



## Annual Report for Calendar Year 2020

### Top Three Accomplishments for 2020

#### I. Immediate and Effective PA CareerLink® Berks County COVID-19 Response

"Pre-COVID", high quality programs offered to customers of the PA CareerLink® Berks County were designed primarily for effective in-person service delivery. As the world suddenly changed in mid-March 2020, our local programs quickly transitioned to offering nearly all customer services virtually. PA CareerLink® Berks County program managers immediately equipped their team members with the proper tools and technology to work remotely as PC's, monitors, laptops, and other technology tools were ordered and distributed to staff. Our experienced and creative program staff worked with their managers to adjust programming for greatest benefit to customers in the new virtual environment as moving instructional content online was swiftly accomplished. Staff reached out pro-actively to PA CareerLink® Berks County partners and other community agencies to identify additional supportive services on behalf of their customers pandemic-related needs related to sudden homelessness, unemployment, domestic violence, and mental health challenges. There were a few hurdles when it came to connecting new customers to services due to ensuring personal identifiable information (PII) would remain confidential while determining eligibility; however, these challenges were quickly resolved by adopting of Adobe and NeoCertified virtual document tools.

Our local PA CareerLink® Berks County Administrator and her management team stepped up to the challenge of coordinating all necessary service and safety maintenance for the facility driven by changing circumstances as the pandemic progressed through our community in waves throughout the year. For example, customer phone calls to the front desk needed to be redirected to staff working remotely so a new digital phone system that offered the ability to transfer calls to staff cell phones was quickly procured and put into place

A modified reopening of the PA CareerLink® Berks County to the public on a "by appointment only" basis in mid-July 2020 was possible through a multi-phased, strategic approach to services and operations. Keeping in mind that in a pandemic, it could be necessary to ease and/or reinforce measures at any given time, the Assistant Director of the Berks County Workforce Development Board, the PA CareerLink® Berks County Administrator, and the program team managers established a weekly reopening meeting to discuss what operations and service delivery would look like during the pandemic as local conditions evolved. Careful planning considered most recent CDC guidance as well as specific recommendations from Governor Wolf's administration. With the modified reopening, building hours were expanded to accommodate additional appointment times for customers while allowing maximum social distancing among customers and staff. This led to a thoughtful multi-phased reopening plan incorporating the establishment of (1) a local pandemic safety team, (2) clear pandemic safety procedures, (3) health and contact screenings,

(4) capacity control responsibilities and protocols, (5) a return to work guide for impacted staff members, and (6) a team schedule that divided staff into two mutually exclusive teams to mitigate any potential spread of virus exposure. Appointment times and sanitization schedules were coordinated amongst all management team members. Signage for “appointment only” messaging was created and phone system messages, website messages, and social media messages were changed to reflect appointment only services.

As a result of this extensive planning and coordination with local partners, the PA CareerLink® Berks County was able to offer local customers our full range of program services in a convenient and safe manner throughout this challenging year. At the same time, we learned valuable lessons that will continue to inform PA CareerLink® Berks County operations into 2021:

- A measured, multi phased reopening plan works very well.
- A team schedule broken out into two teams helps to mitigate the spread of the virus.
- Our pandemic safety procedures have also helped to mitigate the spread of the virus.
- The physical facility requires constant attention and maintenance during the pandemic.
- Community outreach and collaboration, though a theme pre-COVID, is more essential than ever to attract and retain new customers in virtual services.
- Given our new capacity to offer extensive virtual services, we will continue to offer such convenient access to PA CareerLink® Berks County customers after the pandemic has passed.

