



## Annual Report for Calendar Year 2021

*This year's report highlights activities undertaken and lessons learned by the Berks County Workforce Development Board during and in response to a rapidly changing pandemic-impacted environment throughout 2021.*

### Top Three Accomplishments for 2021

#### I. Berks County Post-Pandemic Planning and Labor Market Opportunities

***Advanced Manufacturing Skills Gap in the Greater Berks Region Study*** - In February 2021, the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) published our forward-looking *Advanced Manufacturing Skills Gap in the Greater Berks Region Study*. The final report grew from an intense year of engagement through our competitively-procured contract with the Economic Development Company of Lancaster County (EDC) and its sister organization, the Center for Regional Analysis (CRA). With oversight from the WDB's steering committee, EDC/CRA conducted a detailed supply/demand analysis focused on regional advanced manufacturing with an emphasis on assessing and understanding workforce needs, including specific occupations and skills gaps. The strategic purpose of our study was to help ensure this most critical sector of our regional economy is competitively positioned for continued growth in the future, cognizant that it will require a strengthened alignment of the labor supply and demand. The Berks WDB purposely pursued a regional approach, recognizing the breadth of assets across the broader geography – companies, educational institutions, and workforce and economic development entities – plus the historic flow of advanced manufacturing workers across county lines. Following delivery of the formal report, the WDB and EDC transitioned to spending the remainder of 2021 reviewing the study with our regional economic and workforce development partners in Berks and our six neighboring counties. These reviews focused on the key findings from the report with an eye toward putting in motion actions related to advance the report's recommendations as we emerge from the pandemic. The study was also highlighted in a presentation during the October 27, 2021 Manufacturing Summit held at Reading Area Community College (RACC) attended in person by over 150 regional manufacturing employers and other stakeholders. This study is available for review on the County of Berks' WDB webpage.

***Local Individuals with Disabilities Study*** - In the spring of 2021, the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) competitively procured a contract with Thomas P. Miller & Associates, LLC (TPMA) to conduct an in-depth six-month study on the disproportionate unemployment and under-employment of individuals with disabilities in Berks County, Pennsylvania and how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their employment.

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 resulting report was completed in November 2021 and documents (1) the methodology used during this study, (2) important themes identified through an analysis of the data collected, and (3) recommendations for action steps the Workforce Development Board could take to address three key areas: connection, education, and access to resources.

Notably, four major findings emerged during the analysis of these data points: (1) Individuals with disabilities desire more variety in job opportunities, (2) Employers would benefit from increased access to trainings and resources around supporting the employment of individuals with disabilities, (3) All stakeholders would like to participate in more intentional networking opportunities and, (4) Participants reported that they do not see any long-term negative effects of COVID-19 on the employment of individuals with disabilities. All four findings provide reason for optimism that the WDB can play an important role in helping local employers better connect with this important and underutilized talent pool as we emerge from the pandemic.

WDB members and partners joined a December 14, 2021 presentation by TPMA of the findings contained in the Berks County WDB *“Individuals with Disabilities Employment”* Study. This study is available for review on the County of Berks’ WDB webpage.

**II. Berks County PA CareerLink® Reopening/CareerLink Day (July-August 2021)**

Following many months of limited in-person customer access due to the pandemic, an extensive “spruce up” project was launched in May-June 2021 for PA CareerLink® Berks County physical improvements in advance of the facility’s reopening on July 6, 2021. This allowed the PA CareerLink® Berks County to return to fully open status for public operations which continued through the remainder of 2021.

The PA Dept of Labor & Industry’s *“PA CareerLink® Day – Join the Workforce in PA”* on August 12, 2021 provided us with a timely opportunity to celebrate and highlight local PA CareerLink® activities to encourage individuals to join or rejoin the workforce. That day, the Berks County PA CareerLink® held an indoor employer recruitment and a community fair event, including important community partners such as Berks Community Action Program, Early Learning Resource Center, YMCA, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, Berks Connections/Pretrial Services, and Commuter Services. The employer recruitment activities for the day were expanded to include an outdoor parking lot event with desserts provided by Sweet Street Dessert’s colorful food truck. The Berks *“PA CareerLink® Day – Join the Workforce in PA”* event was attended by Jennifer Berrier, Secretary of the PA Department of Labor & Industry, providing the Secretary with a unique opportunity to hear directly from employers, job-seekers, and staff who creatively persevered in making important employment connections throughout the first 16 months of the pandemic.

