

Lives Empowered Step-by Step Guide

How to Implement Talent Development and Upskilling Initiatives in Communities

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Introduction

The United States is at an employment crossroads—too many jobs are going unfilled, while too many workers are sitting on the sidelines. The disparity between the skills employers need for growing careers and the skills held by many low-wage and undereducated Americans is chronic and growing.

Colorado has spent a number of years developing a cohesive approach to addressing skills barriers through a multi-faceted approach involving private, public, and philanthropic partners. Among the promising approaches to addressing worker skill deficits is upskilling—the implementation of specific demand-driven training and worker supports to rapidly promote skills attainment leading to middle-skills employment and wages.

Central to successful upskilling is engaging and promoting employers who invest in their frontline workers, promoting the adoption of policies and practices used by employers to educate, train and develop frontline workers, and sustaining effective education and training practices leading to success in the workplace.

(<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/upskill-america/>).

This guide provides step-by-step instructions for cities, local workforce boards, counties or regions interested in advancing the economic mobility and training of frontline workers. Lives Empowered brings together retail businesses interested in working collaboratively to increase economic mobility for frontline workers across Colorado and contribute to a strong economy. Lives Empowered is made possible by a \$4.1 million grant from Walmart to the Colorado Workforce Development Council. The resources in this guide combine national promising practices with lessons learned from upskilling communities in Colorado to provide a high-level compilation of the actions taken to create employer-led and locally designed upskilling programs. Communities can use this resource to design programs that meet their unique workforce and economic needs, regardless of location, population density, or industry mix.

RECOMMEND A GRAPHIC LISTING THE SIX PROJECTS

The CWDC's Lives Empowered Initiative is built upon a foundational sector partnership approach to drive job training. Retail Sector Partnerships include:

- o Metro Denver Retail and Hospitality Partnership**
- o Pike's Peak Regional Retail & Hospitality Sector Partnership**
- o Upper Ark Tourism and Outdoor Rec/Retail Sector Partnership**
- o Spanish Peaks Retail Sector Partnership**

From Bobbie: Design idea: maybe a graphic at the beginning illustrating Lives Empowered works through Sector Partnerships (4), 5 communities who were awarded in Feb of 2020 to implement individualized upskilling initiatives (Talent Accelerator Grantees), and with other entities throughout the state (PCC) committed to upskilling. Readers can view more information on 6 of these examples in detailed case studies.

Lives Empowered highlights upskilling initiatives of 6 communities who pulled the right mix of partners together and mapped out resources and strategic initiatives in the following detailed [case studies](#).

Sector Partnerships: Laying the Foundation for Effective Upskilling Programs

In Colorado, sector partnerships serve as a shared commitment across business, education, workforce and economic development organizations that work together to address common economic and workforce needs. Colorado has been investing in the launch and growth of sector partnerships since 2005 through a framework that enables these strategic, collective partnerships to thrive and drive agility and innovation within local and regional economies throughout the state.

These strategic public-private partnerships create a strong foundation to design and pilot upskilling opportunities that promote the advancement of frontline workers and help to fill critical talent needs for businesses. The genesis of successful sector partnerships begins with public partners in workforce, education, and economic development coming together to examine and discuss data and evidence and identify opportunities for growth and jobs within a given industry. The public partners also commit to shared resources that can leverage private sector investment in upskilling.

Business champions are identified who help engage other business leaders and advise on the launch agenda. During the launch, business leaders engage in a facilitated discussion that seeks to understand their key priorities and how workforce issues interconnect with business productivity and competitiveness. Through this discussion, business and industry leaders identify 2-3 top shared priorities as a foundation for action working alongside public partners. Committees and “action agendas” are formed around identified priorities with measurable goals and methods to collect and use data to inform initiatives.

Once the mix of skills was identified and aligned to labor market data and employer job hiring demands, Lives Empowered project leaders undertook the initial process of putting the sector partnerships together. Tapping existing employer networks is a natural way to utilize existing relationships to guide talent development and upskilling activities to ensure training is aligned to employment. In addition to sector partnerships among individual businesses and business champions, trade associations and local chambers of commerce

can serve as great opportunities to engage employers and understand their needs. Employer networks utilized by Lives Empowered communities include:

- Colorado Hotel and Lodging Association
- Colorado Restaurant Association
- Good Business Colorado
- Vail Valley Partnership
- Rocky Mountain Employee Ownership

Education and training providers are critical partners because they design curriculum, conduct training, provide education, and measure the results of the programs that meet the skill requirements of employers. They are a key resource to utilize to provide upskilling services to participants.

