

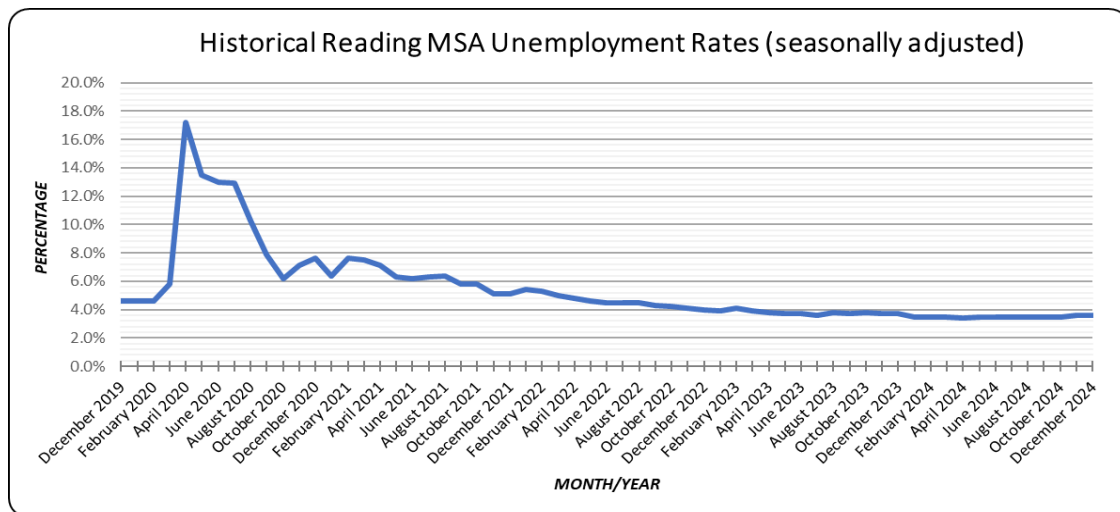


Berks County 2025-2029 WIOA Multi-Year Local Plan Summary

1. Berks County At-a-Glance (see pages 1 through 48 of the plan)

1.1 Workforce analysis - The Berks County Workforce Development Area (WDA) 4-year local workforce development plan covers the period July 1, 2025, thru June 30, 2029, which the Berks County Workforce Development Board anticipates will be a period of dynamic change within our local area's population and labor force.

Reading MSA Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rates (2019-2024) - As reported by the PA Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA), we enter this new four-year plan with over two years of historically low local rates of seasonally adjusted unemployment (below 4.0%):



Source: PA DOL&I Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA)

Location: Our local economy and associated labor market benefit from a competitively advantaged geographic position in Southeastern Pennsylvania (SEPA) which is the Commonwealth's largest, wealthiest, and most dynamic region. For planning purposes, we benefit from the Berks County Workforce Development Area (WDA) being coincident with the Reading Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). We will use the terms "Berks County" and "Reading MSA" interchangeably throughout this plan.

Notably, the Reading MSA is home to a distinctive local employment profile and a sizable, readily accessible labor market characterized by 59.7% of those employed in "private jobs" in the WDA both live and work within Berks County. (Source: Pennsylvania Center for Workforce Information and Analysis [CWIA]).

Employment/Residency Inflow Status,2021 (CWIA)	Count	Share
Employed in the Berks WDA	142,312	100.0%
Employed and Living in the Berks WDA	85,009	59.7%
Employed in the WDA but Living Outside Berks WDA	57,303	40.3%

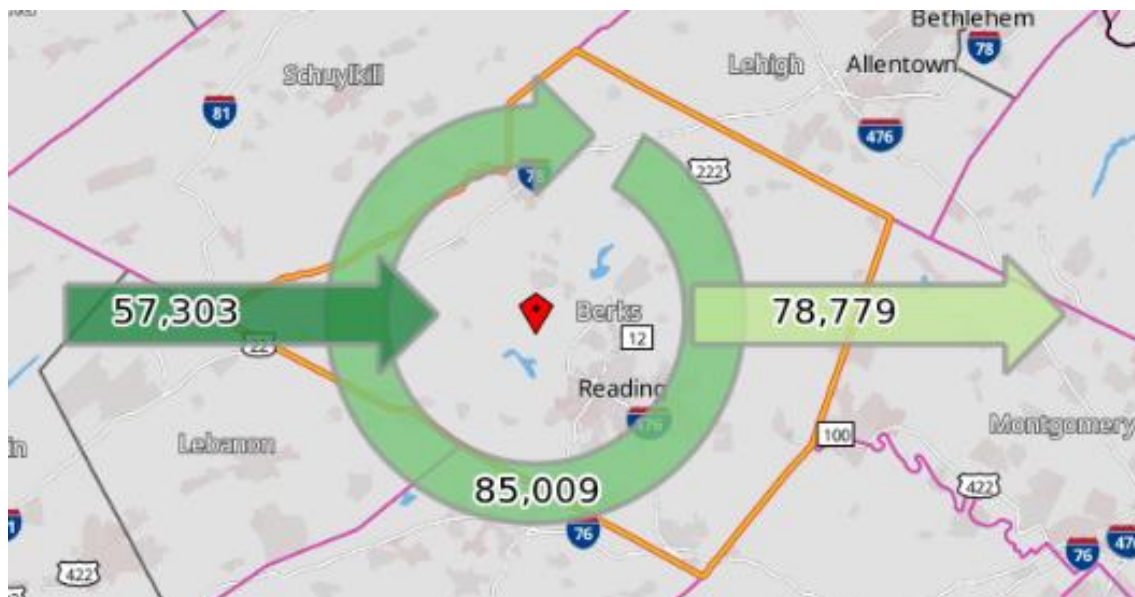
Commuter Patterns: These 85,000 Berks County residents employed in private jobs as noted above who take advantage of the many readily available attractive local employment opportunities in our WDA are

joined by over 57,000 residents of other counties. Most of these inbound workers have relatively easy commutes from four large bordering counties (Chester, Montgomery, Lehigh, and Lancaster) situated from our northeast to south, each with substantial working-age populations of their own. Others commute in from two more modestly populated rural counties to the northwest (Schuylkill) and west (Lebanon). At the same time, many Berks County residents easily access employment opportunities in private jobs in these six neighboring counties and beyond - especially where these counties are home to distinctive industry clusters (e.g. pharmaceutical and life sciences in Montgomery County, financial services in Chester County, or hospitality in Lancaster County.)

Employment/Residency Outflow Status, Berks County WDA, 2021 (CWIA)

	Count	Share
Living in the WDA	163,788	100.0%
Living and Employed in the WDA	85,009	51.9%
Living in the WDA but Employed Outside	78,779	48.1%

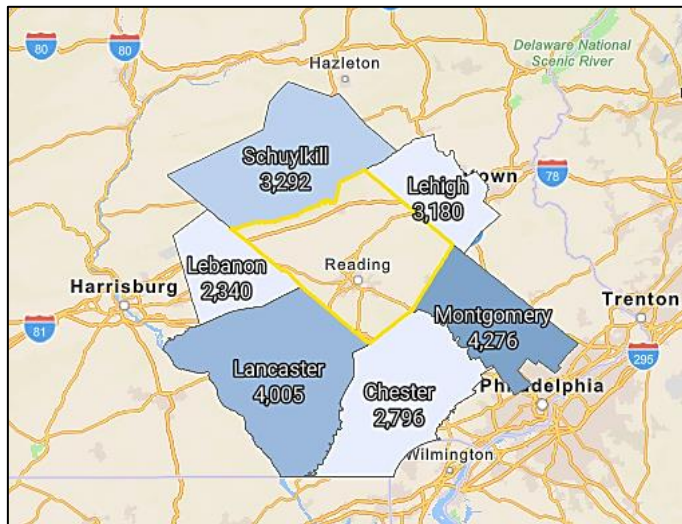
As shown in the pattern mapping below, Reading MSA (Berks County WDA) Net Commuting Worker Private Job Inflow versus Outflow* is **-21,476**. In other words, Berks County experiences a net outflow of residents working outside the county compared to those outside residents who are employed in Berks County.