**III. 2021 Berks Service Corps**

The *2021 Berks Service Corps*, serving Young Adults 18-24 years of age at risk of having their career and education plans severely disrupted by the pandemic, provided a work experience/internship opportunity in support of our Berks County Non-Profit sector. This innovative program operated over eight-week sessions for an average of 25 hours per week. Participants earned \$11.00 per hour developing lifelong leadership skills in service to our community with two cohort offerings: Summer and Fall of 2021.

The Summer cohort commenced July 6 through August 27, 2021. 16 of 17 participants successfully completed their placement, a 94% success rate. 9 participants extended their experience for two weeks through September 10, 2021, with 8 interns successfully completing their two-week extension. The Fall cohort followed October 4 through November 26, 2021 with another 18 young adults successfully completing their internship.

As a reflection of their experience, each cohort participant created and delivered a “serve and learn” presentation to a panel of local employers and social service agencies at the completion of their 2021 Berks Service Corps internship.

<b>Success Stories</b>
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**Carolyn**

In June 2020, Carolyn was laid off from her employer of four years due to the immediate impact of the pandemic. Prior to her layoff, Carolyn worked as an Assistant Manager Specialist where she marketed foreclosed

HUD homes, ordered and reviewed appraisals, listed the home for sale, and reviewed all sales contracts. Although Carolyn found herself suddenly and unexpectedly unemployed, she initially believed, as did her employer, that she would be recalled to work once the pandemic-driven, government mandated foreclosure moratorium ended.

However, as 2021 began, Carolyn became very anxious about potentially running out of unemployment compensation and not having employment. She recognized that she could use assistance with updating her resume and interviewing practice. In February of 2021, Carolyn began participating in PA CareerLink® Berks County Public Workshops. During one of these workshops, a WIOA Instructor spoke with Carolyn about the comprehensive services offered through the WIOA Adult and Dislocated Worker (A/DW) Program at the PA CareerLink® Berks County. After completing several workshops, Carolyn decided to proceed with enrolling in comprehensive services.

Carolyn met with a Career Development Specialist (CDS) to discuss the next steps and to process her eligibility/enrollment. She next registered to begin the A/DW Program's *Success Starts Here (SSH)* class in March 2021. With PA CareerLink® Berks County COVID -19 in-person access restrictions still in place and job-seeker program availability strictly virtual in delivery, Carolyn took advantage and successfully completed the program remotely. In the process of completing SSH, Carolyn showed great potential with her initiative and contributions to the sessions. As a result, her CDS discussed and ultimately recommended that Carolyn interview for the Customer Service Specialist Transitional Employment opportunity that had just become available through funds provided by our local funding from the Commonwealth under a statewide National Dislocated Worker Grant (NDWG).

Carolyn interviewed for the position with the A/DW Program Manager and was offered the position on the spot; she began the assignment on April 5, 2021. During her time in the Transitional Employment opportunity, Carolyn trained on conducting outreach to dislocated workers and providing them with information on services offered at PA CareerLink® Berks County. After becoming familiar with all of the services available as well as the local orientation process, Carolyn also began assisting with completing initial intake assessments and pre-applications for those interested in services.

While participating in Transitional Employment, Carolyn was able to use the skills gained from services utilized at the PA CareerLink® Berks County as well as her prior work experience to connect with a regional employer, Dart Appraisals, regarding their Operations Specialist opening. Carolyn interviewed and was offered this position which she successfully began in May 2021. Clearly, her Transitional Employment opportunity provided through the NDWG successfully assisted Carolyn with bridging the gap between the end of her Unemployment Compensation benefits and her next permanent employment. Additionally, Carolyn reported that she was very pleased with how public workshops and the courses provided during "Success Starts Here" helped prepare her for seeking out her next employment opportunity and, when identified, helping her successfully navigate the application/interview process to obtain her new permanent position.

That new permanent opportunity soon took place when Carolyn, looking to advance in a career move, interviewed with Economic Data Systems Inc., accepted an offer, and assumed the position of WIOA Employment Specialist at the PA CareerLink® Berks County on September 6, 2021.

### **Ray**

Ray enrolled in our Young Adult (YA) program in July 2021. Ray came to Berks County from New York with a High School Diploma and needed assistance with finding gainful employment. After successfully completing orientation, he spoke with his PA CareerLink® Berks County YA Case Manager and the Business Services Consultant who helped him explore paid work opportunities. Ray decided to interview at Craft-Maid Cabinets as a Machine Operator after seeing the job description posted with the PA CareerLink® Berks County. The Craft-Maid hiring manager was extremely impressed by Ray and had him working on cutting wood and measuring

pieces within the first week of paid-work experience. After a month of paid work, the supervisor was interested in hiring him full-time. To allow Ray more hours at Craft-Maid, his YA Case Manager agreed to have him work our full thirty hour a week paid work allowance and then have Craft-Maid cover his remaining ten hours. Throughout his first two months in paid-work, Ray learned how to use the gluing machinery, as well as saws and measuring instruments that are essential at the worksite. October 29<sup>th</sup> was his last day in paid-work and he transitioned directly over to full-time employment the following Monday. His supervisor reports that everything is still going well, and Ray has been positively exited from the YA program.

