

Central Massachusetts Regional Workforce Blueprint

2023-2027





**CENTRAL REGION
WORKFORCE BOARD**



**NORTH CENTRAL
WORKFORCE BOARD**

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Regional Planning Process and Data

The federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was signed into law on July 22, 2014, and is the first legislative reform of the public workforce system in fifteen years. WIOA supersedes the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and retains and amends the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, the Wagner-Peyser Act, and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and establishes the publicly-funded national network of Federal, State, regional, and local agencies and organizations that provide a range of employment, education, training, and related services and supports to help all jobseekers secure good jobs while providing businesses with the skilled workers they need to compete in the global economy.

Among other requirements, WIOA calls for local regions to develop strategies and shared service models among the federally funded partners, including:

- **The Adult Program (Title I of WIOA)**, as part of the Department of Career Services (DCS), Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD);
- **The Dislocated Worker Program (Title I)**, as part of the Department of Career Services (DCS), EOLWD.
- **Trade Adjustment Assistance for Workers Programs** (Activities authorized under chapter 2 of Title II of the Trade Act of 1974 (19 U.S.C. 2271 et seq.)), as part of DCS, EOLWD.
- **Jobs for Veterans State Grants Program** (Programs authorized under 38, U.S.C. 4100 et. seq.) as part of DCS, EOLWD.
- **The Wagner-Peyser Act Program** (Wagner-Peyser Act, as amended by Title III), as part of DCS, EOLWD.
- **The Youth Program** (Title I), as part of the Department of Career Services (DCS), EOLWD.
- **The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act Program** (Title II), as part of Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS), Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Executive Office of Education (EOE).
- **The Vocational Rehabilitation Program** (Title I of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by Title IV), as part of the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) and Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB), Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS).
- **Federal—state unemployment compensation program**, as part of the Department of Unemployment Assistance (DUA), EOLWD.
- **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program** (42 U.S.C. 601 et seq.) as part of Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), EOHHS.
- **Employment and Training Programs under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program**, (Programs authorized under section 6(d)(4) of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C.2015(d)(4))), as part of DTA, EOHHS and
- **Senior Community Service Employment Program** (Programs

authorized under title V of the Older Americans Act of 1965 (42 U.S.C. 3056 et seq.)), as part of the Executive Office of Elder Affairs (EOEA).