*A positive number indicates the number of individuals working in the WDA but living outside is higher than the number of individuals living in the WDA but employed in private jobs outside. A negative number indicates the opposite. Source: CWIA

These commuter inflows and outflows vary by geography:

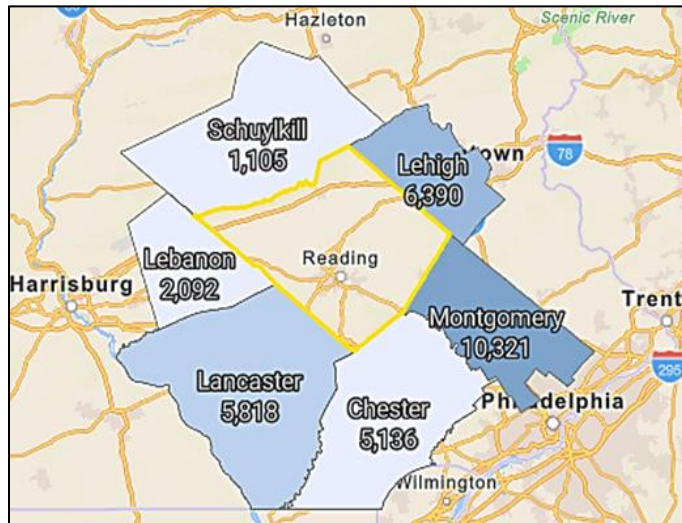
Employed Workers in Reading MSA (Berks County LWDA) and Where they Reside – As the map detail and table below show, the strongest private job commuter flows into Berks County come from Montgomery County (4,276), Lancaster County (4,005), and Schuylkill County (3,292).



Region	Commuters
Chester County	2,796
Lancaster County	4,005
Lebanon County	2,340
Lehigh County	3,180
Montgomery County	4,276
Schuylkill County	3,292
Total Inbound Surrounding County Commuters to Berks	19,890

Source: JobsEQ®

Residents of the Reading MSA (Berks County LWDA) and Where they Work - As the map detail and table below show, the strongest commuter flows to private jobs outside of Berks County are into Montgomery County (10,321), Lehigh County (6,390), and Lancaster County (5,818).

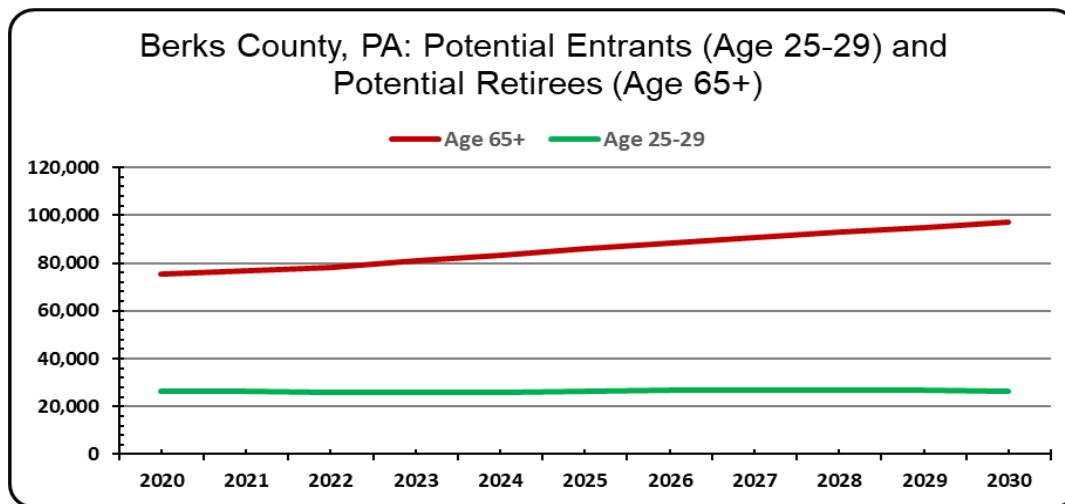


Region	Commuters
Chester County	5,136
Lancaster County	5,818
Lebanon County	2,092
Lehigh County	6,390
Montgomery County	10,321
Schuylkill County	1,105
Berks Commuters into Surrounding Counties	30,862

Source: JobsEQ®

Age Distribution: Berks County's population is projected to steadily grow from 428,631 in 2020 to 441,748 in 2030 (Source: Jobs EQ®).

Two of the most significant long-term trends impacting the Berks County labor market during this period remain (1) the continued aging and (2) the rapid diversification of our local population and available workforce. Of greatest concern identified in our workforce analysis, is the projected steady growth in the number and population share of Berks Countians who have or will reach a potential retirement age of 65 vis a vis the static supply of younger residents to replace them as shown in the graph below:



Significant downward pressure on the size of our Berks County labor force will continue as many experienced older adults exit the local workforce over the next five years without enough young adults to replace them. From 2020 - 2030, the “potential retiree” population (ages 65+) is projected to grow by **33%** from just over 75,200 to nearly 100,000 (Source: JobsEQ®). As a proportion of the current total Berks County population of 432,851 (Source: ACS V2023), “potential retirees” will grow from 17.4% to 23.1% or approximately 1 of every 4 Berks County residents.

Our population of “potential entrants” into the labor force (ages 25-29) is projected to remain essentially flat, barely budging from 26,226 to 26,237 over the same decade (Source: JobsEQ®). The US Census Population Estimate for 2023 calculates an annual average growth rate since 2020 of 0.9% in the total population of the Reading MSA (Berks County). If this trend continues, as a proportion of the overall local population, this important young adult cohort beginning their working careers will remain at approximately 6.0% of the total population.

2019-2024: Stalled Berks County Workforce Growth? The negative near-term results of these long-term demographic trends are now consistently visible in local labor market statistics. The size of the local labor force in Berks County appears to have now settled at levels somewhat below where the Reading MSA labor force appears to have peaked at nearly 219,000 in 2019. 2019 also saw the County’s local seasonally adjusted (SA) unemployment rate drop consistently below 4.0% for the first time in nearly twenty years. [Source: the Pennsylvania Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA)].

CWIA since reports that the size of our local Berks County labor force averaged only 215,000 in 2023 and 2024. Both years saw an average 3.5% unemployment rate driven largely by the historically low average number of unemployed residents at just a bit over 7,500.

Annual Average Labor Force Statistics, Berks County WDA, 2024 (CWIA)

Calendar Year	Labor Force	Employed	Unemployed	Unemployment Rate
2024	215,392	207,933	7,533	3.5

By December 2024, CWIA reported that the size of our local labor force had drifted down further to 213,100 - a 2.5% decline over the preceding five years (12/2019 – 12/2024). Our local number of employed residents has shown similar signs of slow contraction while our seasonally adjusted (SA) local unemployment rate has been astonishingly stable and low at **3.4% - 3.6%** for twenty-two straight months (March 2023 – December 2024). This remains on par with Pennsylvania’s statewide extended unemployment rate of 3.4% - 3.6% and below the U.S. rate of 3.7% – 4.2%. CWIA further reported that, as of December 2024:

- The seasonally adjusted number of employed Berks County residents stood at 205,300 or ≈1.0% lower than a year earlier.

- The seasonally adjusted number of unemployed residents has remained incredibly low and steady at below 7,600 for nearly two years.
- Berks County's non-farm jobs (SA) count has slowly recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic and after five years is only 600 non-farm jobs shy of its 2019 peak of 183,000 (CWIA).