## **II. Employer Best Practices Employee Development and Retention Report 2020**

In response to broader skills gaps across industry sectors and just prior to the arrival of the pandemic, the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) contracted with Educational Data Systems, Inc. (EDSI) to conduct a comprehensive study of current employer recruitment, retention, development, satisfaction and engagement best practices in Berks County. Driven by strategy sessions of the WDB’s Executive Committee, the goal of this competitively procured contract was to help the WDB better understand local employer best practices in response to ongoing talent challenges. The emphasis of the contract’s statement of work was on identifying successful employer strategies leading to lower turnover, higher employee satisfaction, and improved talent development. More than 150 employers in the region participated in the study. Respondents completed a Talent Assessment rating themselves on five key talent metrics: employee retention, employee development, employee attraction, talent and culture, and overall talent strategies. After completing the assessment, employers were invited to participate in focus groups to discuss specific best practices. After launching the project in early March 2020, the scope of the project was expanded to review of how employer best practices might have been impacted by COVID-19.

The most important recommendation from the study was to integrate its findings and recommendations into the WDB’s annual goals and future strategic plans such as this one. Following receipt of the report, the WDB directed the PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST) to initiate follow up conversations with employers who participated in the study. Accordingly, the BST completed structured engagements with 20 local employers during November and December 2020. These “business calling” engagements aimed at encouraging and assisting each employer to implement applicable employee retention and development best practices identified in the report and to identify areas where further customized support for each individual employer is needed. Our BST will continue this employer engagement “best practice” in 2021.

## **III. Career Ready Berks**

To promote wider-scale engagement between local employers and our 18 public school districts, the Berks County WDB continues to champion and secure financial support for our exemplary Career Ready Berks (CRB) alliance. Through an innovative and well-strategized model of oversight, the alliance brings multiple stakeholders and their collective expertise to the table to coordinate the development and delivery of distinct and complementary career exploration activities under one universal “enterprise umbrella.” One successful implementation of the alliance’s strategies has been the creation of a coordinated resource tool – the *Career Ready Berks* online platform brings career information and opportunities to all 70,000 K-12 students in Berks County. Equity in career planning for all Berks students and their families is a foundational principal of CRB. Regardless of school district or economic circumstances, all Berks County students, parents, and educators have equal access to the Career Ready Berks platform which comprehensively disseminates information about exploration and out-of-classroom business-education activities. Through careful planning and design, these essential career education activities reinforce structured curriculum aligned to careers (including registered apprenticeships), that fall within the five broad career clusters defined by the PA Dept. of Education (Arts & Communication; Business, Finance & IT; Engineering & Industrial Technology; Human Services; Science & Health). Nearly 300 experiences are available from over 175 employer providers including the new “Solvelt Berks” interdisciplinary, project-based program facilitated by student interns affiliated with Albright College’s Science Research Institute (SRI). In response to the challenges of the current pandemic, CRB now offers a number of pandemic-safe “virtual” student experiences, including:

- Virtual Internships
- Virtual Field Trips/Company Tours
- Virtual Informational/Mock Interview
- Virtual Classroom/Career-Day Speakers

This proven and fully “scalable” CRB model is recognized by the PA Department of Education (PDE) as a model K-14 education best practice that has now been adopted and adapted to local business-education collaborative needs in local areas across the Commonwealth.

## Success Stories

### **CarbonLite**

Our PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team’s relationship with CarbonLite, an innovative “green” plastics recycling facility, started in early June 2019 as the company began construction on its new East Coast manufacturing facility located just outside the city of Reading, PA. Initial discussions explored how the Business Services Team (BST) could assist CarbonLite with finding potential candidates for consideration for the business’s many new job openings - specifically production workers and maintenance personnel. When considering Reading, PA as a potential location for their future facility, CarbonLite clearly expressed their willingness to recruit individuals with limited English speaking, reading and writing skills. During the initial start-up phase of CarbonLite’s recruitment, the BST was able to help the company’s local HR Team connect with local colleges, universities, training providers and community partners to identify applicants qualified for their management and skill trade openings. In addition, our BST assisted the company’s recruiting effort through successful job fairs & onsite recruitments, outreach activities, screening of applicants, and connecting with community organizations.

