

## **2024 WIOA State Plan Local Visit Review**

The Kentucky Workforce Innovation Board (KWIB) conducted a statewide listening tour in preparation of the 2024 WIOA State Plan. From July through the end of October 2023, all ten Kentucky Local Workforce Development Areas (LWDA) contributed to the work.

The framework for the tour involved working with the local LWDA Board directors and their teams to invite workforce stakeholders to conduct a brief overview of the purpose of the WIOA State Plan and breakout into focus groups to gain insight on specific perspectives. The focus groups were broken into:

- Workforce Partners (community-based organizations, nonprofits, MOU partners, educators)
- Employers
- Elected Officials
- Individual Customers

In total, 33 focus groups were held that involved 348 participants in the listening tours with the breakdown of: 198 workforce partners, 82 employers, 51 elected officials, and 17 individual customers contributing their perspective.

The main line of questioning proposed to each group was a reflection on the existing workforce development system and a reimagined future state of workforce development, with the main intention of learning best practices, challenges, and opportunities that can be pursued. After analysis, here are the common statewide themes:

### **Statewide Common Themes**

#### **1) Youth Employment – the Future of Workforce**

- The most cited point was “exposure to careers” and opportunities for work-based learning
  - Exposure to careers to start during middle school
  - Career exploration to further develop in high schools
- A key point of career exposure was also to involve parents and teachers in understanding all options available in the world of work
  - Cultural shift of ensuring careers in manufacturing and trades are valued; these roles are becoming technologically advanced
  - Understanding that “good jobs” are available in all sectors
- Ensuring that the workforce system reaches youth before they become “opportunity youth”
  - Understanding many kids are raised by grandparents & many have parents incarcerated; different approach is necessary to begin barrier removal
  - Finding opportunities to partner with the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) to help youth with disabilities
- Lack of mentors and mentorship programs leads to disengaged youth
- The value of essential skills and work ethic is critical

### Stakeholder Suggestions:

- Exposure to teachers on all local career (specifically manufacturing and trades) options via externships or short-term bootcamps
- Utilization of “-ships” as a youth career exposure recruitment tool, specifically internships and apprenticeships
- Showcasing diverse workers to students to ensure ALL kids see themselves in various occupations
- Providing students with Labor Market Information (LMI) on all job opportunities and associated wages
- Deeper collaboration between employers, workforce system, higher education, and district superintendents
- School based career advisors as direct in-school connectors to work
- “Student workforce spotlights” to showcase successful work-based learning and/or working in a particular industry

## **2) Hiring and Supporting Non-Traditional Talent/Workers (Untapped Talent)**

- The most cited talent group was justice-involved as several statewide and locally run programs are actively engaged in employment services; opportunities to further efforts through:
  - More expungement fairs as awareness of expungement grows
  - Pre-apprenticeship programs to link individuals while incarcerated to outside registered apprenticeship programs upon release
  - More reentry simulations to exposure employers and workforce practitioners to barriers faced
  - Supportive services as scaffolding to build resilience
- Kentucky has a high number of individuals with disabilities with many employment programs that can be braided and leveraged
- English language learners, refugees, and immigrants
  - Targeted onsite English classes; Per WIOA, KY Adult Education has mandate in adult education and literacy, including individuals with limited English language skills
  - Kentucky ranks #4 nationally in refugee arrivals
- Veterans/military
  - Ft. Campbell averages ~500 transitioning soldiers monthly; Ft. Knox averages ~50 transitioning soldiers monthly; these numbers are further increased when adding spouses and families
  - Transfer of military experience to civilian life is an important component in entering workforce
- Aging population provides the benefits of higher retention

### Stakeholder Suggestions for all Untapped Talent:

- Building pipelines into the workforce (focus on sectors)
- Educating employers on the benefits/ROI and potential challenges with workforce system solutions
- Creating a support structure for employers and workers; example: council/committee for businesses that hire a specific talent pool
- Creating a welcoming community
- Use of technology where career exposure is a barrier (ex: using VR goggles)
- Employer understanding of the benefits cliff and associated challenges
- Digital access and literacy are not equally distributed; provide more avenues for digital training
- Establish councils/focus groups of individuals representing a specific untapped talent pool for continuous customer-centered understanding of challenges and opportunities (including youth talent)
- Utilizing Employer Resource Networks (ERNs) to provide career and barrier removal coaching; less costly than high turnover

### **3. Business Engagement & Industry Innovation**

- Importance of businesses being an engaged partner; being an active voice at the table
- Workforce system must emphasize support for small and medium-sized companies
- Employer investment work-based learning/on-the-job training is critical
- Employer time is limited; using webinars, blogs, direct communication to share resources
- Businesses are interested in actively engaging with other businesses, starting organic sector partnerships; opportunity to collaborate on sector training, employee support systems (sector operated childcare center)
- Support to county and municipal government as an employer as competition has created hard to fill local government jobs: emergency response, road department, sewer & water, etc.
- Businesses are facing succession planning as retirements grow; looking at apprenticeship as a knowledge-sharing program is building momentum
- Supporting recovery population in an ongoing basis through resources (or peer support specialists)