During the first calendar quarter of 2025, our PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST) continues to receive many requests for recruitment assistance from local employers in key industries (e.g. Manufacturing, Healthcare, Construction, etc.) still struggling to fill current job openings.

Given these significant demographic challenges to the local labor force, a renewed focus on our adult working age population (ages 25-64) is warranted. Accordingly, the WDB seeks to understand key medium-term post pandemic developments within the local adult population (ages 25-64), especially regarding that working age population's engagement in the local workforce.

Berks County and Pennsylvania "Prime Working Age" and "Working Age" Adult Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) – In September 2024, the Berks County WDB received a valuable report from the PA Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA) of "prime working age" (25-54) adults and "working age" (25-64) adults in Berks County. The data from 2023, show that both very important LFPRs have fully now recovered from 2019 and remain notably above those for the Commonwealth of PA.

Labor Force Participation Rates				
	Ages 25-54		Ages 25-64	
	Berks County	Pennsylvania	Berks County	Pennsylvania
2018	90.4%	87.1%	86.6%	82.9%
2019	90.4%	87.4%	87.0%	83.1%
2020	X	X	X	X
2021	86.8%	86.8%	83.0%	82.8%
2022	90.2%	88.1%	85.8%	83.8%
2023	90.5%	88.6%	86.9%	84.4%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, B23001: PA Center for Workforce Information & Analysis

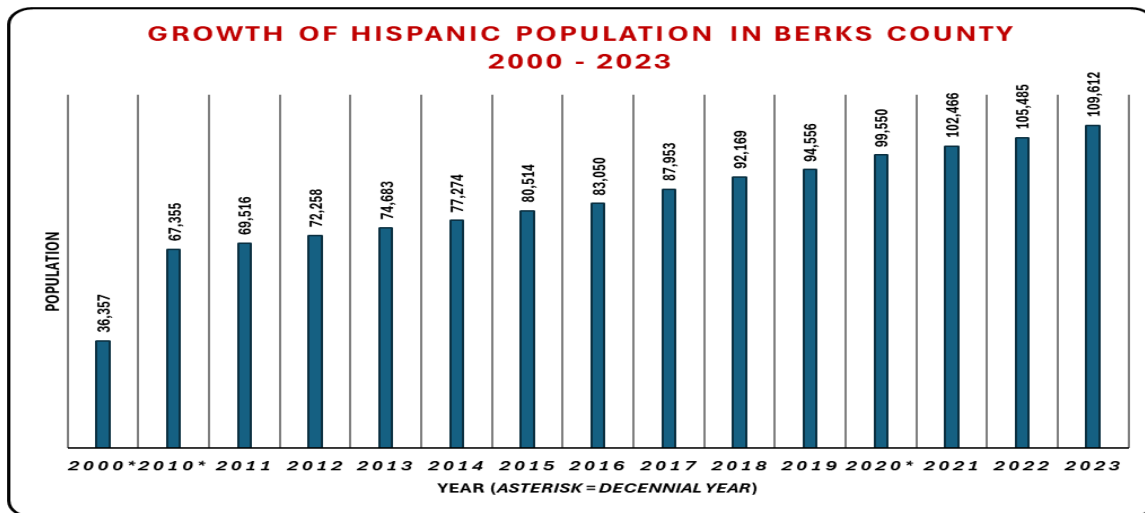
To gain a deeper understanding of these and a wide variety of critical trends within our current and future labor force, the Berks WDB competitively procured a contract with Thomas P. Miller & Associates, Inc. to commence January 1, 2025, with a final report to be delivered to the WDB by September 2025.

Berks County Population Race and Ethnicity: Berks County's growing population is not only aging, but also rapidly diversifying. According to the U.S Census Bureau American Community Survey five-year estimates (2018-2022), the Berks County, PA (Reading MSA) Population Race/Ethnicity demographic is:

Race and/or Ethnicity	Percentage of Population	Population
White	75.4%	322,910
Black or African American	4.9%	21,068
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.4%	1,847
Asian	1.4%	5,831
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.0%	70
Some Other Race	8.9%	38,190
Two or More Races	9.0%	38,567
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	23.2%	99,460

The most dramatic change over the past 15 years, has been the rapid growth of our Hispanic or Latino (of any race) population, especially in and around the City of Reading which is situated at the center of the

Rte. 222 Corridor running from Allentown to Lancaster. The Associated Press (10/24/2024) describes the Rte. 222 Corridor as connecting “some of the fastest growing Hispanic communities in the country”. The 2020 U.S. census revealed that Reading is now the fourth largest municipality, by population, in the Commonwealth and has the highest percentage of Hispanic or Latinos of any municipality in Pennsylvania: nearly 69%, up from 58% in 2010. Our Hispanic or Latino population now accounts for over 100,000 (25.3%, one in four) Berks County residents. This is much higher than the Hispanic or Latino representation of 8.9 % across the Commonwealth (Source: U.S. Census [2024]).



Source: U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census & 1-Year Estimates

Educational Attainment

Currently available excellent local career opportunities (and pre-requisite education) are often not readily accessible to our many Berks County residents with limited English language speaking ability. The American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimate (2018-2022) identifies a growing number of 31,569 Berks County residents (7.8%) who “speak English less than very well”. Our 7.8% rate for residents with this challenge is the third highest rate among Pennsylvania’s 67 counties and much higher than the statewide rate (4.5%).

More broadly, the Berks County labor force exhibits a distinctively challenging education-level profile as compared to Pennsylvania as a whole. As reported by the ACS 5-year estimate (2018-2022):

- An increasing proportion (11.9%) of the County’s adults (age 25+) lack a high school diploma or equivalent. This is significantly higher than the state as a whole, where a declining proportion (only 7.3%) of Pennsylvania adults lack this critical baseline level of formal education.
- Low educational attainment is particularly a concern among working age adult (25-64 years of age) residents of the City of Reading where 28.9% lack a high school degree or equivalent (Source: CWIA and ACS 2018-2022).
- 36.6% of Berks County adults have earned a high school diploma or the equivalent.
- Fewer (26.8%) Berks County adults possess a bachelor’s degree or higher as compared to 33.8% of Pennsylvania adults.

A Critical Need for More Appropriately (and Affordably) Educated Workers: It is an unfortunate common practice when evaluating educational attainment to lump together adults who have earned an associate degree with adults who report having “some college, no degree”. The WDB is not sure what we can say with confidence about the educational attainment of the substantial cohort of 16.1% of adult residents ages 25-64 reporting having “some college, no degree” (Source: JobsEQ®). It is nearly impossible to determine what level of education such “non-completing” adults may have actually acquired. In the absence of a recognized post-secondary credential, the educational attainment of these adults is best

categorized along with their peers who simply report having attained a high school diploma or equivalent. By contrast, our 10.1% of adults who have earned an associate degree (Source: JobsEQ®) should be recognized for this major career achievement and career credential as they are likely well positioned lifelong learners who can adapt to the evolving needs of local employers.

Unfortunately, our current local education profile does not match well with the needs of our region's emerging technology-driven workplace. In the decade ahead, while we may have a sufficient supply of local working age adult residents with 4-year degrees, our local employers need a much larger pool of adults with **associate degrees** (particularly in technical fields of study) or similarly valuable post-secondary educational and skills credentials. Importantly, such post-secondary credentials serve as tickets to career success which can be affordably acquired through registered apprenticeships, technical applied associate (AAS) degree programs, and military or other technical training programs without taking on undue student loan debt.

