the three agencies and has a strong relationship with the third. Beyond meeting attendance, LWIA 3 has partnered with agencies to apply for relevant workforce development grants, including 3 Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) grants. LWIA 3 played a prominent role in collaborating with the State, Region 1 Planning Council (R1), and Growth Dimensions in a year-long process to successfully retain a large automotive manufacturing company, saving over 1,000 jobs. LWIA 3 also participates in various business attraction events, providing workforce data from Lightcast and assisting with presentations when invited.

LWIA 4 also continuously engages with economic development. Northwest Central Illinois (NCI) Works and Business Employment Skills Team, Inc. (BEST) Cooperate Board has two members of Economic Development who regularly attend meetings. Training, planning sessions, and events are just a few information-sharing opportunities.

4. To strengthen linkages between the one-stop delivery system and unemployment insurance programs (§ 679.560(b)(3)(iv))

EDR 5 is committed to strengthening linkages between the one-stop delivery system and unemployment insurance programs through:

- Streamlining access to services by creating solid linkages ensures that individuals receiving unemployment benefits have seamless access to the comprehensive employment and training services of the one-stop delivery system. This streamlines the process for job seekers, making accessing the support they need more accessible.
- Targeted training and support are delivered by utilizing IDES workforce development data to better understand individuals' specific skills and training needs in the unemployment pool. This enables the delivery of targeted training programs and support services that match the labor market's demands.
- EDR 5 is committed to efficiently using resources by sharing data and insights to avoid duplication of efforts and allocate resources more effectively to address the diverse needs of job seekers. EDR 5 is also committed to unified support for economic recovery through rapid response events.
- Strengthening linkages becomes especially crucial during periods of economic downturns or crises. A coordinated approach ensures that individuals affected by job losses receive the support they need to re-enter the workforce, contributing to economic recovery efforts.

5. To promote entrepreneurial skills training and microenterprise services (§ 679.560(b)(4));

EDR 5 is committed to promoting entrepreneurial skills training and microenterprise services in the following ways:

- Collaborate with local organizations. Partner with local business associations, community colleges, and economic development agencies to create a network that supports entrepreneurs. These organizations may already have programs or resources that can be leveraged.
- Organize and conduct workshops and training programs focused on entrepreneurial skills development. Cover topics such as business planning, financial management, marketing, and legal considerations. Work with experienced entrepreneurs or business professionals to lead these sessions.
- Fostering a supportive community by encouraging networking and collaboration among local entrepreneurs. Host networking events, meetups, or forums where entrepreneurs can connect, share experiences, and support each other.
- Promote success stories of local entrepreneurs who have benefited from our programs. Highlighting real-life examples that can inspire others and demonstrate the tangible impact of entrepreneurial skills training.
- Exploring funding opportunities and grants that support entrepreneurship and small businesses. Securing financial support can help sustain and expand initiatives.

6. To implement initiatives such as incumbent worker training programs, on-the-job training programs, customized training programs, industry and sector strategies, career pathways initiatives, utilization of effective business intermediaries, and other business services and strategies designed to meet the needs of regional employers (§ 679.560(b)(3)(v)).

- Conduct a thorough assessment of regional needs, analyzing the regional job market and industries to identify specific skill gaps and training needs. Engage with local employers, industry associations, and workforce development agencies to understand current and future skill requirements.
- Utilize Effective Business Intermediaries by identifying and engaging business intermediaries such as industry associations, training providers, and workforce development boards. Leverage their expertise to connect employers with relevant training resources and services.
- Support the creation of clear career pathways for individuals, outlining progression opportunities within industries. Provide guidance and support for individuals to navigate these pathways, including mentorship programs and career advising.
- Assist employers with developing Incumbent Worker Training (IWT) programs focusing on upskilling and reskilling existing employees to meet evolving job requirements. Seek grant opportunities to offer employers incentives to invest in their workforce's continuous training and development.

- Facilitate OJT opportunities in collaboration with employers. Assist with the design of programs that allow individuals to gain practical experience while developing the necessary skills.
- Align training initiatives with specific industries and sectors that drive the regional economy. Stay informed about industry trends and workforce demands to adapt training programs accordingly.
- Commitment to continuous evaluation and improvement by using current systems to assess training programs' effectiveness. Gather feedback from employers, participants, and other stakeholders to make continuous improvements.

