



Annual Report for Calendar Year 2019

Top Three Accomplishments for 2019

I. *Community-based Construction Sector Pre-Apprenticeship Re-entry Program Funding for “R3”.*

The first of Governor Wolf’s five workforce development goals is to promote *Career Pathways and Apprenticeship*. Specifically, the Governor seeks to *develop a comprehensive career pathways system in PA and expand career pathways as the primary model for skill, credential, degree attainment, with an emphasis on assisting individuals to address barriers to employment, earn a family-sustaining wage, and advance their career.*

The Berks WDB firmly supports Governor Wolf in implementing this priority here in Greater Reading, PA. In early 2019, the WDB issued a request for proposals (RFP) from community-based organizations (CBOs) sponsoring innovative projects to implement or expand high quality pre-apprenticeship programs. The WDB specifically targeted this funding at programs to help adults with barriers to employment attain entry-levels skills in our growing Construction or Healthcare sectors. As a result of the RFP, ***Berks Connections/Pretrial Services (BCPS)*** was awarded \$225,000 in Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker funds to sustain and expand their proven best practice “***R3***” - ***Rebuilding Reentrants and Reading*** registered pre-apprenticeship program for the construction sector. R3 has become a best practice program widely-recognized across the Commonwealth of PA. We look forward to partnering with BCPS to improve and grow R3 even further in 2020.

II. *2nd Annual Employer Symposium to Increase Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities.*

Another of Governor Wolf’s five goals is *Continuous Improvement of the Workforce Development System* - to *identify and enact system changes and improvements that enhance the collaboration and partnership between agencies and partners in the workforce development system.*

The Berks County WDB’s highly-engaged *Committee on Increasing Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities* organized our 2nd Annual Employer Symposium held on September 11, 2019. In keeping with the date selected, special recognition was given to our disabled veterans and again focused on educating hiring managers and human resources professionals on the many talents that our residents with disabilities can bring to employment in their organizations. The 2019 Symposium’s expanded program led to a 35% growth in attendance over our inaugural event in 2018. In order to sustain momentum built by the Committee in this very challenging area, we are already planning for an even larger regional event in the Fall of 2020.

III. *PA CareerLink® Berks County Operator/Administrator Transition.*

A third goal of Governor Wolf is *Strengthening the One-Stop Delivery System* - to *implement improvements to one-stop service delivery to better serve all customers, including job seekers and employers.*

For more than two decades, the Berks County WDB and our partners at the PA CareerLink® Berks County have been at the forefront of implementing and funding a high quality and cost-effective “one stop” center located in the City of Reading. With the mid-year 2019 retirement of our PA CareerLink® Berks County Administrator (a state employee and one of the most experienced and effective Administrators in the state), the WDB leveraged our previously competitively procured one-stop operator contract with EDSI to identify and transition to our new CareerLink Administrator who is employed by EDSI. Our CareerLink’s partners and staff have responded well to the change. As a result, local one-stop job-seeker and employer customers continue to experience the same high levels of service that they have come to expect in the past. In keeping with the intent of the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), all partners are fully engaged and invested in the success of the PA CareerLink® Berks County.

Success Stories

Maria – no longer a victim of Hurricane Maria

Hurricane Maria’s widespread devastation of Puerto Rico in 2018 left Maria, who was with child, and her husband without a home and with few resources to survive on the island. As a result, Maria took the brave step to leave behind her home and move to Reading, PA to begin a new chapter in her life.

Our County Assistance Office (CAO) referred Maria in January 2019 to our EARN program housed at the PA CareerLink® Berks County. When Maria first enrolled in the EARN program, she was clearly overwhelmed by the challenges she faced. With her husband unable to work and a child to support, Maria needed stable employment so that she could provide for her family. Maria took full advantage of the program by working diligently with our experienced EARN staff to identify her career objectives moving forward. Gaining confidence, Maria eagerly participated in EARN classroom activities and earned a Customer Service Certificate

While in EARN, Maria developed and determined her objective to seek a position in the human services field so that she would be able to help others in need in our community. Despite initial setbacks in the form of several unsuccessful interviews, Maria maintained a positive attitude and continued to strive to overcome the obstacles in front of her.