### Stakeholder Suggestions:

- Flexibility of support for employees (ex: using tuition reimbursement dollars for short-term training, upskilling, childcare assistance, or car repair funds)
- Looking at skills versus degrees; providing skills training through work-based learning
  - Similarly, offering Adult Education courses to individuals with high school degrees (ex: East Kentucky employer recognized that 60,000 in EKY/Bordering WV lack a GED; changed policies to hire entry level and train)
- Kentucky Career Center's proactive engagement with small businesses

- Providing “good jobs” that provide competitive wages + benefits + career advancement + voice + diversity + occupational safety + recruitment of untapped talent pools + positive organizational culture -> leads to better recruitment and retention

### **Enhanced Collaboration within Workforce & with Education**

- Enhanced flexibility and partnership between education and workforce; lines need to be blurred
- Communication among workforce partners to raise awareness of program to businesses
- Uphill battle of the perception of the Kentucky Career Center as the “unemployment office”
- Educational continuum needs to be embraced, “K through Gray” or “Cradle to Grave” as individuals become lifelong learners
- Reduced WIOA funding impact on local area providers; collaboration and braiding of funding and services is a necessity; collaboration also balances out duplication of services
- Mental health impacts are seen in service providers
- Co-location of multiple partners in one physical space provides best services; while at the same time, rethinking brick and mortar locations -> go to the customers versus waiting
- Ongoing staff training and exposure to the greater Kentucky workforce ecosystem

### **Stakeholder Suggestions:**

- Creating a shared north star to collectively pursue (ex: connection to good jobs for customers; finding qualified talent to businesses; jointly removing barriers)
- Avoiding “silos of excellence” and creating a “system of excellence”
- Regional promotion of services to provide support to rural area
- Collaboration on training space at an Area Technology Center (ATC) designed to serve youth during the day, with opportunity to serve adults at night
- Explore how discretionary funding to support local innovation can involve local match (ex: 80/20 funding mechanism)
- Collaboration opportunities including:
  - Understanding the leads/champions of specific initiatives or programs
  - Internal resource fairs for partners
  - Unified labor exchange system
  - Unified communication/outreach strategy
  - Shared online portal with all program resources available for staff training and business interest

### **Barriers to Employment: Childcare, Housing, and Transportation**

#### **1) Childcare – Access and Affordability**

- #1 barrier raised across the state for getting and retaining workers
- General support for universal pre-K programs
  - Implementation worries of staffing and school infrastructure to add more kids
- Employee Assistance Program is a positive
  - Implementation: employer engagement in the system is less than 50%

Stakeholder Suggestions:

- Availability for 12-hour shifts; availability on weekends
- Employer sponsored childcare (option: sector/industrial park approach of businesses collaborating to offer childcare services)
- Support and incentives for entrepreneurship in childcare start-up

**2) Transportation – Urban and Rural Areas**

- Availability and access to reliable transportation varies greatly across counties and urban and rural areas

Stakeholder Suggestions:

- Regional or rural transportation options
- Public transportation to jobs, and those seeking skills or training
- Local options for mobility incentives
- Promoting innovative solutions like Enterprise Commute

**3) Affordable Housing**

- Lack of new and affordable housing; multi-units are in high demand
- People escaping urban areas for rural communities; also leads to lack of reliable internet
- Innovative approaches: Elizabethtown Community and Technical College (ECTC) working with the Family Scholar House for on-campus family-style housing for students with barriers

**Feedback from Individual Customers**

**Defining a good job:**

- Pay to match cost of living
- Health insurance/benefits to match family arrangement
- Flexibility
- Culture, working with respectful and good people
- Being treated well
- Provide a greater purpose than just a job
- A job that benefits you and your family
- Opportunity for personal and professional growth
- A place that one can be happy, feel fulfilled, and have purpose
- Transportation offered
- Options in work hours
- Upskilling Opportunities

**Why did you seek employment services from the Kentucky Career Center?**

- Training needs
- Check out employment options

- Unemployment insurance
- To get a job
- GED
- Transportation question

**Positives of KCC:**

- Dedicated and above and beyond staff
- Staff assistance in navigating the labor exchange system
- Staff assistance in helping with employers that are not returning calls on applications
- The community/collective based approach is noticeable, rallied behind customer goals to connect to housing and transportation for stability, and then employment
- Focusing on the goals of the customer

**Suggested Improvements from the Customers:**

- Job search system that is user friendly
- Following people through the process of training to ensure completion (remove barriers along the way)
- Offer in-person, online, chat, and email services
- Recommendation of having a mentor/coach to guide once employed to assist when struggles arise or barriers return
- Recommendation that businesses go to spaces that serve individuals with barriers, and promote opportunities directly
- Ensure career advisor have the training to serve the needs of clients; career academy for all career advisors
- Ensure center and staff have presence in community
- Provide training for basic digital skills (including in multiple languages)
- Networking events for customers