D. Describe regional strategies that will increase apprenticeship and other work-based learning opportunities.

- Continue to foster strong partnerships and collaboration between employers, industry associations, educational institutions, and government agencies through LWIB meetings and activities. The BST will collaborate with local businesses to understand workforce needs and tailor apprenticeship programs accordingly.
- Promotion and awareness through newsletters highlight the benefits of apprenticeships and work-based learning. Hosting informational events to inform all industry sectors of the benefits and return on investment of U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) Registered Apprenticeship Programs. Work with schools, community colleges, and career counselors to promote opportunities for students and job seekers while also informing students and job seekers of the advantages of apprenticeship programs.
- Assist with the alignment of apprenticeship programs with industry-recognized credentials and certifications. Work with DOL to ensure that completion of apprenticeships leads to tangible qualifications valued in the job market.
- Implement targeted outreach programs to encourage underrepresented groups, such as women and minorities, to participate in apprenticeship programs. Address barriers, including stereotypes and lack of information, to ensure inclusivity.
- Encourage the development of apprenticeship programs adaptable to emerging industries and technological advancements. Inform the community of industry trends to ensure that training remains relevant and up to date.
- Evaluation and continuous improvement by utilizing established mechanisms for evaluating the effectiveness of apprenticeship programs. Use feedback from employers, apprentices, and educational institutions to make continuous improvements.
- Continue organizing networking events and job fairs that connect apprentices with potential employers.

E. Describe initiatives to shorten the time from credential to employment and address how the area will work with the education system to begin putting training opportunities in place to meet this strategy.

- Support industry-aligned credential programs that directly match the skills and competencies demanded by employers. Collaborate with industry partners to identify credentials that hold value in the job market and communicate these to training partners.
- Support accelerated training programs that focus on delivering essential skills in a condensed timeframe to enable faster time to employment.
- In collaboration with employers, identify and prioritize in-demand skills that lead to immediate employment opportunities. Regularly update training partners to align with the evolving needs of the job market.
- Encourage programs to offer stackable credential programs that allow individuals to earn certifications incrementally. Communicate with employers to ensure that credentials obtained are recognized in the workforce, providing immediate employability benefits.
- Offer quality career advising services to help individuals make informed decisions about their education and training paths. Provide guidance on selecting credential programs that lead to quicker employment outcomes.
- Collaborate with educational institutions to encourage embedding industry-recognized certifications into degree programs. Encourage the creation of pathways for students to seamlessly transition from education to employment.
- Leverage LWIB committees that bring together representatives from education, business, and community organizations. Focus LWIB committees to strategize on aligning training opportunities with employment needs.

F. Describe the steps that will be taken to support the state's efforts to align and integrate education, workforce, and economic development, including:

1. Fostering the improvement and expansion of employer-driven regional sector partnerships to increase the focus on critical in-demand occupations in key sectors that are the engine of economic growth for the state and its regions.

The initiatives outlined, particularly the focus on apprenticeships and the role of the Apprenticeship Navigator, are key components of a comprehensive strategy, including:

- Continue to strengthen communication channels among secondary and post-secondary education, workforce organizations, and economic development representatives. Regular meetings and updates ensure alignment with regional initiatives.
- Ensure that diverse perspectives, including those from education, workforce, and economic development, are represented on LWIBs. This ensures a holistic approach to regional planning.
- Support and expand efforts to establish employer-driven sector partnerships. These partnerships will focus on critical in-demand occupations and key sectors identified as vital for economic growth.
- Leverage the Apprenticeship Navigator to actively engage with employers. This includes helping businesses understand the benefits of apprenticeship programs and providing guidance on program implementation. Work with the Apprenticeship Navigator to identify

and address barriers that may hinder the implementation of apprenticeship programs. This could include regulatory challenges, awareness gaps, or resource constraints.

- Collaborate closely with secondary and post-secondary education institutions to align curriculum with employers' needs. Ensure that educational programs prepare individuals for apprenticeships in critical sectors.
- Ongoing collection of metrics and evaluation criteria to assess the success of apprenticeship programs. This includes tracking the number of apprenticeships created, employer engagement levels, and the impact on workforce development.
- Work closely with economic development agencies to align apprenticeship programs with broader regional economic development goals. This ensures that workforce development efforts contribute directly to economic growth.
- Foster a culture of continuous improvement by regularly reviewing and updating apprenticeship programs based on feedback from employers, apprentices, and other stakeholders.