### **George**

George came to the PA CareerLink® Berks County on March 13, 2021, with many obstacles and barriers, including being out of work for over 6 months and also being a limited English speaker making finding suitable work during the COVID-19 pandemic especially challenging. However, George’s dream of becoming a licensed commercial driver was very much alive. George applied for Comprehensive Services and explored possible training opportunities. Next, he met with a WIOA Career Advisor and entered our “*Success Starts Here (SSH)*” class after receiving his approval.

George successfully completed SSH and began a purposeful job search in hopes of finding potential employment. During his search, he once more expressed an interest in training support to obtain his Commercial Driver’s License (CDL). Despite his struggles as an English learner, he finished strongly, gaining a Platinum score in WorkKeys™. George was approved for an Individual Training Account (ITA), worked tirelessly, and connected with potential employers to complete training so he could be one step closer to his goal.

George’s ITA was approved on July 16, 2021 and he started his training a few days later. George successfully completed his program but, unfortunately, due to the COVID virus restrictions, the date of his CDL examination was extended multiple times. He eventually passed the CDL examination on his first try on September 29, 2021. George is currently living out his dream of working as a CDL Driver at NFI Industries with substantial wages. We are proud of how far George has come and the resiliency he has shown throughout this process and we are confident that he will continue to succeed in his future undertakings.

<b>Challenges</b>
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#### **I. Labor Market Churn and Retention Issues**

Continuing a worrisome trend that preceded the pandemic, our Berks County Workforce Development Area continued to lead all large local labor markets in the Commonwealth in “new hire churn.” As detailed in the Berks County Workforce Development Board’s (WDB’s) local 4-year plan that was developed and approved in 2021, we have identified and documented significant gaps in adult numeracy and in English language (EL) proficiency among incumbent workers and jobseekers as local economic development needs that have lacked sufficient funding and focus to effectively address. Local employers seeking to recover from the current pandemic are facing unprecedented near-term workforce challenges including: “new hire churn”, low employer retention (i.e., high turnover) and, overall, less than effective recruiting results despite significant compensation increases. These challenges have been amplified by an untimely lack of employee training and development to meet long-term business growth vs. retirement/knowledge transfer threats, and a diversifying and aging local workforce.

#### **II. New State Program Income Policy**

Prior to June 30, 2021, the PA Department of Labor & Industry’s (PA DOL&I) program income policy required that any funds received be expended or returned to the partners by the end of each program year on June 30<sup>th</sup>. Beginning July 1, 2021, PA DOL&I issued a new program income policy that requires all program income received to be expended, obligated, or returned to the partners by the end of each quarter. With assistance

from the Bureau of Workforce Administration, the Berks WDB developed a tracking and reporting process to show the total obligated program income at the end of each quarter to meet the new policy requirements.

<b>Promising Practices</b>
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**I. Southeast PA Regional High Priority Occupation (HPO) Petition Collaboration**

The Berks County Workforce Development Board, in cooperation with our Partnership for Regional Economic Performance (PREP) and on behalf of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Workforce Development Boards (SEPA WDBs), participated as a lead applicant in specific, collective regional petitions for the addition and/or reinstatement of Standard Occupation Classification (SOC) codes to the High Priority Occupations (HPO) lists in our six Workforce Development Area region (Berks, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia WDBs). These regional petitions reflect the expanded cooperation that has developed and matured as our partners in the SEPA WDBs continuously improve our process to research and review each partner’s local need and the benefit of their approval as HPO classifications to the regional labor-sharing market as a whole. This allows all six WDBs to effectively achieve consensus on and collectively recommend the SOC codes included in these petitions. This collaborative effort resulted in successful petitions to the PA Department of Labor & Industry’s Center for Workforce Information and Analysis (CWIA) covering 38 occupations and has been recognized by the CWIA as a preferred practice.