As Pennsylvania's Center for Workforce Information and Analysis (CWIA) reports in its Long-Term Occupational Employment Projections (2022-2032), Berks County firms currently employ 35,560 skilled workers in occupations linked to such affordable and valuable industry-recognized post-secondary credentials. With local employers reporting difficulty in finding qualified replacements for their many skilled retiring workers, CWIA projects that overall jobs for individuals with such credentials will grow 8.7% to 36,610 by 2032.

Migration and Mobility:

- Our region is experiencing some out-migration of retirees; however, more families are moving into Berks County:
 - Local school districts, the Berks County Intermediate Unit (BCIU), housing program administrators, and community-based organizations consistently report to the WDB that most of our newly arriving families (often with school age children) are moving here over the past decade from the greater New York City / Northern New Jersey region which is only 120 miles distant.
 - Like many immigrant families before them, these families come to Berks County in search of more affordable housing, safer schools and better job prospects. As described above, in January 2025, the Berks County WDB competitively-procured a comprehensive study with Thomas P. Miller & Associates, LLC. to better understand the dynamics of this important "in-migration" of working age adults, along with its opportunities and workforce development challenges. The final report will be made available to the public by September 2025.

Disconnected/Underprepared Young Adults: Another significant source of unemployment in Berks County with serious long-term implications is the large number of young adults (ages 16-24) who are not engaged in work or education preparing for careers. The WDB continues to dedicate significant resources to ensure that we have the most comprehensive and current information available regarding the size and critical characteristics of this elusive population. While the unstable circumstances of such "opportunity youth" make them extremely difficult to track and connect with, the WDB estimates that Berks County is now home to 5,000 – 6,000 disconnected young adults and that over half of disconnected young adults face more than one reason for being disconnected.

Based on previous research sponsored by the WDB, the top barriers disconnected young adults in Berks County face include:

1. Lack of Transportation
2. Family Care Obligations
3. Little Understanding of or Preparation for Attractive Career Opportunities
4. Significant Barriers to Pursuing Education

Other Barriers to Employment (U.S. Census): Berks County is home to 29,743 individuals (ages 18-64) with a disability representing nearly 1 in 9 residents in this prime age cohort (11.6%). Of these adults with disabilities, only 14,088 or 47.4% were participating in the labor force. With an unemployment rate of 12.3%, adults with disabilities in our labor force are more than two and half times as likely to be unemployed as are those in the labor force with no disability. (Source: CWIA and ACS 5-Year Estimates; 2018-2022).

In 2021, the Berks County WDB competitively-procured a contractor to conduct research: leading to (a.) a deeper understanding of the reasons working age adults with disabilities in Berks County are disproportionately not employed or are under-employed, both from the individual's perspective and the potential employer's perspective; and (b.) context for the WDB concerning the development of strategies to promote the employment of individuals with disabilities.

This contract was awarded to Thomas P. Miller & Associates, LLC (TPMA). and focused on the disproportionate employment and under-employment of individuals with disabilities in Berks County, Pennsylvania. During this study, TPMA conducted best practice research, collected demographic and labor market data on Berks County, surveyed 140 individuals directly involved with the employment of people with disabilities (community-based organizations that assist individuals with disabilities with employment services, employers, individuals with disabilities, and their support team members), and interviewed 18 key stakeholders. The study revealed important new insights regarding employment opportunities and challenges for Berks County residents with disabilities:

- **Individuals with disabilities desire more variety in job opportunities.** Employees of community-based organizations (CBOs) that work directly with individuals with disabilities to help them find employment frequently reported that job opportunities for these individuals are often limited to janitorial or retail industries. Individuals with disabilities that participated in this study, along with their support teams, expressed the same frustration, especially with how difficult it is to find employment opportunities that align with their interests and abilities. Rather, many jobs offered to these individuals are janitorial or retail with low pay, irregular hours, and limited opportunities for advancement.
- **Employers would benefit from increased access to trainings and resources around supporting the employment of individuals with disabilities.** Through the survey responses and interviews, one major finding that emerged was the need for more intentional training opportunities and resource sharing with local employers in Berks County around supporting individuals with disabilities (especially those with cognitive disabilities) during their employment.
- **All stakeholders would like to participate in more intentional networking opportunities.** Individuals with disabilities and their support team members often expressed how segregated they feel from the workforce community. This separation creates frustration because they feel like they do not have opportunities to make their voices and needs heard. Representatives of community-based organizations (CBOs) and employers all expressed similar sentiments around not having the time or manpower to go out and network on their own.

Poverty: Our local age 16 and older poverty rate (10.2%) is somewhat better than Pennsylvania's poverty rate of 10.7% for adult and pre-adult teenage working age residents (ages 16 and older). However, we realize that our strong local labor market often leaves this substantial population of 34,127 Berks County residents living below the poverty line behind. Disturbingly, the majority (61.6%) are not in the labor force at all (Source: CWIA and ACS, 5-Year Estimates; 2018-2022).

Individuals in poverty can be especially challenging to serve as they often have multiple barriers to employment such as unstable housing, low educational attainment, lack of reliable and effective transportation, etc. These combinations of barriers can make it difficult for these residents to establish a strong employment history which then becomes another barrier to future opportunities. As a result, our local workforce system must continuously improve on our design and delivery of effective comprehensive

services to assist this important pool of human potential and talent help create and share in our local prosperity.

Single Parent Families: Closely related to the challenges facing the Berks County WDB in serving adults living below the poverty line is the pressing need to effectively serve our 15,795 families led by a single parent - representing 36.8% of all local families with at least one dependent child. This current local rate is notably higher than the statewide rate of 32.8% (Source: CWIA and ACS, 5-Year Estimates; 2018-2022). Shortages of early childcare education professionals and affordable qualified childcare providers are especially disruptive to the career prospects and job stability of single parents (mostly women) with school age children and, potentially, a long-lasting detrimental impact on their employment options and family sustaining earnings potential.

Re-entrants: Berks County is also home to a large population of individuals with involvement in the criminal justice system and approximately 85% of all Berks County Jail inmates are unemployed upon release. The Berks County Adult Probation and Parole Office and the PA Board of Probation and Parole's Reading Sub-Office combined supervise over 7,800 individuals on either state or county parole living in Berks County (Source: Connections Work).

Historically, a record of involvement with the criminal justice system has been a major barrier to gainful employment and one of the Berks County WDB's top priorities to address over the past eight years. The WDB maintains a strong strategic partnership with Connections Work (previously Berks Connections Pretrial Services), our local lead agency to assist reentrants attain the skills, support and work experience to gain meaningful and family-sustaining employment. To expand and sustain this work in collaboration with other publicly funded workforce partners, Connections Work joined and remains a partner in the PA CareerLink® Berks County.

The best example of the fruits of the partnership is Connections Work's "**R3**" - **Rebuilding Reentrants and Reading registered pre-apprenticeship program** for the construction sector. Since its inception in 2017, Connections Work has successfully completed 37 R3 cohorts with 319 graduates. As of October 2024, R3 recidivism rate was measured at 4% one-year post graduation compared to 30% for those who did not complete the program. The national average one year post incarceration recidivism rate is 46%.