2. Expanding career pathway opportunities through more accelerated and work-based training and align and integrate programs of study leading to industry-recognized credentials and improved employment and earnings.

The initiatives outlined by EDR 5, particularly the focus on employer-driven regional sector partnerships and implementing an Apprenticeship Navigator, demonstrate a proactive approach to addressing workforce needs and enhancing career pathways. The examples provided, such as the IWT program at Swedish American Hospital, showcase effective strategies for creating career opportunities through accelerated and work-based training. Here's a closer look at key elements and potential recommendations:

- **Apprenticeship Navigator:**
 - **Engagement with Employers:**
 - The Apprenticeship Navigator's role in working directly with employers is crucial. Continue fostering solid relationships with businesses to understand their needs and tailor apprenticeship programs accordingly.
 - Facilitate ongoing communication to ensure that apprenticeship programs align with evolving industry demands.
 - **Barrier Removal:**
 - Identify and address barriers hindering the implementation of apprenticeship programs. This could involve regulatory challenges, awareness gaps, or resource constraints.
 - Collaborate with employers to develop solutions and streamline the apprenticeship process.
 - **Promoting Value of Apprenticeships:**
 - Assist businesses in understanding the value of apprenticeship programs for their organization. Highlight the long-term benefits, including workforce development, employee retention, and business growth.

- Develop outreach materials and workshops to educate employers on the advantages of apprenticeships.
- **Incumbent Worker Training (IWT) Program:**
 - **Utilizing IWT:**
 - Continue leveraging IWT programs to upskill and advance existing employees. This can contribute to employee satisfaction, retention, and overall workforce development.
 - Explore opportunities to expand IWT initiatives to address broader skill gaps within key sectors.
 - **Building Apprenticeship Models:**
 - Building on the success of the IWT program, explore the development of apprenticeship models.
 - Collaborate with employers and training providers to create apprenticeship pathways that align with the training programs and address specific workforce needs.
 - **Dialogue on Apprenticeship Development:**
 - Maintain an ongoing dialogue with employers like Swedish American Hospital on developing apprenticeship models around successful training programs.
 - Identify opportunities for scaling apprenticeship initiatives within the region and adapting them to the needs of different industries.
 - **Documentation of Success Stories:**
 - Document success stories from the IWT program, showcasing the positive outcomes for employers and employees.
 - Use these success stories for promotional purposes to encourage other businesses to adopt similar training and apprenticeship models.
 - **Alignment with Regional Strategies:**
 - Ensure that the apprenticeship models developed align with the broader regional strategies for economic growth, focusing on critical in-demand occupations in key sectors.
 - Coordinate efforts with other stakeholders to create a cohesive and comprehensive approach to workforce development.
 - **Continuous Improvement:**
 - Establish mechanisms for continuous improvement based on feedback from employers, participants, and other stakeholders.
 - Regularly review and update training and apprenticeship models to remain responsive to changing industry needs.

By persistently expanding upon the achievements of these initiatives and upholding a robust commitment to engaging employers and developing the workforce, EDR 5 has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the economic growth of both the state and the region. The sustained success of these programs hinges on collaboration and continuous dialogue with

employers.

3. Expanding career services and opportunities for populations facing multiple barriers to close the gap in educational attainment and economic advancement through career pathways and improved career services.

• Elevate and Life Launch Program:

○ Comprehensive Support:

- The collaboration between Elevate and the Life Launch program exemplifies a holistic approach by providing comprehensive services for youth with justice involvement and educational barriers. Case management, work experience, credential attainment, and employment placement assistance contribute to a well-rounded support system.

○ Virtual GED Classes:

- Addressing the challenge of attending classes while needing to work is a crucial innovation. Offering virtual GED courses and creating a space at the work site with internet access reflects an understanding of the practical constraints faced by the youth.

○ Adaptability and Flexibility:

- Recognize the diverse needs of youth and their varied circumstances. Adapting and flexibly providing services, such as virtual classes, is vital to overcoming barriers.