Nonprofit community-based organizations are trusted resources in many communities, including those that are underrepresented and disadvantaged. Community-based organizations can provide recruiting and intake roles that help break down barriers to access and inclusion. Further, community-based organizations often provide supportive services to ensure participants can complete education and training.

Public sector partners at the state and local levels provide funding support and work with other partners to reduce barriers to successful implementation and sustainability of a talent development and upskilling initiative. Particularly as local economies recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, public sector partners have financial resources that can target resources to communities most impacted and in need of recovery assistance.

With the support of the Lives Empowered initiative, four retail sector partnerships now exist in Colorado. The [Metro Denver Retail Partnership](#), [Spanish Peaks Retail Partnership](#) and [Pikes Peak Retail and Hospitality Partnership and the Upper Arkansas Outdoor Recreation and Tourism Partnership](#) each identified different approaches to upskilling to meet their local needs. These strategies and more are described below.

Region 3, Metro Denver Retail Partnership (MDRP) is the longest standing retail sector partnership and has leveraged the earlier promising practices of the Denver Reimagine Retail program, expanding it to include work-based learning programs, training for incumbent workers and strategies to help employers better retain and increase skills of their existing workforce. MDRP has partnered with a one-stop operator (ResCare) to assist in building a pipeline for incumbent worker training including: Lodging Manager Registered Apprenticeship Program, Certified Hospitality Supervisor Certification, ServSafe, and workplace English classes. Partners worked to update procedures for the Lives Empowered

Initiative to create a seamless experience for both employers and their employees. A platform called Basecamp is used to post positions from employers, as well as make general announcements available to the partnership.

By using the Start/Stop/Continue exercise at the beginning of each year, working groups were formed to focus on resource lists, recruiting employees, and outreach to other businesses to let them know about MDRP. One example of a regional recruiting event was a retail virtual job fair, led by ADWorks! and sponsored by MDRP.

Public partners collaborate with the ***Colorado Hotel and Lodging Association***, where they provide Certified Hospitality Supervisor (CHS) training and On-the-Job (OJT) training for cohorts of incumbent workers enrolled in the Stonebridge Companies Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP). Employees complete training with the CHS Certificate and continue on to OJT for up to one year within the RAP. Over 50 employees have gone through the training program in the last three years.

Region 14, Spanish Peaks Retail Partnership has come together to work on several initiatives including:

- ✓ Civic Leadership Course. A select group participated in seven weeks of interviews and discussions with county leaders with the goal of making participants more civically engaged.
- ✓ Public Conversations. This is a training and support network to help people run elected positions, such as school board and city government.
- ✓ [Fridays in Huerfano](#). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a committee formed to run a summer program encouraging retailers in downtown Walsenburg and La Veta to stay open until 7:00 p.m. on Fridays. During extended hours, concerts, workshops, and other activities occur in downtown areas during these extended hours.
- ✓ Retail and entrepreneur action plan and maker's space feasibility study. The Spanish Peaks Retail Sector Partnership hired a consulting firm to perform a study analyzing the retail ecosystem and the feasibility of a makerspace or co-working space for employers to share costs.
- ✓ Placemaking and Signage Committee. Local artists placed murals to spruce up the small-town downtown areas, creating a welcoming and festive atmosphere to attract business.

Developing Effective Upskilling Programs

Lives Empowered is focused on promoting the upward mobility of frontline employees, including upward mobility on career ladders within the retail industry or leveraging transferable skills to pursue careers in other growing industries. The following information highlights the promising practices from six upskilling communities in Colorado and national lessons learned about steps communities can take to develop effective upskilling programs. These steps can be integrated into the upskilling work of other communities and organizations while focusing on the needs of their unique populations of job seekers, workers, and employers.

