

Narrative Item 5.1 - Alignment to Local or Regional Needs and Strategies

Provide evidence of alignment to local or regional needs and strategies as outlined by local workforce development boards and/or partners in the workforce development plans (local and regional Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) plans).

NWSC ABE has been a strong and active partner in the local and regional workforce development system throughout both Workforce Service Areas (WSA's) 1 (Northwest Private Industry Council - NWPIC) and 2 (Rural Minnesota Concentrated Employment Programs – RMCEP) for many years. The NWSC ABE consortium has member school districts and ABE classrooms located in both Workforce Service Areas.

In WSA1, the NWSC ABE Coordinator has served as the Adult Education representative on the Northwest Private Industry Council (NWPIC) Workforce Development Board (WDB) since July of 2011 when legislation in Minnesota mandated ABE membership on Local Workforce Development Boards. In this role, the ABE Coordinator represents Adult Education interests for three ABE consortia in WSA 1, including Northwest Service Cooperative ABE, Tri County Community Corrections (TCCC) ABE (a consortium partnership between the Fosston and Climax-Fisher school districts and the Tri County Community Correctional Center in Crookston, MN), and Lakes Area ABE (formerly known as Detroit Lakes ABE). The NWSC ABE Coordinator regularly attends NWPIC board meetings and provides input and guidance, particularly with respect to the role Adult Education can play in Career Pathway programming development and implementation within the Workforce Service Area. The ABE representative assists in developing relationships and connections to help inform the local plan designed by NWPIC and helps to ensure that local providers, employers, and clients are aware of ABE programming within their local service area. Information garnered from those meetings is relayed to ABE colleagues at TCCC ABE and Lakes Area ABE.

Likewise, the ABE Coordinator maintains close contact with her colleague in the Moorhead ABE consortium, who serves as the Adult Education representative for WSA 2, the Rural Minnesota Concentrated Employment Programs (RMCEP) WDB to keep abreast of workforce related issues as addressed in the local plan for this WSA.

In northwest Minnesota, WSA 1 has the same borders as Economic Development Region (EDR) 1, and WSA 2 covers 3 separate EDR's. These EDR's are served by one Regional Labor Market Analyst, Anthony Schaffhiser, who works for MN DEED. Once a year, he reports to the local WDB's with up-to-date information about local and regional job market, industry trends, workforce availability and hiring demand. Local labor market information and identified Occupations in Demand serve as the basis for identifying and designing adult career pathways and provide a focus for instruction.

Regional Workforce Development Plan

In addition, WSA's 1 and 2 have banded together to develop a Regional Workforce Development plan, as required under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and the ABE representatives from both RMNCEP and NWPIC boards are selected as one of six members from each of the Workforce Development Boards, along with appointees representing special interest groups, business and diversity, to participate on a Regional Workforce Alliance team. The primary strategies and areas of focus for this implementing this regional plan include:

1. ***Strengthening of the Regional Workforce Alliance (RWA) group that brings employers, educators, local and state resources and tribal entities to the table.*** The region plans to initiate

training through WIOA and State funds that support inclusive workforce and increased knowledge across the workforce in emerging technology, labor market demands and resources for new Minnesotans.

