



CREATING CAREER PATHS FOR IN-DEMAND JOBS

Workforce Innovation Grants help grow careers and meet business needs



November 2025



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CLEAR CAREER PATHWAYS CREATE BRIGHT FUTURES



November 2025

Like many other states, Wisconsin in recent years has faced a workforce shortage driven primarily by an aging population and slowing birthrates. Given our already high labor participation rate—consistently higher than the national average—in Wisconsin we've chosen to focus our efforts on helping communities and workers overcome the remaining barriers to full employment.

In 2021, Governor Tony Evers created the Workforce Innovation Grant (WIG) Program to encourage communities to identify local workforce needs and develop and implement solutions that could be replicated elsewhere. Jointly administered by the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), the program used funding from the American Rescue Plan Act to award \$128 million to 27 projects across the state.

WIG funding is helping Wisconsin residents engineer career paths that build better skills that help them access family-supporting jobs. By boosting skill development with targeted training that fills needs in industries ranging from advanced manufacturing to forestry to construction trades, and more, WIG-funded programs are positioning workers for success and businesses for growth.

As our workforce needs continue to grow, improving access to in-demand, 21st century jobs is critical. The pioneering programs detailed in this report open doors to new skills, improve career trajectories, boost economic well-being, and enable individuals to meet clear career goals.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sam Ridders', written over a white background.

Sam Ridders
Chief Operating Officer
Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation

GROWING THE WORKFORCE TO MEET DEMANDS



November 2025

DWD is proud to support the WIG-funded projects in this report, which are creatively working to bolster the workforce pipeline for in-demand occupational sectors with significant shortages of qualified and skilled workers in Wisconsin and across the nation.

Workforce growth is essential to Wisconsin's economy. To make that achievable in a changing world of work, access to resources that educate and help grow careers is imperative. The training and support needed to upskill and train workers in leading-edge techniques have never been more important, as the way we work changes to accommodate new technologies and changing workforce demands.

The WIG Program helps partners across the state provide people with the skills to navigate our changing economy and set them up for workplace success. It helps people understand their options and set goals for emerging careers—whether they are young people entering the workforce, mid-career workers seeking advancement, or job seekers pursuing new skills.

Governor Evers invested a groundbreaking \$158 million from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to not only support innovative pandemic recovery efforts, but to address the state's ongoing workforce needs. The projects highlighted in this report are examples of some of the creative, local solutions to these regional workforce challenges.

The Workforce Solutions Initiative is composed of three programs, including WIG, that have delivered workforce training and supportive services to 18,000 Wisconsin residents since they began and continue to yield results today.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amy Pechacek', enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

Amy Pechacek
Secretary
Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development



THE CHALLENGE

STATE WORKFORCE SHORTAGE GROWS AS BOOMERS RETIRE

Wisconsin in recent years has faced a workforce quantity challenge in key areas—a challenge that is expected to continue, given demographic trends as baby boomers continue to retire. Overall, DWD projects a statewide labor gap of 294,000 workers by 2032.

In manufacturing, 27.4% of the state's workforce is age 55 or older, and jobs in production occupations are expected to grow by 3.1% from 2022 to 2032, with 36,404 annual job openings anticipated over the same period.

In health care, current hospital workforce shortages were described as “serious but stable” by the Wisconsin Hospital Association in its 2025 Workforce Report, with an overall vacancy rate at 9% as demand for services increases. The Wisconsin projections anticipate a 10.7% increase in health care jobs from 2022 to 2032, with 35,879 annual job openings during that period for practitioners, technical, and support staff.

In the construction industry, the U.S. will need to attract an estimated 439,000 net new workers in 2025 to meet anticipated demand for construction services. The Wisconsin projections anticipate an 11.8% increase in construction and extraction jobs from 2022 to 2032, with 12,623 annual job openings over the same period.

DWD and WEDC have partnered to support creative solutions to these workforce challenges, finding long-term strategies to grow, recruit, and sustain the workforce, especially in key industries.





THE VISION

DEVELOPMENT OF CAREER PATHWAYS BENEFITS BOTH WORKERS AND EMPLOYERS

As part of its work to develop an Economy for All, Wisconsin had the vision to tackle targeted workforce needs in a variety of areas, including transportation, education, health care, and housing, among others. A total of \$128 million was awarded to 27 projects during the course of the program.

The WIG Program complemented the state's existing workforce support and development services, harnessing the power of creativity, regional collaboration, and innovative solutions to longtime local workforce needs. The grants encouraged development of leading-edge, long-term solutions enabling businesses and institutions to find ways to connect people to resources that fill a need for the community, support the hiring needs of businesses, and help people find family-supporting careers more easily. WEDC, in collaboration with DWD, oversaw the program, which developed powerful, effective, and transformative solutions.

These 11 WIG-funded projects are helping to train both current and future workers across many vital industries, from manufacturing and health care to forestry and beyond.





INNOVATION ONE:

A MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH ADDRESSING THE NEED FOR SKILLED WORKERS IN METAL FABRICATION

The Restoring Employment through Support, Training, Outreach, Recruitment, and Education (RESTORE) program is building and upskilling the metal fabrication workforce in Northwest Wisconsin by using a \$9.9 million grant to bring training to high schools and businesses.

HOW IT WORKS:

- RESTORE operates out of training centers in Bloomer, Hammond, Osseo, and Augusta, in addition to two 54-foot semi-trailer trucks that serve as mobile welding labs.
- High school students who complete training receive nine credits toward a technical college diploma as well as industry-recognized short-term credentials.
- RESTORE also partners with local employers to upskill their current employees.

THE SITUATION:

By 2033, an estimated
1.9M
MANUFACTURING JOBS
 in the U.S. could remain unfilled
 due to the skills gap

Source: 2024 Deloitte analysis of data from
 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

More than
1/4 OF WORKERS
 in primary metal and
 fabricated metal products are
 at least 55 years of age

Source: 2024 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

JUST 35%
 of Northeast Wisconsin
 manufacturers surveyed had
 programs in place to address
 knowledge loss due to retirements

Source: 2025 Northeast Wisconsin Manufacturing
 Alliance 2025 Aging Workforce Study

THE EXPERIENCE:

The Restoring Employment through Support, Training, Outreach, Recruitment, and Education (RESTORE) program expands the reach of the Chippewa Valley Technical College (CVTC) program by operating out of training centers in Bloomer, Hammond, Osseo, and Augusta, in cooperation with high schools and businesses.