Step 1: Identify the Region's Talent Development Priorities

Communities that launch sector partnerships have a head start when it comes to understanding talent development priorities. Lives Empowered communities undertook the process of gathering information and understanding each respective region's current skill levels, the skills employer partners are seeking, and the extent to which skill needs are being filled or going unfilled. After gathering information and conducting preliminary analyses, each Retail Sector Partnership identified talent development and upskilling priorities.

As part of this skill identification process, using best practices established and validated by other projects or organizations guided development of the initial training framework. One example is the Aspen Institute's UpSkill America effort, which has identified three skill segments that workers need to perform successfully in jobs and achieve upward mobility. These segments include:

1. Basic skills – Many talent development and upskilling initiatives are focused on building the basic skills of workers who are stuck in entry level, frontline jobs that pay low wages. Many workers in these jobs cannot advance without improving their basic skills in areas such as:
 - Numeracy/Literacy
 - English as a Second Language (ESL)
 - Digital access/skills
2. Acute skill shortages – A number of talent development and upskilling initiatives are designed to resolve acute skill shortages in industries or occupations where employers say they cannot hire the necessary number of workers needed even when offering

increased wages. In Colorado, talent development shortages are identified across 14 key industries:

1. Aerospace
 2. Bioscience
 3. Electronics
 4. Energy & Natural Resources
 5. Infrastructure Engineering
 6. Technology & Information
 7. Health & Wellness
 8. Outdoor Recreation
 9. Tourism
 10. Creative Industries
 11. Financial Services
 12. Food & Agriculture
 13. Transportation & Logistics
 14. Advanced Manufacturing
3. Skill advancement – Talent development and upskilling initiative are designed to take workers who are in the workforce, even sometimes in highly-skilled positions, and modernize or advance their skills. This advancement helps them perform work using current tools or methods, more highly skilled work activities, or the same functions in a digital setting. Examples include:
- ✓ Data analytics
 - ✓ Machine learning
 - ✓ Remote sales

Step 2: Identify the Program Structure

A number of training options can be used successfully for talent development and upskilling. Determining which option to use depends on the type of skills being developed, the best way to measure competency in those skills, and the needs of the target population. Options utilized by Lives Empowered partners were focused on the needs of communities and target populations, while addressing the skills required by employers for occupations.

Apprenticeships are a well-established model that works best when occupational skills are best acquired through work experience, over time. Apprenticeship programs also allow participants to earn increasingly higher wages as they build their skills throughout the program.

CDLE partnered with the local workforce system, US Department of Labor, and other state agencies to implement Colorado's registered apprenticeship system, which is recognized as one of the nation's best. Currently, there are more than 400 registered apprenticeship programs in Colorado, serving more than 6,000 apprentices.

For more examples of apprenticeship programs from across the nation, see [Apprenticeship Models](#) in the UpSkilling Playbook for Employers, by UpSkill America.

Certification programs are used when there are clearly defined industry standardized education and training programs of a relatively short duration. These often include education and training to prepare participants to pass a certification exam. [My Colorado](#)

***Metro Denver Retail Partnership (MDRP)** partners with the Colorado Hotel and Lodging Association (CHLA) to offer twenty-six industry recognized certifications to help workers secure jobs and advance along career pathways in the retail and hospitality industry. Certifications range from five level certifications such as guest service professional, front desk, restaurant server, kitchen cook, guest room attendant, to supervisory level certifications, up to certifications at the managerial and executive levels. The most popular offering is the Certified Hospitality Supervisor training program which is open to hospitality workers who have been in a job with supervisory capacity for at least ninety days.*

[Journey](#) illustrates pathways within industries, such as retail, and the certificates frontline employees can use in order to move up in their careers.

For examples of certification programs from across the nation, see [Certification Program Models](#) in the UpSkilling Playbook for Employers, by UpSkill America.

Bootcamps are used for a relatively short duration and are highly-focused education and training pathways. The **Vail Valley Partnership** uses a bootcamp model to teach frontline staff and community members about community issues relevant to upskilling. They conduct the bootcamp through a local leadership academy (discussed later).