2. ***Continued development of and support for designees of the Inclusive Workforce Employer (I-WE) designation program.*** The Community Workforce Inclusion Councils (CWIC) is a subset of the Regional Workforce Alliance. In the summer of 2019, the CWIC conceptualized and implemented the I-WE designation which recognizes employers who desire to be more inclusive in their workplace culture and practices. Since its inception, the I-WE program has become a hallmark of the regional work in northwest Minnesota and has expanded and been adopted by other regions of the state. The region commits to the continued development of the I-WE program with a goal of providing greater opportunities to develop marketing and follow up programs that will scale up the I-WE designation in this region and increase recognition amongst employers and employer partners locally, and statewide.
3. ***Recognize and adjust to demographic shifts, both in the workforce and also within communities.*** In addition to the Inclusive Workforce Initiative, the northwest Minnesota region is also the birthplace of the Minnesota Indigenous Workforce Initiative (MIWI), launched by DEED's Northwest Minnesota Workforce Strategy Consultant James Whirlwind Soldier launched in 2023 in partnership with the state's Native American leaders and non-Native employers. The goal is to create a pipeline of Native American workers who are prepared to enter high-growth and high-wage employment in meaningful careers with organizations that strive to be an employer of choice for Native American people. The region conducted a workforce survey in February of 2024 and identified priority areas to focus regional resources toward in the next three years to address skills gaps, labor shortages, and shifting resources in its rural and native communities.
4. ***Support the Inflation Reduction Act.*** The RWA has prioritized the use of apprenticeships to assist in filling well-paying union jobs and support proven pathways into local industry that will allow workers to earn while they learn by creating incentives for paying prevailing wages and utilizing qualified, registered apprentices in clean energy projects.
5. ***Ensuring CareerForce staff meet the needs of populations experiencing inequities in employment and education through standardized professional staff training.*** In the recent past, including Workforce Development (*Global Career Development Facilitator*) certification has been sponsored by each Local Workforce Development Area (LWDA). In the coming year, plans are underway to offer Mental Health Awareness training for staff.
6. ***Continuation of Regional Workforce Summits and planned regional events.*** Since its inception in 2018, the region has hosted twelve Regional Workforce Summits to bring together a wide range of stakeholders to discuss occupations in demand and the underlying conditions resulting in a workforce shortage. Information gathered by these summits revealed a core group of factors affecting recruitment and retention of a qualified workforce to the region including issues of housing, childcare, transportation, recruitment, retention, job skills and education. As a result, a core team of committed businesses has met monthly to address these issues and has provided several deliverables, including infographics that are shared amongst employer partners, the I-WE designation which is promoted amongst employers, and the Employability Skills Certification offered through ABE. This Employability Skills Certification is awarded to job seekers who possess demonstrated work skills, such as positive attitude, teamwork, diversity and cultural awareness, communication and listening, appearance and etiquette, critical thinking and problem solving and leadership. Employability Skills Certification is a

product of Soft Skills AHA and is provided by the Northwest Service Cooperative ABE consortium to enrolled learners and referred workforce clients.

7. ***Improved coordination and communication through Regional Career Counseling Coordinating (RC3) staff in the region.*** The RC3 staff connect stakeholders and partners, assess and compile information about all workforce development programs in the region, share best practices among stakeholders, and promote available workforce development and career counseling programs in the area. This staff will play a key role in disseminating information and making connections throughout the region.
8. ***Ongoing creation, outreach, and administrative support for the implementation of Career Pathways.*** Regionally, the RC3 staff are funded by DEED to assist in the planning and implementation of Career Pathways strategies as they are identified.
9. ***Regional Transit Coordination.*** In response to transportation issues identified in communities throughout the region, the regional plan includes the establishment of Regional Transit Coordination Councils (RTCCs) to plan the future look of a regional transportation system.

Several steps have been taken to put the items above into action. Quarterly meetings have resulted in the gathering of a large group of “industry champions” who engage other industry representatives and partners in the identification, creation, and implementation of business initiatives that drive workforce solutions, through sector partnerships. Small groups have coalesced around four specific strategy areas of the Regional Plan: Business Engagement/Business Led Sector Strategies, Community Engagement, Customer Centered Design, and Funding/Resource Policy and Systems. Adult Basic Education specifically serves the group focused on Customer Centered Design. Emerging from this focus area are opportunities to develop or build upon career pathways in each of the subregions.