The program also operates two mobile welding labs housed in 54-foot semi-trailers to deliver training in advanced manufacturing. One lab is operated by CVTC and the other by its grant partner, Northwood Technical College. Graduates of the training receive nine credits toward a CVTC technical diploma as well as industry-recognized short-term credentials. The mobile labs, each with eight welding booths, combine to serve the rural communities and businesses in the northern third of the state.

CVTC works with Workforce Resource Inc. (WRI) to offer support programs including interventions for formerly incarcerated people seeking jobs, academies for youth and unemployed adults, and a Career Venture educational event for secondary students.

4,091

high school
students have
enrolled in training

2,100+

employed
adults have
been upskilled

6,800+

kids and adults
served by additional
support programs



THE EXPERIENCE:

In addition to training high school students, CVTC helps upskill current employees of Eau Claire's Lippert Components. Workers attend CVTC classes and the mobile welding lab makes visits to the company. Area employers have offered 92 work-based training opportunities, nine high school teachers have participated in professional development in the subject areas offered, and 6,897 people have been served by WRI's programs.

"It's been able to allow us to grow our team. And we can expand now to high-school students. Our success rate is 90-some percent."

- Matt Jerlecki, Director of Learning, Lippert Components

Since the program began in 2022, a total of 4,091 high school students have enrolled in dual-credit programs and 2,171 currently employed workers have participated in training.

This WIG-funded success served as a model for replication at Augusta High School and at the Neillsville CVTC campus, with the addition of mechatronics workforce training, as well as a mechatronics high school academy.

THE RESULTS: 2022-2025



**MORE THAN
6,500 PEOPLE**

have participated in training
via the RESTORE program



LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Plan ahead.

Pay attention to the cost of sustaining the training, said Julie Sherman, CVTC's director of apprenticeships and STEM initiatives. "We didn't think about how we power the mobile lab. You can't just plug it into a wall." The program purchased a generator and the truck needed to transport it.

2. Devise strategies for recruitment.

The availability of instructors was also an issue, because many qualified would-be instructors find higher-paying work in the private sector. It is a challenge that requires forethought and emphasis on recruitment. "There aren't a lot of skilled people who want to take a pay cut to teach," added Sherman. "That's the nature of the business."





INNOVATION TWO:

PAIRING WORKFORCE HOUSING WITH SKILL DEVELOPMENT ADDRESSES PRESSING NEEDS

Northwood Technical College used \$6 million in WIG funding to tackle two critical needs in the region: housing and expanded postsecondary opportunities. The Housing Opportunity and Mobile Education Solutions (HOMES) project is bringing advanced manufacturing training closer to home for the unemployed, underemployed, and underserved in Northwood Tech’s Rice Lake region.

HOW IT WORKS:

- HOMES targets Ashland, Barron, Bayfield, Burnett, Douglas, Iron, Polk, Rusk, St. Croix, Sawyer, and Washburn counties.
- The grant funded three multi-family workforce housing projects that include community rooms that can also serve as classrooms for Northwood Tech.
- Northwood Tech also provides off-site advanced manufacturing training via a large box truck outfitted to serve as a mobile advanced manufacturing lab.

THE SITUATION:

Finding quality,
skilled employees is the

#1 CONCERN

for Wisconsin manufacturers in 2024

Source: 2024 The Wisconsin Manufacturing Report,
Wisconsin Center for Manufacturing & Productivity

25% OF WORKERS

in manufacturing are
at least 55 years of age

Source: 2024 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

NEARLY 80%

of Wisconsin manufacturers
said it was difficult or very difficult
to find qualified workers
for open positions

Source: 2025 Northeast Wisconsin Manufacturing
Alliance 2025 Aging Workforce Study

THE EXPERIENCE:

By providing both housing and training directly in targeted communities, the Housing Opportunity and Mobile Education Solutions project (HOMES) solves two problems. It attracts workers to the communities where employers need them, creating a skilled local talent pool, and it relieves some of the financial burden for students while they take advanced manufacturing courses.

"The multi-family housing will be equipped with community rooms that can also serve as classrooms, which will add potential training hubs for Northwood Tech's growing portfolio of mobile education solutions."

- John Will, President, Northwood Tech

An additional \$3.8 million in grant funds was used to develop mobile, off-site training locations at Northwood Tech's campuses. The College is also partnering with Chippewa Valley Technical College (CVTC) to provide off-site training throughout the colleges' vast service area, with the goal of building welding and advanced manufacturing skills in the region. Along with CVTC's mobile welding lab, Northwood provided a mobile advanced manufacturing lab in a large, modified box truck.

Northwood also used funding to equip its campus with mechatronic and robotic equipment to enrich existing programs. In addition, it allowed the college to move equipment to the Rice Lake campus to better serve Rice Lake-area employers with skill training in advanced manufacturing.



THE EXPERIENCE:

MORE THAN
200 WORKERS
have been trained on campus

MORE THAN
700 ENROLLMENTS
cumulatively

Because the full program is still being built and because there were delays in getting instructors and in outfitting the mobile lab, the program's metrics are fairly modest. But the new on-campus equipment helped grow on-campus education opportunities, and as of June 2025, the college has served 228 workers in mechatronics, robotics, and automation, and had 707 cumulative enrollments. The college also invested in virtual reality goggles to demonstrate manufacturing careers to thousands of students.



THE RESULTS:



MORE THAN
3,000

advanced manufacturing
training experiences provided
via the HOMES project

LESSONS LEARNED:

Have patience.

Liz Pizzi, associate dean of workforce and community development, said the college learned that training the instructors and obtaining specialized equipment takes time and patience. “It took us almost a year to get faculty members through the training to do the certifications we needed. You have to build that into the timeline,” Pizzi said, adding that supply chain issues slowed the outfitting of the mobile lab, and the housing component took more time than anticipated.





INNOVATION THREE:

NEW ADVANCED MANUFACTURING SKILLS FROM A MOBILE EDUCATION PROGRAM

Labor shortages in East Central Wisconsin deepened with the pandemic as many experienced workers opted for retirement. Lakeshore College in Cleveland, Wisconsin, used \$1.6 million in WIG funds for its Lakeshore Industry 4.0 Pathways and Upskilling initiative, addressing a critical labor shortage threatening the economic stability of the manufacturing-heavy region.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Upskills current workers in Industry 4.0 automation and robotics, helping them become certified in 15 industry-relevant skills
- Connects upskilled workers with local employers who've invested in new technology
- Provides Industry 4.0 training for employers and trains instructors at other state technical schools

THE SITUATION:

Over the next three years

92%
OF U.S. MANUFACTURERS

expect smart manufacturing will be a major driver of competitiveness

Source: 2025 Smart Manufacturing and Operations Survey, Deloitte

83%
OF EMPLOYERS

surveyed have invested in machine/digital integration

Source: 2024 Industry 4.0 Talent & Technology Survey, Northeast Wisconsin Manufacturing

64%
OF WISCONSIN

manufacturers see automation as key to their company's future

Source: 2024-2025 Wisconsin Manufacturing Report, Wisconsin Center for Manufacturing & Productivity

THE EXPERIENCE:

This program upskills current production workers, machine operators, and high school students, as well as unemployed and underemployed members of their communities, to better understand automation and robotics, an area in which 79% of area employers have made an investment. Because of staff turnover, the build-out of Lakeshore's program and purchase of a mobile lab were delayed. In the meantime, Lakeshore improvised and offered seminar training at community locations and longer programs at its campus locations. It also offers transferable credits and works with employers such as Sargento, Johnsonville, and Kohler Co. to connect workers to quality jobs.