With unwavering support from our EARN staff, Maria’s training and perseverance paid off when she was hired as a Project Coordinator by Safe Berks, a local non-profit. Maria’s new customer service skills and bilingual abilities were highly valued by her employer in this position which she began in May 2019, working 40 hours weekly and earning \$17 per hour. Since starting her job, Maria has kept in touch with the EARN program, often referring to her position as her new career. Maria shared, "Thanks to this opportunity I have been able to move my family forward, while helping myself to become stronger, confident, and more determined. I now help people, who like me, have experienced sexual abuse and domestic violence. I know now that this was God's purpose for me. I feel it is necessary to tell my story to help others and in the short time working here, I am now the Safe Healing Project Coordinator, and I feel so proud of myself".

Anabel – from Paid Work Experience to Full-time Employment

Anabel came to the Young Adult Program at the PA CareerLink® Berks County seeking her High School Equivalency Diploma as well as assistance with landing gainful employment. Anabel was enrolled into our program in May 2019 and impressively obtained her High School Equivalency Diploma by July. In order to accomplish so much academically so quickly, Anabel worked very closely with her instructors and case managers to create an academic plan and stick with it.

From the time she started orientation, Anabel knew she wanted to work in the medical field. After

obtaining her diploma she entered the paid work experience element of the program. This allowed Anabel to land a well-planned internship at Penn State Health's Downtown Reading Campus – a high performance worksite that she likely could not have gotten into on her own due to her limited work experience. Anabel chose to be placed in paid work as a medical receptionist. Being bilingual and having great customer service skills, she excelled in this placement and received exceptional evaluations from her supervisor.

Because of her exemplary work performance, Anabel was soon offered and accepted full-time employment as a medical receptionist with Penn State Health. Anabel is still employed and is very happy with her position. Because of her effort and the support of our Young Adult program staff, Anabel now has her high school equivalency diploma and a bright career. She is a true example of how well-managed publicly-funded workforce programs can open paths and make the dreams of our talented young adults like Anabel become a reality.

Reading Alloys (Ametek) – an outstanding Workforce business partner.

Many small manufacturers in Pennsylvania express distress about their inability to find enough talented workers. However, **Reading Alloys (Ametek)** based in Robesonia, PA has proactively implemented a comprehensive recruitment, retention and development strategy to meet their talent needs as well as the needs and dreams of their employees. The Berks County WDB is an enthusiastic partner with the company on the journey.

This strategic approach to talent management allows Reading Alloys to maintain its competitive edge in the development and production of master alloys and other advanced engineered materials. The company eagerly pursues opportunities to collaborate with community, workforce, and economic entities for the purposes of improving career opportunities for their own employees, local students and job-seekers in the region in many ways:

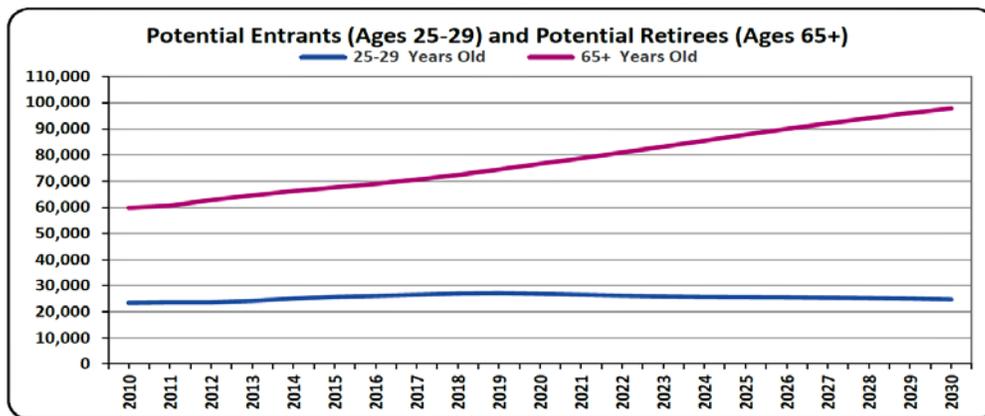
- Company management provides valuable ongoing business-informed guidance to the **Reading/Berks Literacy Council** to ensure that the Council's popular *Workplace Professionalism and Workforce Development* course accurately meet the needs of employees and employers. The company's support goes beyond advice as Reading Alloys contributed \$15,000 to help make these courses available to the wider public in Berks County. The company also partners with the Literacy Council to make its *English as a Second Language (ESL)* program available to the company's incumbent workers who are interested in advancing their careers with Reading Alloys.
- Reading Alloys is an active member of the Great Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) and collaborates with this entity on various collaborative workforce development initiatives including our Next Generation Advanced Manufacturing Industry Partnership (IP). In 2019, the Berks County WDB served as the fiscal agent for a PA Smart Next Gen IP grant for GRCA to convene and implement the work of the IP.
- Reading Alloys leadership understands that some workforce solutions begin by better connecting with K-12 students. The company actively collaborates with initiatives to proactively mold the future of the region's workforce through the Career Ready Berks (CRB) Alliance (which receives funding from the WDB - see *Promising Practices* section below). In 2019, such participation allowed Reading Alloys to efficiently and effectively provide job shadowing, internship, and other career exploration opportunities to K-12 students via the CRB platform. In fact, Reading Alloys exceeded the efforts of many other local manufacturing firms by collaborating with local high schools to create a structured co-op experience beginning in January 2020. The company also provides three Science Scholarships to Conrad Weiser High School seniors.

- Finally, Reading Alloys works closely with Berks Connections/Pretrial Services (BCPS), to provide job-shadowing opportunities to participants in the *Rebuilding Reentrants and Reading (R3)* reentry program (see *Accomplishments* section above). Staff from Reading Alloys also present the “Next Step to Employment” training session to R3 participants and the company provides direct financial support to BCPS through an annual donation. Most importantly, the company has hired several R3 graduates!

Challenges

I. Retirements of the Baby Boom Generation

The main challenge facing the WDB continues to be the retirement of many experienced workers and the associated struggles of local employers. Growing local shortages of qualified candidates for critical “opportunity” occupations are especially acute and local employers need help. While some of the current skills shortage results from the long, steady cyclical recovery from the Great Recession of 2009-2010, an underlying wave of baby-boomer retirements will drive continuing shortages even if regional economic growth slows.



Our employers have never seen anything like this “Silver Tsunami” in the past and the Berks County WDB will play a crucial role in continuing to develop and implement long-term solutions along with our Business Services Team (BST) and local partners. In calendar year 2019 we responded by:

- Authorizing and awarding \$47,000 in Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker matching funds for incumbent worker training in advanced manufacturing skills (32 trainees) and construction trades (5 registered apprentices). These funds particularly benefit small and medium-size employers with similar needs and scarce training resources. Our innovative layoff aversion and job retention strategy helps talented incumbents enhance job-related competencies leading to employment security and advancement potential. Sponsoring companies realize improved market competitiveness and opportunities for growth, in turn allowing for the hiring of less-skilled replacement workers into these attractive career pathways.
- Prioritizing WIOA Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker funding to support effective employer services provided by our PA CareerLink® Business Services Team (BST). The BST hosted a record number of 110 on-site employer recruitment events at the PA CareerLink® in 2019. In addition, our two semi-annual off-site Job Fairs were sold out in 2019 with over 90 employers “in a hiring mood” attending each of the Job Fairs.

- Raising awareness of this long-term replacement challenge through extensive public engagement with local media, economic development partners, educators and public policy makers. This “Silver Tsunami” message is often referenced and repeated by others in positions of influence, not just locally but regionally and statewide.