Employer-funded tuition assistance programs support college credit attainment to help existing workers gain the skills and education needed to advance in careers. A local partner, Aims Community College, has offered college credit classes and certificates through funding from Lives Empowered. This program has allowed individuals to finish degrees with minimal debt. For more examples of college credit programs from across the nation, see [College Degree Models](#) in the UpSkilling Playbook for Employers, by UpSkill America.

Employer-sponsored programs provide a demand-driven alternative for upskilling workers with direct alignment to the knowledge and skills needed for specific, well-paying jobs.

***Fire On The Mountain Restaurants** partnered with third party training offered by the Metro Denver Retail Partnership, to create Training Passports, individual training plans that break down the required training tasks, methods of training delivery, and requirements for each location of the restaurant requiring training. Creating the*

Employers then provide direct feedback to sector partners on the outcomes of the training and avenues for referrals of potential trainees.

Noncredit education and upskilling opportunities provide flexible, high quality options for providing training access to many different populations needing upskilling services. Noncredit education and training is provided through adult education providers, community education departments at community colleges and universities, and community-based organizations. These programs are delivered in various formats and

Ramble on Pearl, an iconic Boulder boutique clothing store that is also a nonprofit social enterprise supporting adults with developmental disabilities achieve their goals of independent community employment, created an apprenticeship program to train people with intellectual and developmental disabilities so they are able to apply for jobs and work independently. Services continue after the apprentices start their new jobs to help them learn job responsibilities and make connections with coworkers who can provide natural support once the employment services are no longer needed.

modalities, including in-person classroom training, online training, and hybrid models that combine in-person and online options.

Lives Empowered partners recommend fundamental underpinnings be implemented when utilizing noncredit options. The **Vail Valley Partnership** found that upskilling is most effective when offered in a broad range of formats (i.e., one-time seminars, multi-week courses, etc.) that cover a range of relevant topics, including self-paced online learning.

Pueblo Community College implemented a summer learning design to expand capacity to deliver training options and conducted outreach to the entire community to promote equitable access to non credit training programs. All Lives Empowered partners found that a key variable in developing community-based training options was identifying target populations, barriers to access, and innovative solutions to addressing inclusiveness and diversity.

Employers themselves can help with partnership recruitment and building an industry approach to upskilling. The **Pikes Peak Retail and Hospitality Sector Partnership** utilized highly respected industry leaders to conduct outreach to their peers in other businesses. This “business to business” recruitment led to an expansion of the sector partnership and promoted the notion of individual companies working together as an industry voice.

The **Pikes Peak Workforce Center** partners with the Pikes Peak Library District and School District 11 Adult and Family Education to provide training to help people improve their basic computer skills. The free in-person and online classes cover both basic skills and common applications, including:

Basic Computer Skills

Internet Basics
Microsoft Word 2016
Email
Career Search Skills

Lives Empowered Training Academy offers retail industry recognized credentials from National Retail Federation and Penn Foster. The training is offered at no cost to individuals thanks to the support of the Colorado Workforce Development Council in partnership with Walmart. The online programs through Penn Foster, provide flexibility for self-paced learning and supportive services to help individuals complete the programs. Programs include:

- Career Readiness Bootcamp*
- Retail Industry Fundamentals Credential*
- Customer Service & Sales*
- Business of Retail: Operations & Profit*

As important as the type and modality of training is consideration of who training recipients are, reasons why certain populations are underserved, and barriers to access that are validated and not assumed. Lives Empowered offers multiple examples of programs that were designed to serve target populations:

- ***Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains*** targeted refugees, immigrants, and other new Americans as they are a growing population within the community and evidence demonstrated needed upskilling services and training coordinated with supportive services provision.
- ***Pueblo Community College*** targeted veterans, individuals with disabilities, and those with little to no postsecondary educational attainment to address the need for specialized services and promoting upward mobility for underrepresented individuals. Pueblo Corporate College also served dislocated workers by identifying transferable skills that were relevant to the retail industry and filling any gaps in skills through sector-based training.

Step 4: Identify Funding Sources

Sustainability of a sector partnership and upskilling will occur if funding sources are braided together to build a fully resourced model. Lives Empowered partners utilized a number of public and private resources to innovate and scale programs.

Public Sector Funding

An important foundational program is the federal **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)**. WIOA contains core programs for adults to help them receive job

search assistance and training. Service priority must be given to recipients of public assistance, other low-income individuals, individuals who are basic skills deficient, and veterans.