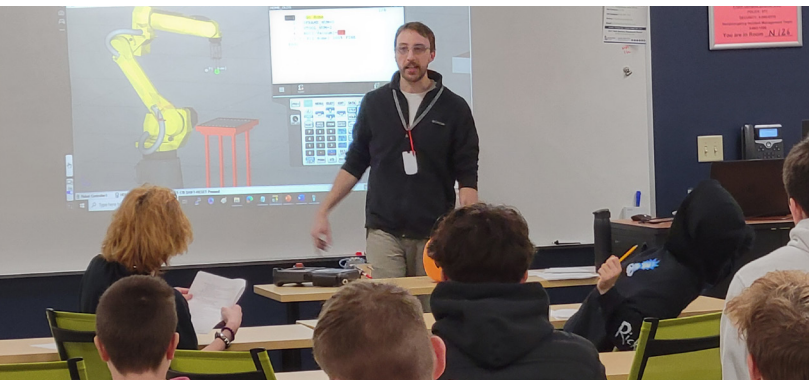
STUDENTS CAN EARN CERTIFICATIONS IN 15 INDUSTRY-RELEVANT SKILLS via the mobile lab

The mobile lab, a modified box truck containing advanced manufacturing gear, arrived in fall 2024, and Rachel Kroeplien, dean of advanced manufacturing and agriculture, expects it will expand the program's influence. Individuals trained in the lab can become certified in 15 industry-relevant skills including welding, quality assurance, computer numerically controlled machine tooling, and working with electromechanical systems. The college has awarded 838 certifications so far, exceeding its goal of 800 certificate-holders.



THE EXPERIENCE:

Additionally, Lakeshore now provides Smart Automation Certification Alliance (SACA) training to area employers and is the regional hub for training SACA gold-level instructors for other state technical schools. The alliance develops and deploys Industry 4.0 certifications for a range of industries. SACA's program provides affordable, accessible certifications to increase the number of skilled individuals companies need to fill in-demand jobs in the advanced manufacturing sector.



THE RESULTS: 2022–2025



MORE THAN 800 WORKERS

have been certified by the Industry
4.0 Pathways and Upskilling initiative

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Build time into implementation schedules.

Kroeplien said getting instructors SACA-certified at the gold level was a challenge, because it took considerable time. Getting the mobile lab on the road was another challenge, and she recommends building adequate time into program implementation schedules to accommodate potential delays.

2. Partner with community agencies.

She recommends working with community partners, such as United Way, to connect education to individuals seeking training.



INNOVATION FOUR: MEETING FORESTRY INDUSTRY CHALLENGES THROUGH EDUCATION

Addressing a need for skilled workers in the forestry industry, the Wisconsin Forestry Center at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point received \$8 million in WIG funds to support education and create a pipeline to forestry careers for the next generation.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Aims to build awareness of the forestry and forest products industries in Wisconsin for youth
- Builds and instills skills in high school students through novel school curriculum development
- Provides a hands-on forestry skills camp and offers immersion training to immediately address workforce challenges in the industry

THE SITUATION:

Nearly
**35% OF
FORESTRY WORKERS**
in the U.S. are ages 55 and older
Source: 2024 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

The median age of
U.S. forestry workers is
46 YEARS OLD
Source: 2024 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

The Stevens Point/Wausau
area has seen an almost
60%
OUT-MIGRATION RATE
of 16- to 26-year-olds for work
Source: Migrationpatterns.org

THE EXPERIENCE:

“Our pathway model started with the premise that we needed to reach people and get them fundamental skills early on,” said Les Werner, a retired UW-Stevens Point assistant professor and the former director of the Wisconsin Forestry Center. “We have an applied curriculum that we’re developing in high schools. That program was piloted last spring at Menominee High School.”

The more advanced immersion programming offers a six-week certificate program in forestry operations and a five-week certificate program in mill technology. In addition, UW-Stevens Point issues college credits to students who complete the forest operations course. The university has partnered with Northcentral Technical College (NTC) to build this training (including investment in a \$4.4 million state-of-the-art sawmill on NTC’s Antigo campus, which was operational and in use in time for the inaugural training in March 2025). Both courses use advanced technologies to serve new students and upskill the existing forestry workforce.

“The past four years have seen an amazing and transformative series of events and momentum.”

- Steve Hubbard, Director, Wisconsin Forestry Center



THE EXPERIENCE:

“With physical infrastructure now built and three initial training rounds conducted, we are turning our focus to examining how effective our approach has been,” said Steve Hubbard, the new director of the Wisconsin Forestry Center. “We recognize the opportunity to improve how and when we deliver these important programs. Capacity building, sustainability, and flexibility—for both students and instructors—will be key elements of planning for the future.”

MORE THAN
**300 HIGH SCHOOL
TECH ED TEACHERS**

received direct forestry education
and careers training

MORE THAN
**2,300 HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS**

received forestry education
and career exposure

The grant also helped boost UW-Stevens Point’s profile in the industry nationally. The university has helped create a national consortium for colleges with strong forestry programs to encourage broader application of this approach. The congressional Jobs in the Woods Act, currently included in the U.S. Farm Bill with bipartisan support, would enable other forestry programs to replicate elements of UW-Stevens Point’s program, if the bill is passed.



THE RESULTS: 2022–2025



250+ STUDENTS

have been trained at the new
Forestry Advancement Center
at Treehaven

LESSONS LEARNED:

Partner with business.

Industry partnerships have been key to the initiative's success. Much of the program's startup time was invested in curriculum development and gaining industry input, Werner said. For example, the program received in-kind support from Ponsse North America, which manufactures timber harvesting gear. "Participants not only get the simulator and the background and the training side of it, but they get butts in seats, and that makes a world of difference," he added. The program has recruited a UW-Stevens Point graduate to spend three weeks each year being the field person for logging operations.