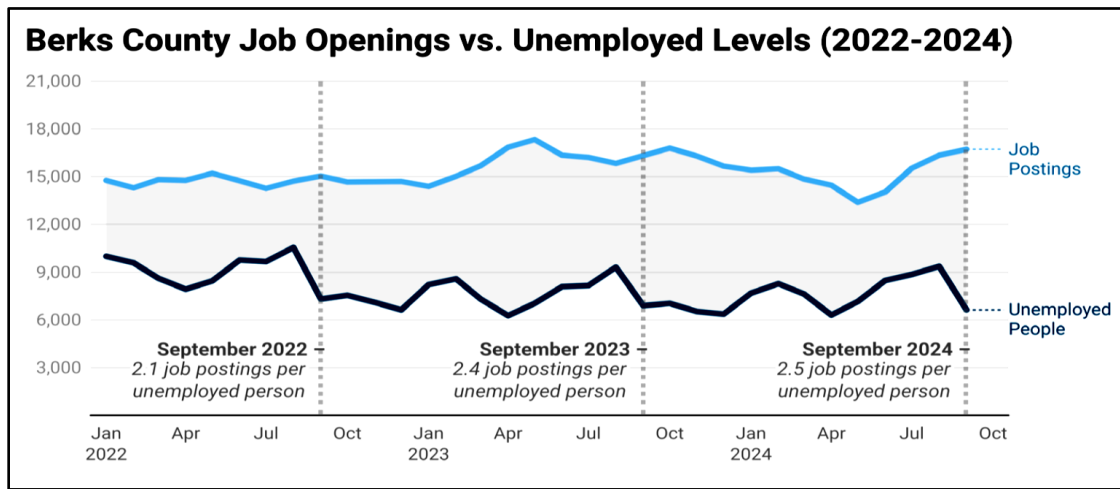
Post R3 graduation employment rate is 83% as of October 2024. Typically, the unemployment rate of the justice involved is much higher than that of the general population and is estimated at over 50%. R3 has become a widely recognized best practice re-entry program across the Commonwealth of PA and we look forward to partnering with Connections Work to sustain, improve, and grow R3 even further over the next four years.

1.2 Economic analysis – Describe strategic planning elements including a regional analysis of economic conditions.

Local Economic Conditions.

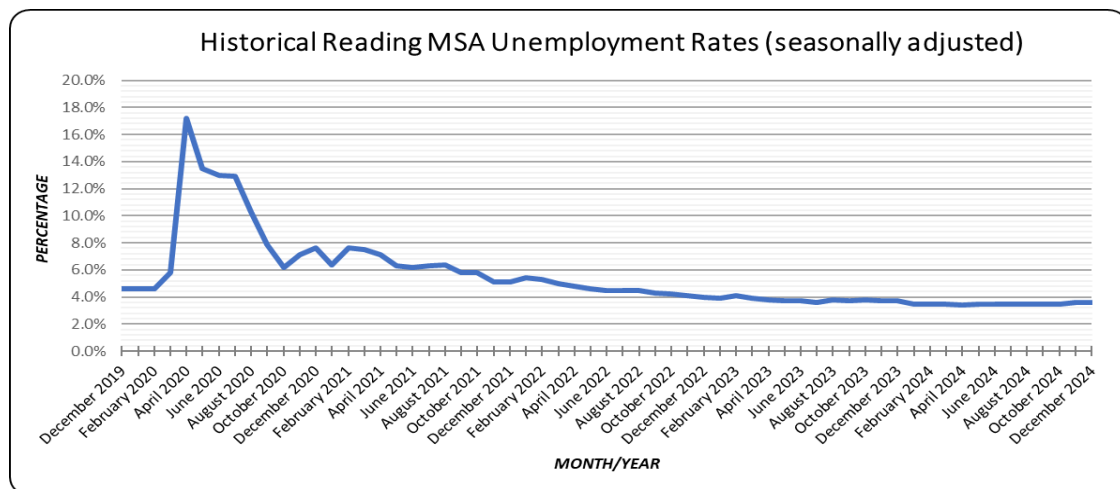
As reported by the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance in their Economic Intelligence Report Q32024 (published in January 2024), Berks County businesses' hiring challenges persist amid low unemployment:

- *In September 2024, there was an average of 2.5 job postings for every unemployed person in Berks County. By comparison, there was an average of 2.4 job postings per unemployed person in September 2023 and 2.1 job postings per unemployed person in September 2024.*
- *Although Berks County's low unemployment rates have eased pressure on people looking for work, they can also present a challenge for businesses seeking employees.*



Reading MSA Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rates (2019-2024)

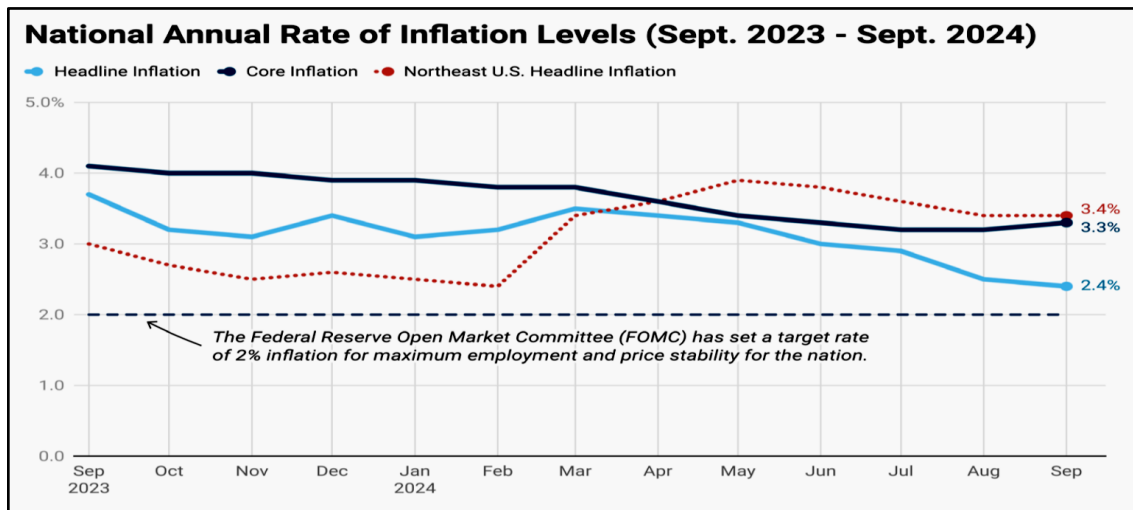
GRCA's reporting of a continuing local tight labor market through the end of 2024 tracks with monthly data reported by the PA Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA) as shown above in Section 1.1:



Source: PA DOL&I Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA)

Despite labor supply challenges, local and regional businesses reported having a stronger third quarter of 2024 compared to the previous quarter. Similarly, in its September 2024 surveys of regional businesses, the Philadelphia Federal Reserve found that 72% of manufacturers and 63% of non-manufacturers reported production and sales were stronger or equal to the previous quarter. The largest constraining factor to both manufacturing and non-manufacturing businesses was the challenge of finding qualified workers.

National annual inflation continued its decline down to the lowest annual inflation rate, declining since February 2021 with a notable 0.6% drop in the annual rate of inflation seen from June 2024 (3.0%) to September 2024 (2.4%). However, prices in the Northeast region rose more than across the nation during 2024. Annual headline inflation in the Northeast region was 3.4% in September, a full percentage higher than the nation. The rising costs of shelter, transportation, and education and communication grew more quickly in the Northeast region than the full United States over the last year (September 2023-September 2024). **Data source** U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics



Housing: Shelter costs in the region grew at nearly double the rate of other household costs in 2024. A primary driver for elevated shelter costs has been a misalignment between housing supply and consumer demand, with the latter outpacing the former.

- A. Reviewing historical data for new housing permit approvals can shed light upon how a local economy's real estate and construction markets have performed year to year. GRCA goes on to report that Berks County saw a significant drop in the volume of housing permits issued in the wake of the Great Recession in 2008 and has remained well below pre-2008 levels. In September 2024, the median sale price of a house in Berks County rose 6.4% from a year earlier, with the median home price reaching \$410,000. This supply shortage vs. demand is likely to continue for the foreseeable future as GRCA reports that Q3 2024 saw the lowest quarterly volume of housing permit approvals in Berks County since Q4 2022.