Colorado promotes a **Thriving Work-based Learning** community to address the problems plaguing their talent pipeline. By valuing business-led work-based learning, systemic change can occur, including leveraging financial resources contributed by multiple partners. Lives Empowered has worked to achieve a sustainable work-based learning business model to support local communities.

The CWDC has a [Work-Based Funding Matrix](#) that details opportunities for resourcing work and learn training options. Examples of funding opportunities on the Matrix include the Apprenticeship State Expansion Grant and CO-TECH, which is a US Department of Labor Closing the Skills Gap funded project that funds work and learn training at Colorado's community colleges.

Private Sector Funding

Employer-paid tuition assistance is an often untapped resource. Data demonstrates that employer spending on skills training and education far surpasses public spending on these activities. Employer-paid tuition assistance works well when the training goal is degree attainment or certification that uses in-person or virtual classes, and the target population is working adults. These programs are usually paid for as an education benefit by an

Walmart's Live Better U tuition assistance program provides access to more than forty programs to help associates earn high school diplomas, college degrees, skilled trades certificates, and professional certificates. While the high school completion program is free, other programs are offered to associates for only \$1 a day. Programs are online, flexible, and self-paced, and are designed for working adults by top-ranked, accredited universities. Associates receive personalized program recommendations about the future of work and support from education coaches.

employer. Some employers pay providers directly, while others require workers to pay tuition and then seek reimbursement.

Philanthropic foundations are a resource for supporting specific skill development initiatives, geographic regions, or target populations. For example, [Walmart.org](https://www.walmart.org) provided funding and guidance to the CWDC for Lives Empowered. This represents a critical contribution to Colorado's talent development and upskilling efforts while promoting upward mobility and economic inclusion of residents.

Cash and in-kind alternative funding arrangements can be an innovative alternative for financial support of upskilling in a community. For instance, Income Share Agreements (ISA)

can be used to offset program costs, including tuition and fees for training. ISAs help people complete a upskilling program with no out of pocket costs in exchange for a percentage of future earnings.

One unique alternative funding option was creation of a 501(c)(3) by the **Vail Valley Partnership**. This new nonprofit expanded the Partnership's ability to apply for grants and seek new funding sources. This and other organizations can position themselves for outcomes-based funding, which many states and the federal government are migrating to as a means to promote effectiveness of economic and social programs.

Additional program support can be raised by seeking cash and in-kind support from local citizens, organizations, and businesses that are civic minded, regardless of their participation in the program. The **Spanish Peaks Retail and Tourism Partnership** was grounded in the community and utilized strategies for funding that engaged the public and a shared commitment to lifting the prospects of all local residents.

Step 5: Identify Program Supports

For programs to achieve their intended results, sometimes participants (and occasionally the participating partner organizations) need additional support to persist through to completion. Participant supports are wide and varied and include both public and private resources. Participant supports provided in Lives Empowered included a variety of targeted resources designed to help diverse people engage in training and participate in the labor market at higher wages.

With one-on-one navigation support, **Lutheran Family Services** focused on breaking down barriers for immigrant job seekers, who are traditionally limited in obtaining middle-skills jobs in the community. Specific services provided by Lutheran Family Services include:

1. Procurement, translation, and evaluation of foreign issued education and professional credentials for relevance in the U.S.
2. Career planning
3. Mentoring

The **Pikes Peak Retail and Hospitality Sector Partnership** focused on providing transportation options to its participants to support upskilling and training. The Colorado Springs metropolitan area is expanding dramatically to the north and south, which creates additional challenges for low income residents. With the leadership of the Partnership's businesses, new public transit routes for busing were implemented.

The **Alliance for Kids & Pikes Peak United Way** provided support to over 65 of the region's key childcare agencies and programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. This collaborative effort supported parents in 1,333 households to work and gain skills. For nearly 70% of the children, program-provided lunches/snacks were the only meals they received during the day.

With an extremely high cost of living, nonprofit organization partners in the **Vail Valley Partnership** played an essential role in providing community support for local residents, most of whom work in the local hospitality and tourism industries. The Partnership leveraged services provided by nonprofit providers to provide mental health services, housing, and food to support participants while in training and initial entry into jobs.