INNOVATION FIVE:

BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAP ACROSS NINE WISCONSIN COUNTIES

In Wisconsin Rapids, Mid-State Technical College used \$9 million in WIG funds to create a program that provides credentialed advanced manufacturing training to unemployed and underemployed people, underserved communities, and youth in a nine-county area in Central Wisconsin.

HOW IT WORKS:

- The AMETA Center, in Stevens Point, offers advanced manufacturing training for students and upskilling for current employees.
- The program partners with the Boys and Girls Clubs to connect youth to manufacturing apprenticeships.
- It provides wrap-around services such as coaching and child care to help remove barriers to education.

THE SITUATION:

NEARLY
45%
OF HIGH SCHOOLERS

have no work experience in
the last 12 months

Source: 2024 Youth Right Now Survey,
Boys & Girls Clubs of America

MORE THAN
30%
OF PORTAGE COUNTY

residents are 55 and older

Source: 2025 Portage County Profile, Wisconsin
Department of Workforce Development

THE EXPERIENCE:

Mid-State Technical College, in partnership with local manufacturers and the Stevens Point community, used its WIG to build the Advanced Manufacturing, Engineering Technology, and Apprenticeship (AMETA) Center in Stevens Point. AMETA is a cutting-edge advanced manufacturing training hub that also offers employer-sponsored customized training.

"We want to make sure that when they leave Mid-State, they're getting into the workforce."

- Micki Dirks-Luebbe, former Director of Development, Mid-State Technical College

Funding was also used to assist with tuition, create Manufacturing the Future bootcamps, and connect students with youth apprenticeships, in partnership with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Portage County and Wisconsin Rapids. In addition, the program offers support services for students that included academic coaching, mental health assistance, programs to retain students, and aid with child care and transportation.

WRAP-AROUND PROGRAMS HAVE SERVED

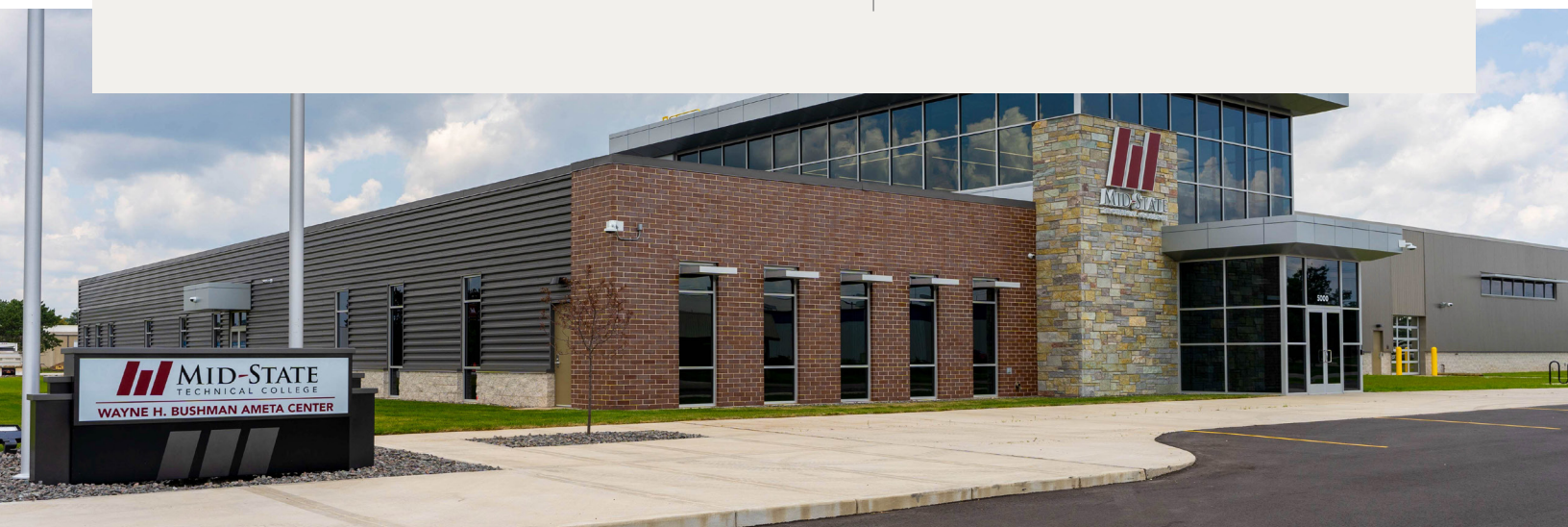
3X AS MANY PEOPLE

as originally estimated

MORE THAN

2,200 STUDENTS

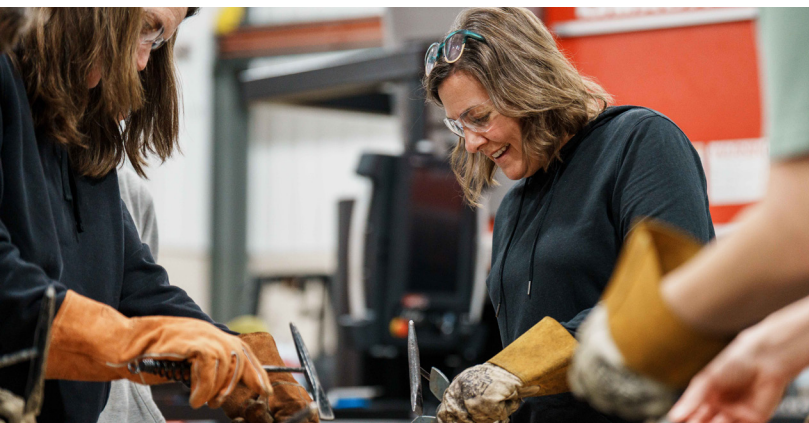
have been served



THE EXPERIENCE:

Mid-State has already far exceeded its goal to serve 2,500 people and has already served more than 7,800 in its partner programs. It also projected it would aid 1,105 students with support programs, and has served 2,234 students through the second quarter of 2025.

“A lot of our students have been disenfranchised by typical educational systems. For them to come here and have a place where they belong is important to us,” said Micki Dirks-Luebbe, Mid-State’s former director of development.



THE RESULTS: 2022–2025



MORE THAN 10,000 PEOPLE

including veterans, Mid-State students, youth, and teens have been served by Mid-State’s programs

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Partnership building is critical.

The college's eight partners include a veterans reentry group, a diversity and equity group, a transportation provider, and a regional economic development agency, among others. Because of the partnerships with Mid-State, Dirks-Luebbe said some of the groups have gone on to build other valuable community programs, and Mid-State plans to work with them on an ongoing basis.