• Elevate and YouthBuild Partnership:

○ Simultaneous Diploma and Training:

- Co-enrolling students in Elevate and YouthBuild to simultaneously pursue a high school diploma and vocational training in welding is a powerful strategy. This approach ensures that individuals complete their education and gain valuable skills that enhance their employability.

○ Career Growth Opportunities:

- Emphasize the importance of career growth by integrating educational and vocational training programs. The partnership with YouthBuild provides a pathway for students to acquire credentials that directly lead to employment, fostering long-term career growth.

• Career Readiness and Work Experience:

○ Contextualized Learning:

- Offering career readiness courses alongside job coaching during work experience creates a learning environment that is practical and directly applicable. Contextualizing learning within the workplace enhances understanding and prepares youth for success in future employment.

○ Interpersonal Skills Development:

- Job coaching enhances technical skills and focuses on interpersonal skills, such as appropriate communication with co-workers and supervisors. This emphasis contributes to developing soft skills crucial for sustained career success.

• Plans for expansion of services for populations with multiple barriers:

- **Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation:**
 - Expand the system for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of these programs. Collect feedback from participants, employers, and partners to make continuous improvements.
- **Scalability and Replicability:**
 - Explore opportunities to scale these initiatives or replicate successful models in other regions, ensuring that the impact can be extended to a larger population.
- **Public Awareness and Advocacy:**
 - Promote the success stories arising from these partnerships to create awareness and advocate for the value of holistic support programs. This can attract additional support, resources, and partnerships to expand the reach and impact.

G. Describe how goals established in this plan will be monitored and evaluated.

The implementation of effective performance management involves several key steps. Firstly, it requires the establishment of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) aligned with specific goals. These KPIs serve as quantifiable indicators, measuring progress and success. Secondly, a regular schedule for progress tracking is crucial, with intervals such as weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annually determined by the nature of the goals. Thirdly, continuous engagement of stakeholders is vital. This involves gathering feedback from team members, clients, and other relevant parties to gain diverse perspectives.

Additionally, the implementation of performance reviews, both individual and team-based, is essential for assessing contributions and making necessary adjustments. Leveraging data analytics tools to analyze large datasets is the fifth step, providing insights into trends and patterns that inform decision-making. The sixth step emphasizes documenting and transparently communicating results to foster stakeholder accountability and trust. Continuous improvement is the seventh step, utilizing evaluation results to enhance future goal-setting strategies. Lastly, as mandated by EDR 5, external audits or reviews provide unbiased evaluations and insights, informing practice and continuous improvement throughout the region.

H. Describe how responsiveness, inclusivity and accessibility (RIA) are or will be incorporated in the implementation of regional workforce, education, and economic development strategies.

A comprehensive approach RIA is implemented through various strategies. Firstly, there is a commitment to continuous data collection and analysis, focusing on demographic data such as race, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and disability. This analysis aims to identify disparities in access, participation, and outcomes across different demographic groups, with transparent communication of findings to the region. Equity impact assessments form the second strategy, evaluating proposed policies, programs, and initiatives to understand their potential differential effects on demographic groups. Strategies are then adjusted based on these assessments to mitigate negative impacts and enhance positive outcomes. The third strategy involves meaningful and inclusive community engagement, ensuring diverse voices are heard in planning and decision-making processes. This includes collaboration with advisory groups and community organizations representing marginalized populations. Customized support services, such as childcare assistance and career advising tailored to individual challenges, constitute the fourth strategy. Inclusive hiring practices are encouraged as the fifth strategy, promoting RIA within the workforce through various channels. The sixth strategy promotes apprenticeship and training opportunities accessible to individuals from all backgrounds, collaborating with employers to create pathways for underrepresented groups. Continuous monitoring and evaluation, the seventh strategy, involves regular assessments of the impact of strategies on RIA goals and soliciting feedback from affected communities for ongoing responsiveness. Policy advocacy, the eighth strategy, focuses on regional-level policies that address systemic barriers and support inclusive economic and workforce development. Transparency and

accountability, the ninth strategy, involves maintaining transparency in reporting progress on RIA goals, holding organizations accountable, and publishing regular reports highlighting successes, challenges, and areas for improvement in workforce RIA.

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