WSA 1 (the Northwest Private Industry Council) Workforce Development Plan

The primary goals and strategies outlined in the local plan for WSA 1 as they relate to ABE include:

1. ***Creating a service delivery system that aligns the work done by the CareerForce Center and its partner agencies so that there is “no wrong front door” to receiving needed services, and barriers to accessing services are eliminated.*** To this avail, the Northwest Private Industry Council has amended its bylaws to include the addition of a One-Stop Committee, which serves to coordinate the work of the service providers within the local workforce development area. In the seven-county area, there is one comprehensive CareerForce centrally located in Thief River Falls and two affiliate locations in Crookston and Roseau, staffed with itinerant workers. While the comprehensive CareerForce Center in Thief River Falls includes all core partners under WIOA, the Adult Basic Education program is located on campus, but not within the CareerForce office suite. WIOA partners in the region have developed and executed a Memorandum of Understanding to ensure that service providers are knowledgeable about the services offered by partner agencies and can effectively connect with one another and refer clients for needed services. Agency partners have participated in annual all staff training days offered in person (pre-Covid) and virtually, to bring partner staff together to share resources and information and build collegiality amongst providers.

Eliminating barriers to access (including services and locations) continues to be an ongoing challenge faced by the WIOA partners in this region. Due to the size of the technological investment that is

necessary to accomplish this goal, the local board is unable to make significant contributions as a single entity, however we have made some strides regionally and at the service provider level, such as:

- **Adult Basic Education** programs are located throughout the region in a variety of locations, including schools, CareerForce centers and college campuses. Services are offered at varied times throughout the week, and online learning through synchronous instruction and access to asynchronous platforms provides adult learners with content and instruction during nontraditional hours. ABE programs embed technology in all classes and continue to expand access to distance learning platforms throughout the state. Access to digital platforms allows students with mobility challenges to access technology-based instruction. The North Star Digital Literacy assessment is available to all ABE consortia classrooms statewide to help assure that learners master basic computer skills in a variety of areas, and students have the option of taking the assessment under a proctored environment to earn a portable NorthStar Digital Literacy certificate. All ABE sites within the region meet accessibility standards.
 - **CareerForce and partner sites** continue to work remotely with clients due to COVID-19 and are just beginning a soft re-opening of brick-and-mortar locations, however, there is a strong directive from state leadership that strategies be implemented that will maximize client services and eliminate barriers to participation, including the facilitation of online workshops, or services offered at non-traditional hours, such as Saturday Job Search Workshops offered at local public libraries.
2. **Building a revised local vision and mission statement for the seven-county area in order to develop strategies that will better connect local communities, government, business and education to the state's vision statement: a healthy economy, where all Minnesotans have or are on the path to meaningful employment and a family sustaining wage, and all employers are able to fill jobs in demand.** Over the past four years, the NWPIC board has engaged in a focus area discussion in place of a full strategic planning process resulting in the establishment of a Business Services committee and Career Pathways education for the board. Part of this work also included efforts that coincide with the larger statewide effort to build brand awareness and support of the larger workforce development system. For its part, Adult Basic Education has taken much of the lead in providing training and presentations that will enhance the board's understanding of career pathways programming and has also taken a leadership role in the development of a Career Pathways committee with the goal of seeking a future grant funded pathway for adult learners.
3. **Meeting the needs of local employers, workers, and job seekers.** Specifically, this consortium has focused efforts by providing assistance and instruction in the following areas:
- **Soft Skills training for new and incumbent workforce** using an online platform called Soft Skills Pro (by Soft Skills AHA), either as a stand-alone platform that students can work with through ABE, as a seat that can be assigned to a requesting job service provider for use with their enrolled clients, or as a hybrid online class offered to learners through the Northwest MN ABE Transitions Region, called Skills for Work.
 - **Career planning for job seekers**, also using components of the above-named software, to assist with development of interview skills, career search and interest inventories, and resume and cover

letter writing.

- **Basic computer or digital literacy skills**, as mentioned previously, embedded in literacy instruction at all levels, as well as offered virtually through approved distance learning platforms or synchronous online regional and consortium classes. The consortium also offers a technology lending library at all classroom locations which enhances the ability for adult learners to connect to classes and programming and eliminates barriers to the same.