2. Coordinate the partnerships.

Having a designated staffer to manage partner relationships, including quarterly meetings and retreats, was beneficial for staying organized to move the initiative forward. These meetings helped the college proactively address needs and identify new opportunities to leverage partnerships to tackle other community needs.





INNOVATION SIX:

LIFTING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH CONSTRUCTION AND CONSERVATION SKILLS

Operation Fresh Start, a nonprofit serving Dane County since 1970, offers students a chance to earn their high school diploma and driver's license while also getting experience in construction and conservation work. In addition to being a certified pre-apprenticeship training program, Operation Fresh Start was awarded \$3.3 million in WIG funds to continue training the next generation of Wisconsin workers.

HOW IT WORKS:

- The program works with 16- to 24-year-olds emerging from poverty and transitioning to adulthood
- It helps students get their high school diplomas and driver's licenses
- It provides job shadowing and academies that teach skills in construction and conservation

THE SITUATION:

NEARLY
45%
OF HIGH SCHOOLERS

have no work experience in
the last 12 months

Source: 2024 Youth Right Now Survey,
Boys & Girls Clubs of America

MORE THAN
40%
OF CONSERVATION WORKERS

in the U.S. are over the age of 40

Source: 2025 Zippia

THE EXPERIENCE:

While studying to get their high school diplomas and earn their drivers' licenses, participants also gain exposure to construction and conservation jobs. They do this by working on projects such as affordable housing or parks improvements. Once participants earn a high school diploma, those who are interested in pursuing a career in either field can join the Grad Crew, which offers a more intense job shadowing experience.

Grad Crew programs work with individuals aged 18-24 who are often emerging from childhood poverty to set them on a path to self-sufficiency. The Build Academy teaches skills in residential and commercial construction; the Conservation Academy uses a two- to eight-month program to develop skills in land management, sawyer skills, trail-building, and controlled burns.

TODAY, THE PROGRAMS ARE SO

POPULAR

there is a waitlist

INDUSTRY PLACEMENT

TRIPLED

between 2022 and 2024

Steve Gardner, who leads the Build Academy, said the program contributes to a pipeline of young trade workers, helping them hit the ground running when they are placed. Cory Rich, who oversees the Conservation Academy, said the program helps the industry diversify and provides a pathway to skilled entry-level jobs to provide participants with financial stability while they consider post-secondary credentials in the field.



THE EXPERIENCE:

While it took time to generate industry partnerships and complete the curriculum, the programs today have a waitlist. The industry placement rate grew from 31% in 2022 to 92% in 2024. The academies' completion rate grew from 50% to 66% during that time.

"It was great to see the industry recognize that we had created some barriers that were keeping people out, and we could act to remove them."

- Cory Rich, Director of Legacy and Conservation Academy programs, Operation Fresh Start



THE RESULTS: 2022–2024



IN 2024, 92% OF PARTICIPANTS

were placed in their desired industries

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Communication is critical.

Open lines of communication and industry partnerships are critical. Operation Fresh Start officials worked with land management employers to identify the minimum hiring standard, making academy graduation an equivalency to a four-year degree for some jobs. “It was great to see the industry recognize that we had created some barriers that were keeping people out, and we could act to remove them,” Rich said.

2. Encourage feedback.

The academies encouraged employers to provide informal feedback to program officials, so they can help correct unfavorable behaviors and keep participants on track in job performance. The program also consults industry representatives during curriculum development to ensure that graduates will have the skills employers need.





INNOVATION SEVEN: SCHOOL-BASED PARTNERSHIP BOOSTS HIGH SCHOOLERS' SKILLS, CREATES PIPELINE FOR AREA EMPLOYERS

The Sauk Prairie School District collaborated with local employers to understand the skills that were needed for people entering the local workforce. They used local funding and a \$2.44 million WIG to establish school-based, hands-on learning to gain those skills.

HOW IT WORKS:

- The school-based labs focus on three industries—agriculture, health care, and manufacturing—and include an advanced manufacturing room, patient simulators in a medical careers lab, and a modern greenhouse.
- The new lab facilities are used to train both high school students and upskill current, local employees.

THE SITUATION:

In 2024, finding and keeping qualified employees were the

TOP 2 CONCERNS

of Wisconsin manufacturers

Source: 2024 The Wisconsin Manufacturing Report, Wisconsin Center for Manufacturing & Productivity

The gap between health care hires and openings was

1.38 MILLION

in 2024

Source: 2025 Wisconsin Hospital Association Health Care Workforce Report

The gap between manufacturing jobs and employees could reach

1.9 MILLION

by 2033

Source: 2024 Deloitte and The Manufacturing Talent Institute Study

THE EXPERIENCE:

Sauk Prairie's local employer base is driven by three industries: agriculture, health care, and manufacturing. As part of a community-approved high school renovation referendum, the Sauk Prairie School District talked with area employers to understand their worker shortages and the skills that were needed.

This collaboration used local and WIG funding to establish hands-on, school-based labs to help students gain workplace skills. The labs allow students to prepare for apprenticeships and employment at local companies—and gives existing employees a chance to hone new skills. Night classes are offered to serve both. “We’ve had classes with half 17-year-olds and half in their 30s and 40s, and it’s been fantastic,” said Jeff Wright, school district administrator.

“We’ve seen our apprenticeship program explode over the last few years.”

– Jeff Wright, Administrator, Sauk Prairie School District

The school has a modern greenhouse facility used year-round that produces micro-greens for the cafeteria, a medical training room with patient simulators that prepares students to become certified nursing assistants (CNAs) and phlebotomists, and an advanced manufacturing room with high-tech gear that replaced 1964-vintage industrial equipment.

“We’ve seen our apprenticeship program explode over the last few years,” said Wright. Students also see the medical training as a springboard into undergraduate degrees and medical schools, he added.





THE RESULTS: 2022–2025



"THIS PARTNERSHIP IS MAKING A SIGNIFICANT POSITIVE IMPACT FOR OUR STAFF, RESIDENTS, AND COMMUNITY."

– Paul Fiscus, Administrator, Maplewood Sauk Prairie

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Stay in touch with businesses.

One powerful lesson was in school outreach to businesses. “I went to the businesses all at one time, and they all came to the table at the same time. But we had to initiate that. If other school districts are wondering, ‘Why isn’t our business community doing that?’ it’s probably because the school hasn’t asked, as opposed to businesses not wanting to do it,” Wright said.