II. Decreased Local Demand for Job-Seeker Training / Need for Greater Outreach

Our tight Berks County labor market remained at or near full-employment throughout 2019. Coincidentally, last year brought a marked decrease in job-seeker demand for individual training accounts (ITAs) as well as reduced employer interest in new hire training support through on-the-job training (OJT) contracts. This drop in demand for the WDB’s budgeted training funds reflects the welcome news that local job-seekers, even those with below-average work histories, can often readily find well-paying entry-level employment without additional training. Local employers are currently anxious to fill their entry-level positions and often move quickly to bring candidates onboard without extensive vetting and selection processes in place. Unfortunately, this trend can be problematic when it leads to significant new hire turnover or “churn”.

Under such strained labor market conditions, we cannot afford to leave any local talent “on the sidelines” or stuck in dead-end jobs without good career paths for growth and advancement. Our comprehensive one stop PA CareerLink® Berks County consistently and effectively serves job-seekers of all ages, backgrounds and barriers who come to us seeking assistance. However, we have capacity to serve more customers and know that there are many more residents in the County who can benefit from what we have to offer. Our challenge is to place even greater focus on reaching out more directly into the community and further developing strong referral relationships with our community partners. Increasing community outreach will be a major focus for the WDB in 2020.

III. Transportation Challenges Affecting Workforce Participation

While job-seekers are fortunate to find plenty of attractive entry-level job openings with good local employers, many under-employed residents (particularly in the City of Reading) lack access to reliable transportation that would allow them to take full advantage of such career opportunities and pathways. We are encouraged by the recent response of our regional public transportation agency BARTA to expand bus routes to bridge this gap but more needs to be done. The WDB will work with our local employers and economic development partners to find solutions.

Promising Practices

I. Career Ready Berks: K-12 Talent Pipeline

The WDB is a prime sponsor of the Career Ready Berks (CRB) partnership and platform. In 2019, funding from the WDB’s Business Education Partnership (BEP) grant was provided to the Berks County Intermediate Unit (BCIU) to coordinate sign-ups of business and education partners for our innovative online CRB platform. The new platform brings real-time career information and opportunities to Berks County students and matches their interests with opportunities provided by local employers in key industry sectors. Through the BCIU’s successful 2019 outreach activities, 148 local businesses now participate on the Career Ready Berks platform. All eighteen Berks school districts, our two CTCs, I-Lead Charter School and Berks Catholic High School are actively utilizing the platform – having provided career awareness and exploration to more than 2,500 students and workplace experience opportunities to over 170 educators to date.

Beyond the platform, Career Ready Berks provides a self-sustaining framework bringing business leaders and educators together to (1) build and support rigorous career pathways for all K-12 learners, (2) leverage

and align resources, (3) coordinate and expand communication among stakeholders and (4) support regional workforce needs and strengthen our local economy.

Career Ready Berks has been recognized as a best practice partnership by the PA Department of Education (PDE) and across the Commonwealth. BCIU is now providing guidance on similar initiatives to other local education agencies, particularly with other Intermediate Units in the Southeast PA region to help them adapt and adopt the Career Ready model.

II. *Local Industry Sector Strategies and Priorities.*

The Berks County WDB remains committed to local employer engagement through rigorous industry sector analysis and programming. As part of a thorough review of our local WIOA multi-year plan in 2019, the WDB completed its biannual analysis of all local industry sectors. Using the latest economic data and labor market information (LMI), the WDB confirmed five priority industry sectors to focus on through 2023:

- Priority A Sector – **Manufacturing**
- Priority B Sectors (2) – **Healthcare and Construction**
- Priority C Sectors (2) – **Agriculture and Transportation & Warehousing**

Proven benefits of this best practice approach include:

- Greater **focus** by engaging employers with common needs.
- The ability to **prioritize** and target the impact of limited workforce development funds.
- Improved **alignment** which breaks down silos between the WDB and our partners in economic development, education, community-based organizations, etc.

Request for Additional State Guidance
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I. EARN program guidance.

The WDB thanks the Department of Human Services (DHS) for the recent roll-out of the new EARN program regulations. As we move forward with our procurement process to secure enhanced provider services beginning July 1, 2020 it will be very important that DHS provides further guidance around implementation of the new regulations.