Local Wages vs. Inflation: Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) analyzed by the EDC for GRCA shows that Berks County's sustained low unemployment rate has led to a simultaneous rise in wages. In April 2023, Berks County wage growth surpassed the national inflation growth from January 2019 as shown in the chart below:



Data source U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics/GRCA

Cost of Living Index (COLI) for Berks County, PA: GRCA also provides the quarterly collection of local data for the national Council for Community and Economic Research (C2ER). Historically, the cost of living in Berks County remained slightly below the national average. The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, published their *Analysis of Cost-of-Living Data for*

Pennsylvania Counties (May 2024) using C2ER 2023 data. According to the report, Berks County's COLI stood at 101.9 in 2023 – slightly above the national average and just under Pennsylvania's 102.1. This valuable county by county COLI breakdown clearly illustrates Berks County's sometimes overlooked competitive regional labor market advantage. With a COLI equivalent to the 100.3 average for Pennsylvania's rural counties, Berks County is within commuting distance of the five economically-dynamic Philadelphia metro region counties – all of which have much higher local costs of living – Bucks (113.0), Chester (116.4), Delaware (114.3), Montgomery (117.4), and Philadelphia (128.5). As the report concludes, "Combined with other factors like quality of life, proximity to family, recreational opportunities, and many others, cost of living could be the deciding factor for individuals considering relocation."

2. Strategic Workforce Development Vision/Goals (see pages 48 through 61 of the plan)

2.1 Local Board's Strategic Vision and Alignment with the Governor's Strategic Vision - The Berks County WDB's vision is to support the development and maintenance of a skilled and competitive workforce in alignment with the broader economic development efforts to attract, retain and grow business in Berks County. In support of this vision the Berks County WDB has established a reputation for offering effective services and programs and for continuously improving the quality of services and programs.

To implement this vision and to promote broad-based economic growth and economic self-sufficiency for local families, the WDB's Planning Committee developed five goals which were recommended to the full Berks County WDB. Concurrently, the WDB's Youth Committee considered and endorsed two of the goals (IV and V) specifically related to the needs of young adults. Based on these recommendations from the Committees, the full WDB formally approved and adopted all five goals at a public meeting on September 20, 2024. More in-depth information regarding the WDB's rationale for the adoption of these goals is provided in Section 2.1 of this plan. The Berks County WDB will continue to implement these five strategic goals and priorities over the four years covered by this plan:

1) Building on our Strengths – Local Industry Sector Priorities and Related Technical Training Strategies

Because of the Berks County Workforce Development Board's (WDB's) long-standing commitment to industry sector analysis, priority setting, and employer engagement (plan sections 1.2, 1.3), our WDB houses extensive local labor market subject matter expertise in the knowledge, skills, abilities, and requisite industry-recognized credentials needed to sustain a local talent pool for the recruitment and retention of qualified employees, and the upskilling of "home grown" talent. Benefits of the WDB's industry sector approach to employer engagement include:

- Greater **focus**, by engaging employers with common workforce and skills development needs.
- The ability to **prioritize** and target the impact of limited (and often restricted) public workforce development funds in support of increasingly scarce local talent to address critical skills needs.
- Improved **alignment** among the WDB and our partners in economic development, education, community-based organizations, etc. as we collaborate to meet common skills needs identified in conjunction with local employers.

2) Engaging with Employers in Talent Retention and Development

Five years ago (even before the arrival of the pandemic in Berks County,) the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) identified stubbornly high local levels of new hire "churn" in our local labor that was remarkably higher than rates in any other area in the Commonwealth. In response to this sustained and disruptive labor market challenge, the WDB focused on assisting local employers with their talent retention and development strategies while supporting these efforts with the best available data. Steady progress has been made in bringing down these high rates of new hire churn and will continue to be a focus in Program Years 2025 – 2029.

3) No Talent Left Behind: Increasing Employment Opportunities for Adults with Barriers to Employment, including:

- Adults with Disabilities
- Adults with Histories of Convictions
- Adults who are English Language Learners (ELL)
- Adults with Low Literacy and Numeracy

The Berks County WDB will also work to expand and upskill the overall talent pool of existing adult workers to meet the needs of our key industry sectors. The WDB's Access and Opportunities Committee consists of board members and off-board members with proven expertise in serving/advocating for the communities of individuals with barriers to employment. A special focus of this committee is to increase the percentage of individuals with barriers who are gainfully employed, especially those adult residents with disabilities.

4) Connecting Young Adults (Ages 18-24)

The Youth Committee of the Berks WDB serves a unique and crucial role for the Board as the key convener of local partners with the mission and capacity to meet the extensive needs of connecting young adults. The Youth Committee recognizes that we require solid local data regarding the extent of the problem of disconnected young adults in our communities. Accordingly, the WDB has regularly allocated funds to research, quantify, and profile disconnected and under-employed young adults (a.k.a. "opportunity youth") in the Reading MSA.

5) Future Talent Pipeline – School Age Population (Ages 5-18) Career Readiness and Career and Technical Education (CTE)

The WDB clearly understands and consistently communicates the serious risk to our local prosperity if we and neighboring counties in our region fail to address the root causes of the mismatch between the evolving needs of local employers and the skills and qualifications of the available workforce. Frankly, too many adult Berks County residents, while they were still in our elementary and secondary school systems here or elsewhere, did not receive the education, workplace skills and career knowledge that they need to succeed in our rapidly changing economy. Fortunately, our two local Career and Technology Centers (BCTC and RMCTC) continuously improve their programming and support systems, thereby building reputations for excellence within our local communities. As a result, school year 2024-2025 saw both BCTC and RMCTC achieve record enrollments despite a slow long-term structural decline in our local high school age population (ages 14-18). Many high-quality programs at both CTCs now have more applicants than they can accept.

Strategic Planning to Meet Employer Needs - The Berks County WDB remains committed to local employer engagement through rigorous industry sector analysis. It is the Board's practice to broadly share occupational and industry sector employment information with our economic and education partners and community-based organizations. In return, the WDB seeks feedback from these partners that they often receive directly from employers. This ongoing exchange of labor market intelligence allows the WDB to continuously update and deepen our understanding of the current and future skills needs of our employers and to develop responsive programming. As a result of our long-standing commitment to this proven best practice, the Berks WDB is home to local labor market subject matter expertise in the knowledge, skills and requisite industry-recognized credentials needed to contribute to the growth of a qualified talent pool, the recruitment and retention qualified employees, and the upskilling of "home grown" talent. Proven benefits of our industry sector approach include:

- Greater **focus** by engaging employers with common workforce and skills development needs.
- The ability to **prioritize** and target the impact of limited workforce development funds to address common critical skills needs.
- Improved **alignment** among the WDB and our partners in economic development, education,

community-based organizations, etc. as we collaborate to meet common skills needs identified in conjunction with local employers.

In keeping with this employer engagement strategy and in preparation for the development of this latest WIOA four-year plan, the WDB completed its most recent bi-annual analysis of local industry sectors in Spring 2024. Using the latest economic data and labor market information (LMI), the WDB confirmed and approved the following five priority industry sectors on which to focus.

- Priority A Sectors – **Manufacturing and Healthcare (excluding Social Assistance)**
- Priority B Sector – **Construction**
- Priority C Sectors – **Agriculture and Educational Services**

In June 2024, the Berks County WDB formally adopted this workforce development industry sector priorities strategy for Program Years 2024-2028.

3. OPERATIONAL PLANNING: Local Area Workforce System and Investment Strategies (see pages 61 through 96 of the plan for a descriptive overview of the local workforce system structure, including key stakeholders and entities, WDB Committees, and PA CareerLink® WIOA funded programs & Workforce Services available to special populations)

3.1 Local workforce system structure – The purpose of the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) is to identify the long-term, strategic workforce development needs of the community; propose strategies to meet those needs; set priorities; build partnerships to align resources in support of those strategies; test specific initiatives to advance those ends; and measure and evaluate results. We support the development and maintenance of a skilled and competitive workforce in alignment with the broader economic development efforts to attract, retain and grow business in Berks County.