2. Invest in equipment.

“There’s nothing we bought with the grant that we’ll have to buy again anytime soon, which allows us to keep doing what we’ve been doing.” The school also made an intentional decision to place the new labs in conspicuous locations to remind students and visitors of the availability of the new resources.





INNOVATION EIGHT:

LIFTING EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS FOR PEOPLE AFFECTED BY TRAUMA

The Career EXCELeRate Wisconsin Project—a collaboration of Goodwill Industries, Rawhide Youth Services, and Fox Valley Technical College—aims to remove some of the barriers to employment that past trauma and mental health challenges can pose. It's using a \$6 million WIG to provide trauma-informed care, education, and employment services.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Navigators attend classes with students seeking certifications in eight high-demand career areas to help them manage mental health barriers and stay engaged.
- It also provides job placement and wrap-around support in areas such as mental health, housing, transportation, financial concerns, and more.
- In addition, it helps refugees find career pathways in manufacturing.

THE SITUATION:

Those with multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACES) are more than
2X MORE LIKELY TO BE UNEMPLOYED

Source: 2017 Metzler et al., (2016). Adverse childhood experiences and life opportunities: Shifting the narrative., Child and Youth Services Review

THE EXPERIENCE:

The three organizations work together to provide Rawhide-led training on trauma-informed care in education and employment services. They partner with Fox Valley Technical College instructors and Goodwill of North Central Wisconsin (NCW) employment placement specialists and case managers.

Rawhide provides “navigators” to attend classes with students who are seeking certifications in eight high-demand career areas (including manufacturing, diesel technology, nursing assistant, early childhood teaching aide, professional truck driving, woodworking technician, welding, and plumbing fundamentals). Navigators help students manage mental health barriers, stay engaged, and envision a future they never imagined.

“They went from \$0 a year to \$40,000 a year. That’s an important success story.”

– Kaleb Schad, Director of Strategy and Marketing, Rawhide Youth Services



THE EXPERIENCE:

Case managers and employment placement specialists provide job placement and wrap-around help in areas such as mental health, housing, transportation, and financial concerns, among others. The program is also helping resettled Congolese refugees find career pathways in manufacturing through college help with interpreters and English language instruction.

AT INTAKE,
49% OF PARTICIPANTS
in the program had \$0 in income

OF TOTAL PARTICIPANTS
MORE THAN 80%
have a one-year employment
retention rate

The program has already exceeded its goal to serve 460 people during the life of the grant; it served 618 as of June 2025. So far, 83% have earned certifications and 88% have a one-year employment retention rate in their field of study. "It's getting people into the workforce who weren't there," said Rawhide's Kaleb Schad. "Now they're making, on average, \$20.73 an hour. They went from \$0 a year to \$40,000 a year. That's an important success story."

Goodwill is currently piloting a program with the state Department of Health Services and UW-Green Bay to replicate key elements of its trauma-informed approach and wrap-around services for students enrolled in UW-Green Bay's Certified Direct Care Professional program.



THE RESULTS: 2022–2025



**MORE THAN
600 PEOPLE**

have been served by the
Career EXCElerate Wisconsin Project

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Emphasize student attendance.

“We’re trying to change sometimes generational cycles of not knowing how to be employed. The navigator is in the classroom right away, calling, texting, and finding out why they’re not there,” Goodwill NWC’s Kayla Countney said. People with the program say that keeping students in the classroom helps provide the knowledge, confidence, and ongoing support they need to complete the program and become employable.

2. Build relationships.

Being proactive and involved from the start also helped. “It’s hard to reach out and ask for help. We’re embedded in this program and watching for signs and symptoms,” Countney added.





INNOVATION NINE:

EXPOSING STUDENTS TO REAL-WORLD OPPORTUNITIES

When the Madison Area Builders Association identified that over 1,500 family-sustaining jobs in the building trades remained unfilled in the region, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Dane County and several other area organizations snapped into action. Using a \$3.5 million WIG, their Careerforce Build UP! program exposes Boys & Girls Clubs members to jobs in the skilled trades, such as electrical, plumbing, carpentry, and HVAC services.

HOW IT WORKS:

- The 16-week apprenticeship program lets young people explore in-demand trades, learn to use tools, get driver's education, and earn valuable certifications.
- It will also include soft skills and entrepreneurial classes, showing students how to build their own businesses in the construction trades.
- It's partnering with organizations like She Builds Wisconsin, the Latino Academy of Workforce Development, and more to diversify the trades and create economic opportunity.

THE SITUATION:

The construction trades workforce in the U.S. is only

**5% WOMEN AND
6.3% BLACK**

Source: 2025 WEDC

By 2026, the construction industry needs to attract

HALF A MILLION

new workers to meet estimated demand

Source: 2025, Associated Builders and Contractors

THE EXPERIENCE:

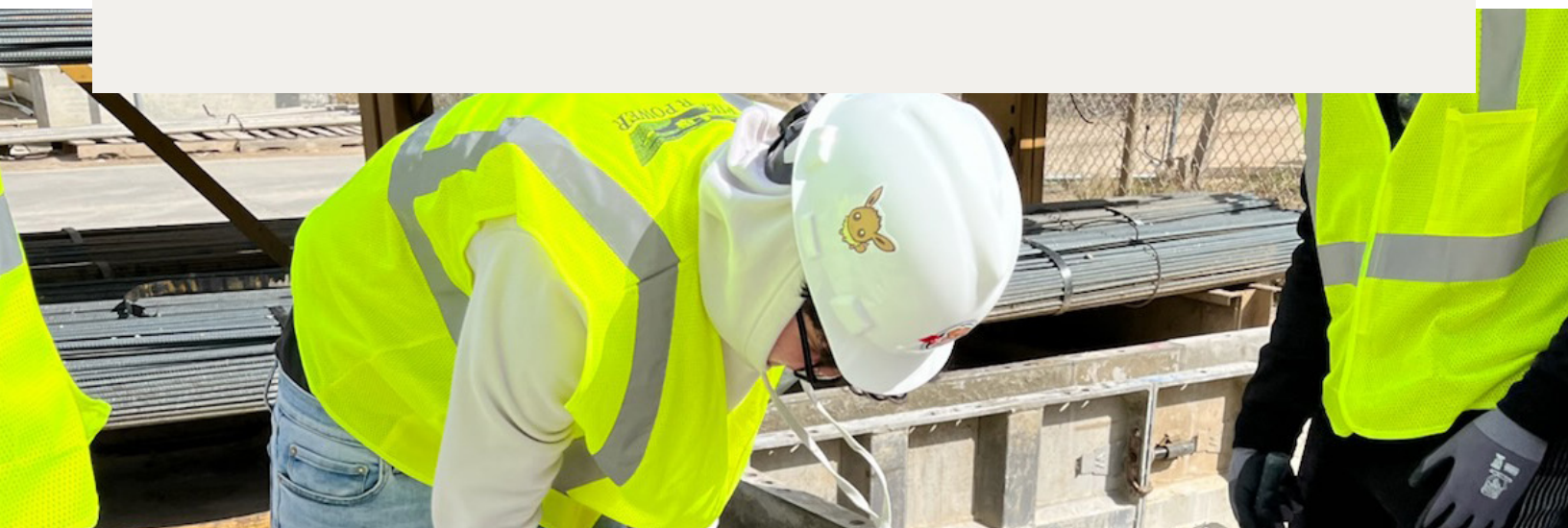
The Careerforce Build UP! program through Boys & Girls Clubs of Dane County provides pre-apprenticeship training in the construction trades for underrepresented youth aged 16-18, as well as soft skills—such as leadership, communication, and customer service—and entrepreneurial training for middle-school students.