CarbonLite’s initial start-up schedule experienced operational delays and setbacks with the March 2020 arrival of COVID-19 in Berks County ranging from shipping delays of heavy machinery from overseas providers; halted construction due to state-imposed health & safety restrictions; and the inability to send newly-hired individuals for critical training at the company’s Texas facility due to travel restrictions. As a result, CarbonLite was forced to push back the planned opening of their new facility and temporarily put

a hold on additional hiring for three months. However, by mid-June most of the barriers to the completion of the new facility faded and CarbonLite was able to renew aggressive recruitment efforts through the summer and fall of 2020. When the company's initial post-lockdown recruitment efforts did not provide the number of candidates necessary to fill the company's needs, the local HR Team once again conferred with members of the BST to discuss ways that other employers were thinking "outside of the box" to increase applicant traffic within continued pandemic restrictions. While many of the BST's recommendations were beneficial, it was ultimately concluded that, due to our local pandemic safety protocols, the PA CareerLink® Berks County was still unable to offer on-site recruitments.

However, as an alternative to on-site recruitments, the BST offered to assist CarbonLite host a parking lot drive thru job fair at their new location on November 5, 2020. Through the BST's effort, the information regarding the upcoming event reached over 50,000 potential job seekers. The parking lot event itself proved quite successful with over 400 applicants turning out and more than enough qualified applicants to carry the company through the present phase of their staffing/recruitment plan. CarbonLite's local management team subsequently expressed their deep gratitude for the assistance of the BST, stating they never anticipated it would be possible to attract such a turnout for the event.

### **Lauren**

Lauren came to the PA CareerLink® Berks County young adult program in late 2019 with a high school diploma and dreams for a better future but with almost no work history nor a clear sense of what careers or occupations interested her. With tailored support from program staff who saw her potential, Lauren passed the WorkKeys assessment with a Silver Level Certificate setting the stage for staff to place her in an initial paid work experience as an administrative assistant in the Dental Department of the Penn State St. Josephs' Health campus in downtown Reading. As part of the placement, program staff guided Lauren as she quickly obtained all necessary clearances and pre-placement tests and continued to complete her planned 360 hours in paid work. Near the end of the placement, Lauren reported to her case manager that while she enjoyed her placement, she learned that the healthcare environment was not something in which she was interested in pursuing as a long-term career path.

Lauren's second paid work experience was at C.H. Briggs, a building materials supplier, where she was placed in the Marketing Department. There, Lauren learned how to add items to the company's website, check inventory and stock, and add different sizes and colors to products already placed on the site. When the pandemic hit Berks County in March 2020, all on-site paid work experiences were put on hold in keeping with government health and safety guidance. However, C.H. Briggs saw such potential in Lauren that the company provided the computer hardware to permit her to continue her placement by working from home. This mutually-beneficial accommodation enabled Lauren to complete her placement at C.H. Briggs in August of 2020 when she was hired as a permanent employee. Lauren is now working 30 hours a week and making \$11 an hour. She is collaborating with staff on bigger projects and learning all aspects of product marketing. Lauren was successfully exited from our young adult program and staff has full confidence that she will succeed in her new career field of interest.

### **Ana**

Ana worked as a nurse at a hospital in Puerto Rico until she was forced to leave her home following the devastating earthquakes that killed many residents and severely damaged the island's infrastructure on January 7, 2020. Ana, accompanied by her two children, came to Berks County, PA seeking a new start. Though her English abilities were limited, she did not let that stop her in her journey toward self-sustainability. Following a referral from the state's Berks County Assistance Office (CAO), Ana enrolled in our local EARN program housed at the PA CareerLink® Berks County. She enthusiastically embraced EARN's Customer Service Curriculum and was awarded her certification within her first 2-weeks with the program.

Suddenly, the pandemic struck Berk County and it seemed as though the world halted in its tracks. However, Ana did not let the pandemic's disruption slow her down one bit. By early April 2020, she secured employment with Maxim Healthcare as a Home Health Aide, earning \$10/hr. There she completed an 8-module training course and received a certificate. Finally, amidst the chaos, she could see a light at the end of the tunnel.