WDB members are unpaid members of the local community. By federal law and state policy, representatives of the local business community must constitute a majority of the Board's membership. Local labor organizations, community-based organizations, economic and community development entities and educational institutions are also represented on the Board. The Board normally holds public meetings once each calendar quarter and members also serve on Committees which meet regularly. Board Committees may also include non-Board members with particular workforce development experience and expertise.

The Board designates the operator(s) and oversees the operation of the PA CareerLink® Berks County (one stop delivery system).

Berks County is a single-county Workforce Development Area. The Chief Elected Official (CEO) is the elected Chair of the Berks County Board of Commissioners, a body consisting of three Commissioners, elected for four-year terms as specified by the Third-Class County code. The Berks County Board of Commissioners has entered into a partnership with the WDB for the planning and governance of workforce activities authorized under WIOA with respective roles and responsibilities delineated in the partnership agreement effective April 1, 2024. In general, the WDB is responsible for the administration of these activities and acts as a convener and facilitator for broader workforce issues in the county and collaborates with neighboring boards on issues of importance that cross county borders or have mutual benefit to their respective workforces.

WDB staff are County of Berks employees reporting to the Chief Operating Officer/Director of Workforce Development, who in turn reports to the full WDB and administratively to the County's Director of Community and Economic Development. Staff assist the WDB in the development of its strategic vision and plans and manage the implementation of board initiatives; develop and facilitate community partnerships which advance the goals of the board; maintain relationships with Federal, Commonwealth, and other funding sources; and assure the flow of information to assist the board in oversight and decision-making functions.

The County of Berks is the Grant Recipient for funds received from the U.S. Dept. of Labor under the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA). The Chief Elected Official (“CEO”) is responsible for all workforce funds allocated to the Berks County Local Workforce Development Area (LWDA).

The CEO appoints the members of the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) to fulfill the following duties and responsibilities:

- i. Develop the strategic vision, workforce development plans, policies, and priorities for the local Workforce Development Area.
- ii. Conduct workforce research and regional labor market analysis to assist in the development of this vision, plans, policies, and priorities for the local Workforce Development Area,
- iii. Advise and assist the County of Berks Board of Commissioners by setting policy to promote effective workforce development programs in the Berks County Local Workforce Development Area.
- iv. Support the development and maintenance of a skilled and competitive workforce in alignment with the broader economic development efforts to attract, retain and grow business in Berks County.
- v. Propose strategies to meet the long-term, strategic needs of the local Workforce Development Area as identified.
- vi. Collaborate with local representatives of secondary and postsecondary education to lead efforts in the local Workforce Development Area to develop and implement career pathways.
- vii. Develop strategies for using technology to maximize the accessibility and effectiveness of the local workforce development system for employers, workers, and jobseekers.
- viii. Build partnerships to align resources in support of those strategies.
- ix. Develop a comprehensive workforce development plan and other plans and strategies as may be required.
- x. Designate operators and oversee the operation of the PA CareerLink® (one stop delivery system) located within the Berks County Workforce Development Area.
- xi. Select program providers.
- xii. In partnership with the Chief Elected Official, provide program oversight for local WIOA and other programs to ensure the appropriate use, management, and investment of funds to maximize performance outcomes. Maintain accountability to assess program performance and customer satisfaction through program oversight and monitoring.
- xiii. Negotiate and reach agreement with the Commonwealth on local performance measures as appropriate.
- xiv. Recommend providers of workforce development and training to the Commonwealth for certification
- xv. Disseminate information on WDB approved and Commonwealth certified training programs.
- xvi. Promote private sector participation and employer engagement in the local workforce development system.
- xvii. Appoint WDB Committees as described herein.
- xviii. Develop and approve the WDB budget, modifications, and other related budgets.
- xix. Administer additional federal, state, and other workforce funds as an integrated system.

The Berks County WDB shall exercise its decision-making powers and perform its functions and duties as necessary to fulfill its mission, subject to the requirements and limitations imposed upon it under the terms of WIOA and all Federal and State laws, regulations, rules, directives, and requirements issued by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry (PA L&I) as they may be adopted and amended.

As described in the aforementioned WDB duties and responsibilities, the WDB will designate the operator and oversee the operation of the PA CareerLink® Berks County (one stop delivery system) located within the LWDA.

4. OPERATIONAL PLANNING: Local Area Workforce System (see pages 97 through 123 of the plan)

4.1 Business and Employer Engagement –

- A. *Support a local area workforce development system that meets the needs of business in the local area*** - The Berks WDB believes that recruiting and retaining the right local business leaders to serve on the WDB and WDB committees is the most important factor in sustaining the engagement of employers, including small employers and employers in in-demand sectors or who employ workers in high priority occupations.

The Berks County WDB continues to be instrumental in assisting local eligible employers engage with Reading Area Community College (RACC) and Kutztown University's Small Business Development Center (KU SBDC), as the PA Department of Community & Economic Development's local Workforce and Economic Development Network of Pennsylvania (WEDnetPA) partners, to access WEDnetPA reimbursement funding for qualifying higher-technology new and incumbent worker training needs.

The Berks County WDB utilizes WIOA Title I Adult/Dislocated Worker funds to promote employer engagement in a hiring and retention strategy supported by our Work-Based Training policy. The policy provides eligible employers/employees with financial subsidies for foundational skills development at entry-level through enhanced competencies skills training as incumbents and apprentices.

- B. *Manage activities or services that will be implemented to improve business engagement*** - the PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST) has established a reputation as a trusted partner with local employers. The region's growing shortage of qualified candidates for critical and "opportunity" occupations.

The PA CareerLink® Berks County and Berks County WDB has partnered to form an Employer Outreach Team (EOT) that meets regularly to share information, coordinate employer outreach, maximize available resources, and tailor responses to the specific needs of individual employers. This team, co-managed by the BST Director of Services and the WDB's Manager for Planning & Partnership Development, is comprised of individuals from Business Services, EARN, Young Adult, OVR, Job Corps, Local Veterans Employment Representative, and Connections Work, who come together, at a minimum, quarterly or at special request of a team member, and independently with relevant interagency members to discuss and share business/employer intelligence and better understanding of employment barriers.

As a core partner, OVR participates in Employer engagement and provides multiple services to the business community designed to assist businesses with onboarding pre-screened qualified employees with disabilities. OVR also offers no-cost consultation on the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), accessibility standards and helping a business to retain current employees following an incident, injury or disability.

- C. *Better coordinate regional workforce and economic development strategy, messaging, engagement and programs*** - The Berks County WDB has a proven track record of coordinating workforce development programs with regional economic development partners. The Berks County WDB has maintained an especially close and successful relationship with the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA). Since PY2018, at the WDB's recommendation, GRCA has acted as the convener of the Greater Berks Advanced Manufacturing Industry Partnership (IP). The fundamental goal of the IP model is business-owner-centric, allowing business owners to be at the very core of the discussion on what their

needs will be, and creating actionable ways to present solutions, championed by the businesses themselves. The Berks County WDB's ongoing guidance, support of, and involvement in this Greater Berks Advanced Manufacturing IP reflects its confidence that GRCA is uniquely positioned and staffed to build capacity and strengthen the partnership's ultimate reach. As the benefits of this movement to an Industry Partnership (IP) model have become even more evident statewide over time, the Berks WDB continues to explore additional opportunities for similar IP development in its other priority industry sectors.