Housed in the organization's new Mackenzie Regional Workforce Center in Fitchburg, the program transports students from Madison high schools for the four-hour daily sessions, which are held after school and include a meal. The 16-week pre-apprenticeship program allows students to explore in-demand trades, learn to use tools, and receive certifications on OSHA-10, first aid/CPR/AED, fall protection, traffic flagging for construction, and driver education.

“Some kids come out of high school making more money than their parents. The fact that the Builders Association is willing to hire young people coming out of the program, it's going to be a game changer.”

— Michael Johnson, President and CEO, Boys & Girls Clubs of Dane County

This program can help serve a key goal of diversifying the trades and creating economic opportunities in family-supporting careers. In the construction industry as a whole, 6.3% of the workforce is Black, and 32.6% are Hispanic or Latinx. And women make up less than 5% of the workforce nationally. Participants in the Careerforce Build UP! program, on the other hand, are 31% Black, 27% Hispanic or Latinx, and 32.7% female.



THE EXPERIENCE:

Through strategic partnerships with local initiatives such as She Builds Wisconsin and the launch of the club's BLAZE Girls Camp at the McKenzie Regional Workforce Center in 2024-25, the club has seen an increase in the enrollment of girls.

THE PROGRAM HAS
15% MORE WOMEN
than the construction
workforce nationally

ABOUT 39%
of high school seniors
completing the program have been
hired for construction positions

The program began when the new center was opened in summer of 2023, and in the first year, it served about 3,000 students across its three programs and summer camps. The pre-apprenticeship program, taught by program partners such as the WRTP|BIG STEP, the Latino Academy of Workforce Development, Habitat for Humanity of Dane County, and construction professionals from area firms, has a class size ranging from 8 to 12 students, encouraging more engagement and one-on-one attention during classroom and in-shop learning. Students can miss only two days of attendance, and those completing the class earn a \$1,000 stipend.

To date, 272 students have completed the pre-apprenticeship class; of these, 57% were seniors, 41% were juniors, and 3% were sophomores. About 39% of the seniors have already been hired for seasonal, part-time, or full-time positions in the construction industry. Alan Branch, senior vice president of workforce development with Boys & Girls Clubs of Dane County, said one young woman he met in a high-school equivalency class joined the program; today, she is employed by the Boldt Co. making about \$28 an hour and has her own apartment and car.

The club has formed a new partnership with the Dane County Schools Consortium to address barriers and provide support services during the 16-week program. That includes additional transportation services, child care, support with social and emotional issues, and provision of work attire.

The club's approach in Dane County is set to be replicated by the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater La Crosse as part of a facility expansion that broke ground in March 2025. Additionally, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Cincinnati is replicating this model. Both clubs have consulted with the Dane County club as they develop their programs.



THE RESULTS: 2022–2025



272 STUDENTS

have completed the 16-week
Careerforce Build UP! Program

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Think about transportation.

Student transportation needs are critical to make the program easily accessible for students coming straight from high school. “You have to go get them,” Branch said.

2. Provide supports.

Emotional and social support needs to be provided for students struggling with issues at home or at school. The club has reached out to the Dane County Job Center which has occasionally referred it to local agencies able to provide counseling or other specific services that address social and emotional health to help and ensure student success.





INNOVATION TEN:

COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL EMPLOYERS TO BUILD MANUFACTURING, EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS

Southwest Wisconsin Technical College (SWTC) used \$2.9 million in WIG funding to launch the Advance Southwest Wisconsin Program. It works with local business and education partners to upskill current manufacturing employees, create youth apprenticeship opportunities, and provide English instruction to the region's growing Hispanic population, encouraging their upward mobility.

HOW IT WORKS:

- It provides employers with custom upskill training via a state-of-the-art mobile training unit and SWTC's technical programs.
- Its STEM Youth Apprenticeship program provides a bridge to UW-Platteville's engineering program.
- It includes wrap-around services such as child care and transportation to help students overcome barriers to education.

THE SITUATION:

Southwest Wisconsin counties face a median income that is

UP TO 12% BELOW

the national average

Source: 2025 WEDC

Two Southwest Wisconsin counties face a

NEARLY 30% DECLINE

in estimated population by 2050

Source: 2025 Wisconsin Department of Administration

THE EXPERIENCE:

Southwest Wisconsin Technical College and its 11 area partners—including local employers and educational institutions—teamed up to offer custom upskilling to existing manufacturing employees. It also offers English instruction for the region’s growing Hispanic population, many of whom are currently employed as farm workers but are interested in moving into advanced manufacturing.

SWTC also used the money to launch a new manufacturing and STEM Youth Apprenticeship program and bridge its technical programs to UW-Platteville’s engineering program. In addition, the college helped create the Southwest Wisconsin Alliance for Growth in Manufacturing (SWAG) to grow the manufacturing sector and raise awareness of opportunities in advanced manufacturing. Students needing help to surmount other barriers, from transportation to child care and education funding, were able to take advantage of resources from the college, the Southwest Community Action Program, and the Southwest Wisconsin Workforce Development Board.

BY JUNE 2025

MORE THAN 160

high school students had been placed in apprenticeships

THE PROGRAM GREW TO SERVE

MORE THAN 250

English language learners post-grant



THE EXPERIENCE:

As of June 2025, Southwest Tech had trained more than 920 employees at 28 manufacturing companies in its five-county area, and more than 162 high school students were placed in manufacturing and STEM youth apprenticeships. The number of English language learners at the college grew from 50 prior to the grant to more than 250. Additionally, UW-Platteville was able to train more than 1,000 students in a new automation module.