The **Spanish Peaks Retail and Tourism Partnership** thought creatively about supports for their participating businesses to help boost the local economy. They created a placemaking initiative, establishing a comprehensive system of signage to help draw people to local businesses, historic landmarks, and key services. They also created walking tours to highlight historical landmarks and places of interest.

Step 6: Continuous Improvement and Targeting Upskilling to Local Employers, Workers, and Communities

After a successful talent development and upskilling partnership has been launched, tracking results is critical for continuous improvement. The Lives Empowered partners found that targeting services and implementing unique program components is crucial to the overall design of the program, as well as meeting the needs of job seekers and workers looking for upward mobility. Below is a description of the ways that the Lives Empowered partners implemented individualized features of their programs to foster continuous improvement and promote success among program participants.

To realize the vision of a diverse workforce, strategies and tactics need to be developed during initial program design to promote participation by underrepresented and disadvantaged groups.

Lutheran Family Services utilized multilingual and multiethnic staff and focused on a commitment to cultural competence from the onset of their program. Staff report that this created a welcoming environment for individuals who have limited English skills, but specifically, for individuals who were not sure how to navigate government and public support systems and processes.

Lutheran Family Services also worked with employer partners on ways to ease the transition into the workforce for immigrants and refugees, thus helping employers promote opportunities for upskilling and support of workers with various backgrounds.

When targeting services to unemployed and low wage workers, outreach and worker supports are critical components to scope out during the planning phase and implement well, once programs commence.

Both the **Pikes Peak Retail and Hospitality Sector Partnership** and the **Spanish Peaks Retail & Tourism Partnership** created career pathways within industries so entry-level workers saw the path to a successful career within an industry. Pathways with wage increases along occupational sequences were important to demonstrate, especially for pathways and industries with entry-level jobs that pay lower wages.

The **Metro Denver Retail Partnership** identified training and on-boarding activities that occurred immediately upon hire to fill time delays in immediate work and earnings due to security background checks that lasted 7-10 days. By engaging the new hires, retention of new employees increased. The Metro Denver Partnership also focused on raising awareness of job opportunities and career pathways, including targeted outreach campaigns, specialized hiring events, and strategic use of technology tools (e.g., social media) for recruitment.

The **Vail Valley Partnership** also utilized community outreach to recruit trainees and workers. They specifically used social media, engagement at local events, and newspaper advertisements as strategies to raise awareness of opportunities. **Spanish Peaks Retail & Tourism Partnership** conducted outreach to new residents by engaging them in civic activities.

Continuous improvement and metrics of success are important to develop and monitor throughout the implementation and operational phases of the sector partnership and talent development program.

The **Metro Denver Rail Partnership** utilized a “start, stop, continuous improvement” exercise to examine priorities and activities currently against next year’s goals. This allowed the partners to continually monitor effectiveness of current programmatic components against level of performance.

The **Pikes Peak Retail and Hospitality Sector Partnership** utilized a specific focus on job quality. This included aligning employer hiring and recruiting to skills training programs and credentials offered. For more information on job quality tools, visit the Aspen Institute’s [Job Quality Tools Library](#).

The ***Spanish Peaks Retail & Tourism Partnership*** created a leadership development program for community members interested in public service. The program provided information about the local economy, the role of governing boards, and opportunities to be involved in civic affairs. In conjunction with the leadership development program, the Partnership also examined local statutes and policies that created friction between business owners and local government officials. This allowed business and local government to work together to alleviate issues impacting job and business growth.

Conclusion

Lives Empowered partners have learned many lessons throughout the talent development and upskilling process. First and foremost, successful talent development and upskilling requires engagement of all sectors of the community—from public, private, and nonprofit. While all partners must be at the table, employers' role is critical as they provide the “demand” for employment aligned to the types of skills needed by workers. This demand drives the activities that support workers—training, worker supports, and work experiences. Continuous improvement and measuring results is critical to inform the program design and make modifications as new information is learned and conditions change.

If designed, monitored, and adjusted accordingly, a sector partnership that seeks to improve the skills and talent pipeline in a community can be successful at helping diverse populations fully participate in the economy.