ABE programs in WSA 1 have worked in a variety of ways to align programming and respond to the goals identified by our local Workforce plan:

- **Quarterly One Stop Operator Meetings:** The ABE Coordinator participates in quarterly meetings of the current One Stop Operator partners. The purpose of these meetings is to better define the roles and responsibilities of each partner as they collaborate to develop better alignment between programs and establish an updated partner MOU.
- **Annual All-Staff Meetings:** Staff from ABE and each of the One Stop Operator partners participate in conjoined training, at least once a year. The purpose of these training sessions is to bring staff together in effort to build relationships and get to know each program's staff and services better. Partner agencies take turns hosting these half day meetings, which consist of open discussion and sharing, training around topics of common concern to all, and a working lunch to foster fellowship and communication.
- **Assessment Testing:** In effort to better align services, providers have recognized the need to begin using common assessment tools and language. ABE classrooms in the consortium provide TABE assessments for dislocated workers throughout the region through referral by a caseworker, and leadership from ABE and Title I programs are currently developing protocols, documentation, and data sharing procedures for inclusions on a newly revised and updated MOU being created to address WIOA policies and regulations.
- **Co-location of Services:** NWSC ABE has enjoyed a long-standing presence on two Northland Community and Technical College (NCTC) campuses in Thief River Falls and East Grand Forks. These campuses serve as the primary post-secondary training providers in WSA 1, and as mentioned previously the Thief River Falls CareerForce location is also housed on the NCTC campus. Co-location on these campuses has proven to be not only a wonderfully adult centered environment for ABE classrooms and students, but also a natural bridge between adult literacy programming, workforce programming, and post-secondary training and credential achievement. Recently the Thief River Falls ABE classroom moved into a room immediately adjacent to the Head Start Center and the Academic Success Center. This move facilitated an even stronger partnership between the programs and made room for Head Start to locate its services on campus! Additionally, Crookston ABE is co-located in the Crookston CareerForce office with representatives of the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) and Inter-County Community Council, the contracted program provider for WIOA Adult, Youth, and Dislocated Worker programs, as well as the state Dislocated Worker programs. This partnership offers learners and workforce clients access to several programs under one roof, designed to meet their educational and basic needs, while at the same time moving them toward economic self-sufficiency. Referrals between programs occur more seamlessly, and staff from the various programs have come to better

understand the services offered by their partner programs.

- **Conditional Content Learners:** ABE classrooms have served a special category of adult learner, called Conditional Content Learner. Created in 2009 by the state ABE program, this policy allows qualifying workforce clients to be referred, in writing, to ABE for up to 30 hours of instruction in the areas of Basic Technology Skills (such as Basic Computer Literacy), Job Seeking Skills (such as resume writing, interviewing and job searching) and Soft Skills Necessary for Work (such as SCANS skills).
- **Content Standards:** MN ABE programs have adopted content standards in three domains, including Soft Skills Necessary for Employment. All staff in this consortium have been trained on implementing the *Academic, Career and Employability Standards (ACES)* addressed in the *Transitions Integration Framework (TIF)* into their instruction. This addresses the development of six key Soft Skills categories, including: Effective Communication (EC), Learning Strategies (LS), Critical Thinking (CT), Self-Management (SM), Developing a Future Pathway (DFP), and Navigating Systems (NS). ABE can offer this professional service as a way to meet Soft Skills training needs as defined in the local plan.