“Just listening to industry—to what they’re hearing and seeing and what they want for their employees—and giving them a platform to exercise their voice has been great.”

– Holly Straka, Director of Business and Industry Services, Southwest Wisconsin Technical College

The program has strengthened college-local-industry relationships, helping the college stay on top of industry trends and challenges and improving its ability to meet student and business needs by offering programming that teaches in-demand skills.

Manufacturers, in turn, benefit from regular discussions with educators on topics related to the future of manufacturing, including automation/robotics, artificial intelligence, energy efficiency, and more. SWAG is currently working to develop a dues model to help offset the workforce training costs, which had been offered for free under WIG to establish the workforce benefits for area employers.



THE RESULTS: 2022–2025



MORE THAN 2,000 PEOPLE

have been empowered by
Advance Southwest Wisconsin

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Forge industry partnerships.

Holly Straka, the college's former director of business and industry services, said building partnerships with industry was critical. "Just listening to industry—to what they're hearing and seeing and what they want for their employees—and giving them a platform to exercise their voice has been great," Straka said. Industry insights, she said, have helped develop relevant curriculum and inform education on industry trends and technology. "As a result of things we've learned through this grant, we're looking at creating an associate degree in advanced manufacturing."

2. Connections count.

Straka also said connecting high school students to employers was vital. "Industry wants to get connected with high school students. They need to get students interested in these careers at a younger age," she said. "And students need to understand what kinds of careers are available."





INNOVATION ELEVEN:

INTRODUCING YOUNG PEOPLE TO NEW CAREER PATHWAYS AND MENTORS

\$3.3 million in WIG funds helped launch the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee's new Ready Center Collective. This collaboration between schools, more than a dozen large-scale employers, and others is helping young people in Milwaukee and Waukesha counties find a career path.

HOW IT WORKS:

- The program provides Boys & Girls Clubs members exposure to career pathways via job shadowing, training, internships, apprenticeships, and virtual simulations.
- Students also have the opportunity to earn certifications in nursing and child care.
- The program provides driver's education and rideshare funding to remove transportation barriers to training.

THE SITUATION:

In a national survey
68% OF CHILD CARE CENTERS

reported staffing shortages

Source: 2024 ECE Field Survey, National Association for the Education of Young Children

In 2023 there was a
NEARLY 12% VACANCY RATE

for CNAs in Wisconsin

Source: 2025 Wisconsin Healthcare Workforce Report, Wisconsin Hospital Association

THE EXPERIENCE:

This multi-tiered program provides teens with opportunities to sample promising career pathways through hands-on experiences and job shadowing, skills training, and internships and youth apprenticeships. The Ready Center Collective has partnered with Employ Milwaukee and Herzing University, among others, to offer occupational lab experiences and give students a chance to earn certifications. The program has focused on training CNAs and child care workers. Funding allowed the program to build out and equip a CNA lab and get it certified by the state.

BY JUNE 2025

**MORE THAN
2,200 STUDENTS**

had taken advantage of career
exploration opportunities

MORE THAN

**500 YOUTH
APPRENTICESHIPS**

had been arranged by
June 2025

To enable teens to overcome transportation barriers and attend trainings, the clubs also offered driver's education and covered the cost of rideshare services. To further increase access and broaden exposure to different careers, the program purchased virtual reality devices to simulate work environments.

As of June 2025, the program had enrolled 3,361 students. It had provided mentoring, coaching, and/or tutoring services to 2,261 students; set up 538 job-shadowing experiences; arranged 525 youth apprenticeships or internships; and given 2,298 students introductory work experience and/or career exploration opportunities.

"A success story has been the CNA certifications. There's an abundance of employer need in the area, especially large hospitals and employer partners."

—Joe Schmidtkofer, Grants Director, Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee





THE RESULTS: 2022–2025



MORE THAN 3,300 STUDENTS

have benefited from
Ready Center Collective Programming

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Achieve balance.

Balancing employer needs and student interest in training programs is important. At some point, the center offered trainings in banking, culinary skills, and information technology, as well as for quick-lube technicians. “We’ve learned some lessons about which ones hit the sweet spot of student interest, employer need, and also just ease of ability for students to complete the training,” said Joe Schmidlkofer, grants director at the Boys & Girls Clubs. “A success story has been the CNA certifications. There’s an abundance of employer need in the area, especially large hospitals and employer partners.” Some of the students who completed child care certifications even went on to work for the Boys & Girls Clubs.

2. Maintain flexibility.

A new program offering in early 2025 demonstrates the importance of staying flexible and adjusting to emerging trends: The Boys & Girls Clubs started offering training for pharmacy technicians in response to a need identified by one of the program partners.



SUMMARY OF LESSONS LEARNED:

WIG funding helped these 11 innovative programs succeed in meeting the changing demands of industry, filling crucial skills gaps, and building Wisconsin's workforce. As they established these programs, organizers took away a variety of important lessons that will make replication of their success by other organizations possible.

They include:

- 1. Maintaining strong, long-term partnerships** with relevant groups in business, education, the community, and nonprofit groups—before obtaining grants—will create a more seamless and less time-consuming process for new programs once new funding is obtained.
- 2. Providing mobile training opportunities** helps reach and provide access to marginalized individuals where they are in the community—especially in rural areas of the state.
- 3. Considering transportation solutions to include those who lack access to reliable or public transportation** is essential for trainings that require participation at central locations.
- 4. Including driver's education opportunities for career pathways training geared toward young adults** helps increase access to careers that require driving to job and training sites.
- 5. Remaining agile to shifting programming** is important as industry and workforce trends create new opportunities in local industry sectors.
- 6. Establishing regional collaborations** for ongoing workforce and economic development discussions can bring together community leaders, educators at all levels, employers from key local industries, and nonprofit and social services partners.

SUMMARY OF LESSONS LEARNED:

7. Creating direct connections between employers and local educational institutions can be a powerful way to:

- Help improve awareness and curriculum for family-sustaining career opportunities in the key industries that drive the region’s economy.
- Dispel any outdated misconceptions about the types of work available in certain industries.
- Ensure lab spaces are relevant to the skills high school and technical college students need for local career opportunities upon graduation.

THE CONCLUSION:

The pioneering programs detailed here are opening doors to new skills, boosting economic well-being, improving workforce readiness, and promoting economic development across the state.

They are building on the success of the workforce system and clearing a path to family-supporting jobs, preparing people to compete and succeed in workplaces changed by technology and the demands of a changing economy. The WIG funding has driven innovations that build on what DWD is already doing to build stronger, thriving communities and an even better Wisconsin.