Launched in June 2023, the GRCA, sub-contracted as the Healthcare IP convener, has been working with the two major Berks hospitals, three local colleges, Berks County's two Career & Technology Centers, the Reading Hospital School of Health Sciences, and the Berks Latino Workforce Development Corporation (BLWDC -a.k.a. Tec Centro Berks) which provides healthcare training programs, and multiple independent healthcare support employers.

The Berks County WDB has a well-established and ongoing best practice of working closely with our education and strategic human capital development partners to recognize the needs of local employers (see plan sections 1.2 through 1.4) as a first step leading to effective collaboration with these partners on the planning and delivery of multiple events and initiatives to further and more completely understand those needs.

- D. *Strengthen linkages between the PA CareerLink® service delivery system and unemployment insurance (UI) programs.*** - The local area complies with the Commonwealth's Register for Work and Work Search law by helping unemployed individuals register on the PA CareerLink® system. The resource room computers are available for Unemployment Compensation (UC) Claimants to access the state UC website. Additionally, individuals who are likely to exhaust their benefits are identified by the State through the Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) program. These individuals are directed to come to the PA CareerLink® Berks County for job search assistance. Unemployment Compensation (UC) representatives are currently deployed in all the PA CareerLink® comprehensive centers.

4.2 Promotion and Coordination of Entrepreneurial Skills and Microenterprise – Since 2016, the Berks County WDB has been an active participant in the Southeast PA Partners for Regional Economic Performance (PREP). The promotion of entrepreneurial skills and microenterprise are a regional undertaking across our Southeastern PA planning regions. Partnerships with economic development agencies provide a broader set of services to employers across the region. The six local workforce development boards comprising the SE PA planning region include Berks, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia will continue to emphasize and respond to the demands of regional employers. To implement and sustain this regional planning and collaboration, the six local WDB directors will continue to meet monthly and convene with their WDB Chairpersons, at least annually, to focus on improving the services to employers, industry clusters, and skills sets necessary and in demand to complement and support local county-based efforts.

4.3 Business and Employer Program Support – The PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST) is a sub-contracted service currently provided by Educational Data Systems, Inc. (EDS)I. The contract pays for three staff members who report to a program supervisor. Additionally, staff from other teams (EARN, WIOA Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker and Youth, Veteran's program) also work cooperatively with this team.

4.4 Continuous Improvement – The Berks County WDB circulates a monthly national, state, and local Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) labor market report incorporating data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the PA. Dept. of Labor & Industry Center for Workforce Information & Analysis. The Berks County WDB verifies the relevance of the training activities associated with the targeted occupations through outreach to employers. Active partnerships with economic development agencies is solicited to promote the growth of a competent workforce in support of economic development initiatives.

The WDB's Training & Industry Partnership Committee reviews each new annual draft Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA) HPO list for relevance and alignment to local labor needs. All training activities, including WIOA Title I eligible Incumbent Worker and Registered Apprenticeship, Individual Training Account, Customized Job Training (CJT) for New-Hire Cohorts, New-Hire On the Job (OJT) and Transitional Work Experience, and Apprenticeships are linked to High Priority Occupations (HPOs), or occupations within a career path leading to these HPOs. HPOs are linked to their relevant wage and educational attainment levels, within the priority Industry Sectors as defined by the full board (See Section 1.2). Requisite credentials are industry-recognized and are in great demand. Customer satisfaction surveys of individuals in training are reviewed for their satisfaction with the training experience, case manager, etc. These surveys are compiled by the PA CareerLink® Administrator and shared with the WDB and WDB staff. Program with sub-par satisfaction are provided technical assistance by the WDB.

4.5 Technology and Remote Access - In order to meet the needs of as many residents as possible, the Berks County WDB continues to encourage the offering of remote access to services, in addition to available virtual services as described in Section 3.1 of this plan. PA CareerLink® staff are able to provide assistance to individuals who might have challenges utilizing technology by providing services virtually or further assisting them in the resource room within the one-stop. In addition, the WDB has an expectation of all local contractors to implement outreach within their programming, developing a yearly Outreach Plan on how they will reach the community regarding services within the one-stop. Utilization of purchased I-Pads will be part of the outreach efforts in collecting future participant information via the Digital Intake form, that information can be accessed by staff to conduct outreach for program services. PA CareerLink® Berks County, at no cost to Limited English Proficient (LEP) individuals or families, provides interpreter services to all LEP individuals or families applying for, participating in programs or receiving services/benefits through the PA CareerLink® Berks County. *(See section beginning on plan page 113 for further information and list of services).*

4.6 Transportation and Supportive Services – PA CareerLink® Berks County WIOA Title I Staff are responsible for coordinating services and providing referrals to other state and local agencies offering supportive services. Providers of WIOA Title I services in the PA CareerLink® Berks County must develop a resource network insuring that the availability of supportive services in Berks County is made available to participants in the one-stop delivery system.

The PA CareerLink® Berks County WIOA Title I Staff will meet with each participant to assess the need for supportive services. The following are supportive service requirements:

- Participant must be a WIOA Title I eligible individual.
- Participant must be participating in WIOA Title I Adult/Dislocated worker training services or Title I Youth services.
- Participant must be unable to obtain supportive services through other programs providing such services.

4.7 Rapid Response – The Berks WDB's Rapid Response Team is made up of experienced PA CareerLink® Title I and Wagner-Peyser staff, and the state-assigned regional Rapid Response coordinator. The Berks WDB Rapid Response Team is especially competent and assertive in meeting the needs of dislocated workers impacted by layoffs and plant closings. Our Rapid Response team's proactive and coordinated efforts include access to Pennsylvania's economic development assistance resources, such as helping businesses that are at risk of closing to keep their doors open, as well as helping employers reduce the size of, or prevent a layoff.

4.8 Individuals with Barriers to Employment – All new applicants for unemployment compensation are directed to register on PA CareerLink® and told they can come to the PA CareerLink® Berks County office to accomplish this task. Claimants who are placed on Labor & Industry's Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) list are sent letters inviting them to a

local Orientation. Job seekers are invited to sign up for email notifications at orientation, at workshops, and with signage in the reception area and the resource room. Those who sign up receive information about job fairs and employer recruitment activities. ***(See section beginning on plan page 199 for further information and list of services, activities, and program resources).***

- 4.9 Non-discrimination** – The Berks County WDB’s full commitment to Equal Opportunity and Non-discrimination is detailed above in section 3.2. Accessibility to the services provided by the PA CareerLink® Berks County and all Partner agencies is essential to meeting the requirements and goals of the PA CareerLink® Berks County. Job seekers and businesses must be able to access all information relevant to them via visits to physical locations as well as in virtual spaces, regardless of sex, age, race, religion, national origin, disability, veteran’s status, or on the basis of any other classification protected under state or federal law. The one-stop will maintain a culture of inclusiveness and the physical characteristics of the facility, both indoor and outdoor, meet the latest standards of accessible design. ***(See section beginning on plan page 122 for further information and list of Adaptive Equipment available at the PA CareerLink® Berks County).***

5. COMPLIANCE – *Section describes the Berks County WDB’s responses to the following elements:*

- 5.1 MOU assessments** - *Describe the cooperative agreements that define how all local area service providers will carry out the requirements for integration of and access to the entire set of services available in the local area one-stop delivery system. (See plan page 124).*
- 5.2** *The process the local board uses to ensure the collection of the debts of lower-tier sub-recipients, because of audits. (See plan page 125).*
- 5.3** *Action(s) the local board is taking (or will take) towards becoming or remaining a high-performing board. (See plan pages 125-126).*
- 5.4** *The process the local board uses to provide a 30-day public comment period prior to plan submission of the plan and describe the opportunity for input into development of the local plan, particularly for representatives of business, education, labor organizations, program partners, public agencies, and community stakeholders. (See plan pages 126-127).*