WSA 2 (Rural MN Concentrated Employment Programs) Workforce Development Plan

The primary goals and strategies outlined in the local plan for WSA 2 as they relate to ABE include:

1. **Ensure proper connectivity and coordination among providers within the local workforce development area.** The CareerForce locations in LWDA 2 are primarily staffed by Rural Minnesota CEP, Inc. (RMCEP), however, it is important to note that partners are either co-located or provide itinerant services in the nine CareerForce locations in this region, including Mobile CareerForce services. Each CareerForce location develops and maintains community connections and networks with providers to coordinate services. Where possible, service providers are co-located in CareerForce locations, although there are currently no NWSC Adult Basic Education co-located classrooms within LWDA 2. As a goal, WSA 2 plans to explore opportunities to have a greater ABE presence at CareerForce locations with a common referral for similar clients.
2. **Prepare an educated and skilled workforce.** The mission in LWDA 2 is to provide employers with the skilled workers that they need to succeed through (1) the development of extensive partnerships, (2) the creation of innovative strategies, projects, and delivery systems, (3) the strong administration of WIOA, State, and grant programming, and (4) working together with System and Community Partners, to ensure that services and programming are provided that meet the needs of today's consumers and businesses, as well as strengthen our local economies.
3. **Explore the possibilities of including ABE in the MFIP orientation and other programs as appropriate, which will allow for seamless delivery in the access to Adult Basic Education and Literacy services.**

ABE programs in WSA 2 have worked in a variety of ways to align programming and respond to the goals identified by our local Workforce plan:

- **Bemidji CareerForce Partnership:** NWSC ABE has established an MOU with RMCEP, to better define the roles and responsibilities of each partner as they collaborate to develop better alignment between programs. Currently, the ABE program in Bemidji is the only location within the consortium

that falls within the RMCEP service area. Students/clients in this area are served by two CareerForce locations in the community.

- **Co-location of services:** Bemidji ABE is co-located on the Northwest Technical College campus. This college serves as one of two primary post-secondary training providers in WSA 2, with the other college being part of the university system. As mentioned previously with other campus-based classrooms, co-location of ABE on this campus has proven to be a wonderfully adult centered environment for ABE classroom and students, as well as a natural bridge between adult literacy programming, workforce programming, and post-secondary training and credential achievement.
- **Career Pathways Training:** RMCEP recently secured an Individualized Training Pathways to Prosperity grant through DEED to target individuals in need of career counseling services. ABE partners will provide supportive services at the request of RMCEP for these individuals including basic skill development, career awareness and readiness through individualized, contextualized instruction in reading, math, and language skills.
- **Soft Skills Training for Adults:** Employment and training providers in northwest Minnesota have long recognized the need to provide career seeking adults with transferrable and essential workplace skills training. Three years ago, a team of partners from various agencies including Adult Education, Inter County Community Council employment training programs, Rural MN Concentrated Employment Programs, and Northwest Private Industry Council began meeting to discuss options and resources available to students and job seekers in Minnesota's Workforce Development Region 1. They surveyed the needs of area employers and used the information gathered to establish a series of training focus areas, essential skills common to good employees no matter the job or industry sector in which they work, including communication, teamwork, problem solving, attendance protocols, time management, and more. These areas are commonly referred to as "soft skills"; skills that go beyond the technical skills needed to perform that job but are integral to the making of a successful 21st century employee. The team used these focus areas to explore a variety of curriculum and certification programs that would provide training and credentialing of career seekers and began to pilot a new computer-based curriculum and credential with adults called *SoftSkillsPro*, a product of *SoftSkillsUSA*. *SoftSkillsPro* provides a three-pronged approach to training and credentialing which includes online instructional modules leading to a Workforce and Life Essentials (WLE) certificate, a Career Prep course which assists learners in developing the skills and tools they will need during their career search, and the Soft Skills Pro Industry certificate which provides information to prospective employers regarding the applicant's workforce skills and traits. In addition to these certificates, students can complete a comprehensive personality assessment, learn how to set SMART goals, create a cover letter and resume, and gain skills that will prepare them for job interviews. Access to *SoftSkillsPro* is offered free to adults enrolled in any of Northwest Service Cooperative's Adult Education programs as well as to any interested adults enrolled as clients of various workforce agencies and programs including Intercounty Community Council Employment and Training, CareerForce in Bemidji, and Beltrami County Workforce Impact in Bemidji.