Ana maintained her position with Maxim Healthcare for the remainder of 2020 but expressed to her EARN case worker the hardships incurred with the rigorous 7-days/week schedule her patient had asked of her and she was struggling to spend important time with her family. Ana began her job search anew, while still maintaining her job at Maxim. With a goal of returning to her love of nursing in a hospital setting, Ana applied to the County's second largest employer Tower Health System, providing her recently acquired credentials to supplement her nursing certificate from Puerto Rico. After multiple tries, she was able to speak with a recruiter and despite her limited English landed an interview with the hospital. As of the beginning of 2021, Ana was hired by Tower Health assigned to the maternity/delivery team at Reading Hospital.

## Challenges

### **Lack of Available Workers to Meet Employer Demand / Low Job Seeker Engagement Amid Uncertainty**

Beginning in the third calendar quarter (July-September) of 2020, our PA CareerLink® Berks County Business Services Team (BST) has been inundated by calls from local employers in key industries (e.g. Manufacturing, Transportation & Warehousing, etc.) desperate to fill current job openings and reporting almost no responses to their online job postings. The BST and the WDB learned from many of these employers that they were significantly increasing their entry-level wages in response to the immediate lack of active jobseekers yet still are not receiving responses from candidates.

It's too early to know with certainty, but it appears that the pandemic has further exposed long-term structural challenges (including insufficient training and development of their incumbent workforce) that many employers will need to address sooner and more consistently in the year(s) ahead. Certainly, the extended and enhanced federal unemployment benefits provided under the Cares Act in response to the sudden and dramatic job losses during the first half of 2020 allowed some dislocated workers to initially delay engagement in actively seeking new employment until August. However, as those enhanced benefits began to expire during the second half of 2020, other factors converged to hold back unemployed residents from seeking readily available employment here in Berks County. In our view, these factors can be lumped under the general heading of "**Uncertainty**".

- The sudden shock of unanticipated furloughs/layoffs is always very hard for most individuals to recover from. In this case, many dislocated workers were expecting or hoping to go back to their old jobs and employers. As it became increasingly apparent that was not going to happen, these workers may have gotten "stuck" in place.
- Beginning in August, the growing uncertainty for workers with school age children regarding changing school schedules and delivery methods at our 18 local public-school districts had these workers struggling to balance work and family needs. Even those parents allowed by their employers to work from home sometimes found that they were not able to effectively juggle work demands while supervising learning for children who are not regularly at school. Initial data shows that working mothers with school age children have been particularly squeezed out of the workplace.

- Some industries where jobs were plentiful in February 2020 (e.g. hospitality, food, entertainment, personal service, retail and health care systems) were particularly hard hit following the arrival of the pandemic in mid-March. Workers in these sectors are often not eager to change careers to industries (e.g. manufacturing, construction and transportation/logistics) where local job openings rebounded more quickly and became plentiful during the last five months of 2020. (Note: This will likely be a long-term challenge for us at the WDB in support of local employers who have many open positions to fill.)

The Berks County WDB expects that this paralyzing uncertainty will likely continue through at least the first quarter of 2021 with a dampening effect on labor market participation and continued recruiting headaches for employers.

<b>Promising Practices</b>
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**I. Fiscal Monitoring**