**II. Communication of our Local 4-Year Plan to our Local Community in Spanish.**

One of the most important demographic trends identified during 2021 by the Berks County WDB was the acceleration of growth in our Hispanic population. This is a source of great local pride and opportunity. For the first time ever, the WDB was able to communicate highlights of our local 4-year workforce development plan directly to Berks County residents in Spanish. Our thanks to Berks County Commissioner Michael Rivera and WDB employer representative member Jennie Rodriguez-Priest for sharing our plans and priorities during Commissioner Rivera’s regular Spanish-language radio broadcast in April 2021. Our PA CareerLink® Berks County staff was able to confirm at least one new customer who learned of our programs and service as a result of this broadcast, but we are confident that this unique outreach raised awareness of the PA Career-Link® Berks County among many others.

**III. Career Ready Berks: “How Internships Work” Summit and “PA Dream Team Berks County”**

In celebration of National Career Development Month, our Career Ready Berks (CRB) Internship Summit provided an ideal forum for business and industry leaders within Berks County to discover how they can inspire high school students to achieve their career goals through internships.

The Career Ready Berks “*How Internships Work*” Symposium” took place on October 29, 2021 at Reading Area Community College and included businesses and school districts showcasing their internship experiences. Underwritten with 2019-2020 Berks Business Education Partnership (BEP III) Grant funds, the symposium focused on creating even more internships for Berks County students, success stories, business-end sharing, and how companies can start an internship program that will benefit both the student participant and employer sponsor alike. High School Internship Coordinators from across the County were on hand to discuss the crucial role of the business mentor in effective internship programs. The Summit provided many high school interns and their business mentors with the opportunity to share their valuable experiences. More than 70 business professionals, students, educators, and supporting business-education partners were in attendance.

Also funded through the Berks BEP III Grant, the “PA Dream Team Berks County” program introduces students (grades 5-12) to the value of technical training and STEM education, and to the many career opportunities available in modern manufacturing. In 2021, eleven young professionals in STEM Careers from seven area manufacturers were recruited, oriented, and fully trained for the PA Dream Team Berks County pilot

program. This training prepares local Dream Team members to share their personal career stories in the classroom and other venues throughout the school year to educate and excite students about manufacturing careers and the STEM curriculum, and to help students explore the many technical education opportunities available in our region.

Delayed in early 2021 due to COVID-19 concerns, the Berks County Dream Team officially launched in September 2021. Offered to all eighteen Berks County school districts and private schools, our school administrators and STEM teachers were notified about the new program availability both directly (electronically) and via an informative Power Point Presentation Workshop that was hosted by Berks County Intermediate Unit (BCIU) staff in September.

Within weeks, the Berks County Dream Team had received an extraordinary number of requests for engagements from educators and area stakeholders. Because the scale of requests was so large, a Dream Team scheduling meeting was held virtually to determine how best to fulfill as many requests as could be accommodated given the extraordinary demand for team volunteers' time. PA Dream Team Berks County engagements officially began in October 2021. Among the anticipated presentations during the 2021-2022 school year are 5 community events, including two summits and two Career & Technical Center open houses, and 12-15 requests from educators, which include multiple in-classroom requests from Berks County middle-schools and high schools. Recruitment efforts for additional young professional volunteers have continued and team expansion is an integral part of the strategy to sustain and grow the program.

**IV. Operator EEO/ADA Compliance Responsibilities & EEO Award**

An Equal Opportunity (EO) review conducted by the PA Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO) in 2021 recertified the Berks WDB and PA CareerLink® Berks County (PA CL Berks) as compliant with Equal Employment Opportunity guidelines. The PA CareerLink® Berks County has been recognized for strong outreach and the frequency/variety of training offered to full staff in meetings. Mr. John Moser, Assistant WDB Director and EO Officer, received a certificate on behalf of PA CareerLink® Berks County, for EO Best Practices in Adaptive Technologies, Disability Assistance Technology, and Employer Symposium.

In what was the first of an awareness and continuous improvement collaboration with the OEO, the WDB scheduled Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) trainings for Berks County Workforce Development Board members. As the WDB committee charged with oversight responsibilities for PA CL Berks operations, the EEO training was delivered to the One Stop Oversight Committee on July 27, 2021 during a joint virtual meeting with the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee.

<b>Request for Additional State Guidance</b>
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As detailed in our local 4-year plan, the Berks County WDB remains committed to local employer engagement through rigorous industry sector analysis. This allows the WDB to continuously update and deepen our understanding of the current and future skills needs of our employers and to prioritize key industry sectors in order to develop responsive programming in conjunction with local partners to address critical gaps. We encourage the Pennsylvania Workforce Development Board (PA WDB) to undertake a similar sector-based analysis and prioritization process to better align local and regional workforce development plans with the statewide plan.