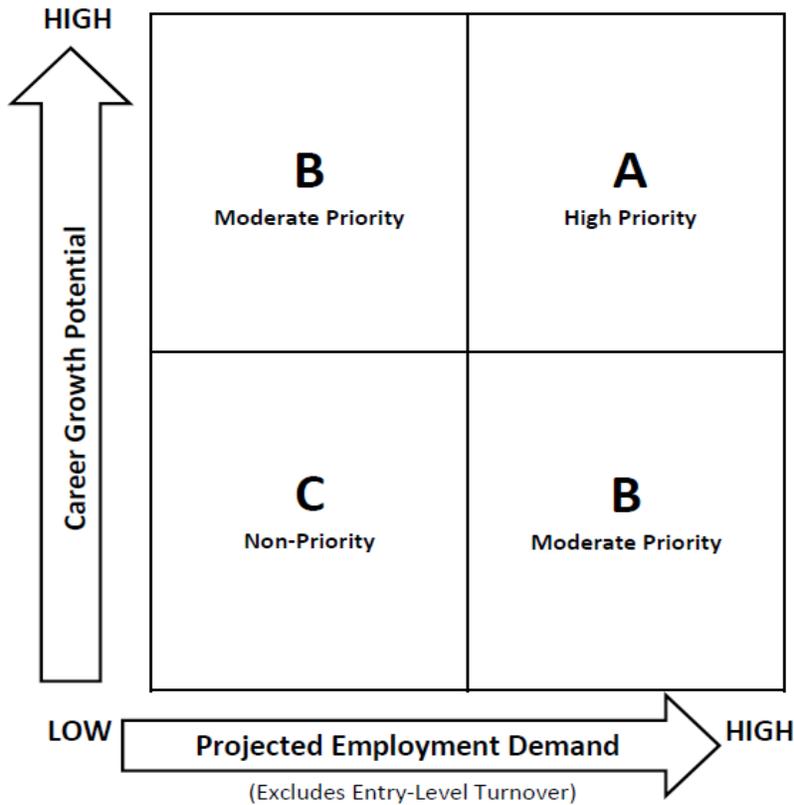
The Berks Workforce Development Board (WDB) fiscal staff hosts an annual fiscal training with all sub-contractors before the start of our program/fiscal year each July 1. This training is updated each year to include federal fiscal regulations or policies, state fiscal policies, or contracted fiscal requirements that may impact the contractor during the next fiscal year. Topics are chosen based on the WDB's annual subcontractor fiscal monitoring results, state fiscal monitoring, subcontractor questions throughout the year, or newly added requirements from the federal, state, or local level. All forms that may be required under the contract are also reviewed including the local fiscal monitoring tool. We review what will be expected from each contractor during an annual fiscal monitoring including what documentation may be requested. This training provides the contractors an opportunity to ask questions if needed.

Due to disruption from the pandemic, the Berks fiscal staff held individualized training sessions by conference call for each contractor in July 2020. This required 12 initial training sessions; however, two of our contractors requested follow-up sessions as the contractors believed the training would be beneficial for other staff members to participate. This year's individualized training sessions made it easier for the contractor to ask specific questions relating to their contract or budgets which usually does not occur in a larger group setting. We are already seeing the benefits of this adjusted approach through improved and more consistent fiscal performance among our contractors.

**II. WDB Coordination of Perkins V Local Workforce Needs Assessment**

During the 2019-2020 school year, the WDB developed and led a process to analyze area needs and evaluate technical education programs concurrently for all three local institutions receiving federal Perkins V funding - Reading Area Community College (RACC), Reading Muhlenberg Career & Technology Center (RMCTC) and Berks Career & Technology Center (BCTC). The focus of this process was to review each institutions' programs and discuss their alignment with the county's workforce development priorities. A ranking rubric was developed by the Berks County WDB to evaluate the overall projected employment demand of program-related occupations versus the corresponding career/wage growth potential of the technical education programs at all three institutions. Our rubric was subsequently adopted as a best practice by many other local areas in the Commonwealth for completing their own initial local needs assessment under Perkins V.

**Berks County WDB Perkins V CIP-SOC Ranking Rubric**



**Occupational Ranking Criteria:**

1. Alignment to WDB Priority Industry Sector
2. Alignment to Career Pathway
3. Employment Demand = Job Growth + Replacement Need

Request for Additional State Guidance

**Updated State Cluster Analysis / Post-pandemic Statewide Industry Sector Analysis** – To assist the Commonwealth and local WDBs in planning for post-pandemic recovery, it would be helpful for the Pennsylvania Workforce Development Board to engage local WDBs and our economic development partners in 2021 in a statewide review of key industry clusters and sectors in light of the disruption caused by the pandemic. Such a comprehensive and collaborative review could assist state and regional policy makers better target public workforce funds to greatest impact.