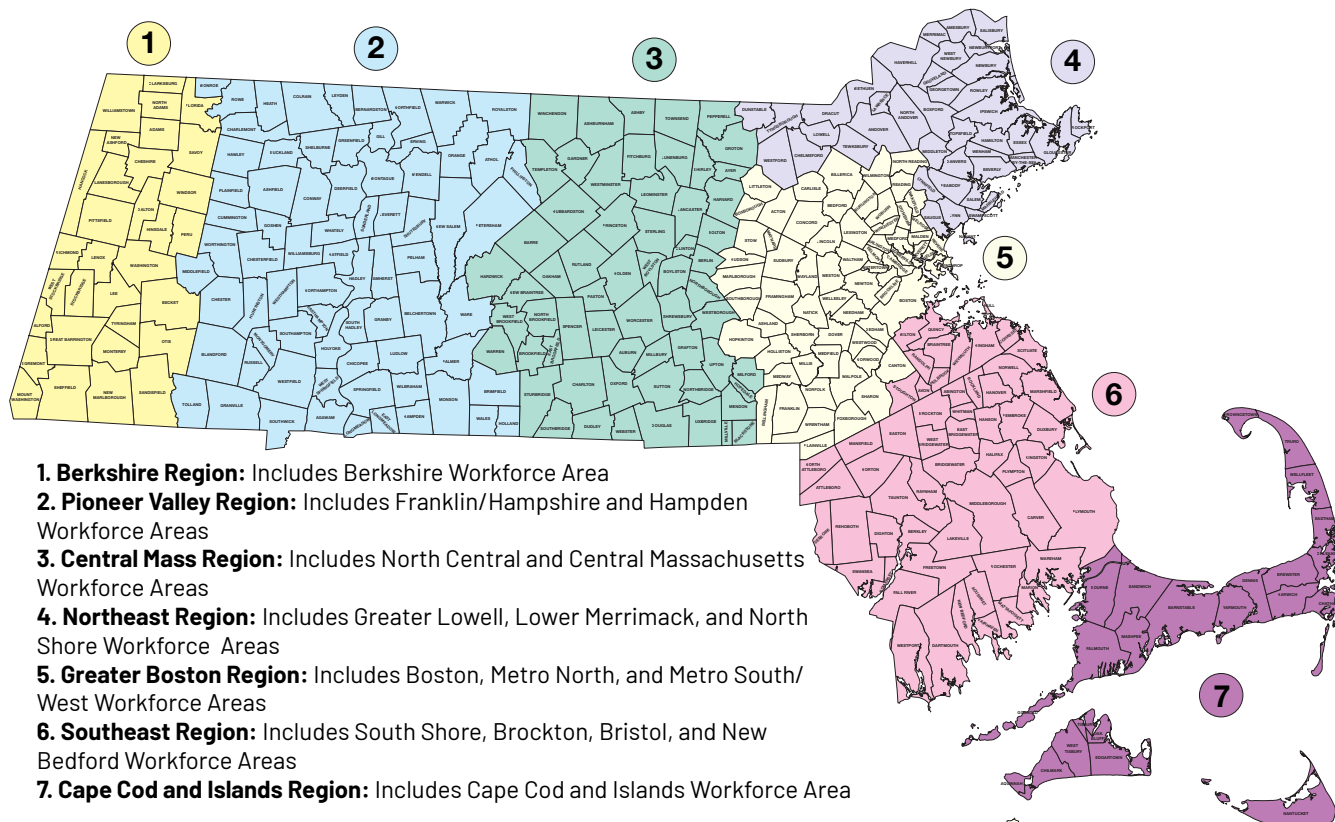
To accomplish this, local Workforce Development Boards have convened their local partner representatives to establish a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) detailing service referrals and delivery, data sharing procedures, Career Center operations, and career pathway supports.

As part of WIOA, the Governor of each State is required to submit a Unified or Combined State Plan to the U.S. Secretary of Labor that outlines a four-year workforce development strategy for the State's workforce development system. As detailed in the Commonwealth's WIOA State Plan, the Baker Administration has launched several initiatives to better coordinate the broadly defined workforce system with the needs of business as well as focus on expanding the impact on job outcomes for individuals with barriers to employment. One of these initiatives is the Workforce Skills Cabinet, which was created to align the resources of the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, the Executive Office of Education and the Executive Office of Housing and Development – the State agencies that administer the major federal and state programs for job seekers and employers.

Through the Workforce Skills Cabinet, the Commonwealth has established a regional planning process to align the priorities of each region for the agencies within the Workforce Skills Cabinet's four secretariats. In this way, the Commonwealth is utilizing the required WIOA Regional Planning process to create this new, integrated

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THE WORKFORCE SKILLS CABINET COMBINED THE COMMONWEALTH'S 16 WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT REGIONS INTO SEVEN WORKFORCE SKILLS CABINET PLANNING REGIONS:



Specifically, the goals of each region are to:

- Identify the growing industries and occupations to be prioritized by system partners that will assist in the economic growth of the region.
- Develop a joint set of action steps to address skills gaps within these industries/occupations.
- Align and drive programming and service delivery across the three secretariats to meet the needs of the priority industries/occupations.
- Help more residents gain the credentials, education and job skills needed for successful careers within high-demand career pipelines.

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regional planning process across the economic, education and workforce Secretariats.

On a regional basis, this process seeks to scale up regional workforce development models that provide workers with the skills employer's demand. The process is designed to ensure that regional employers, educators, and workforce training officials are coordinated in a way that creates strong talent pipelines for in-demand jobs.

The purpose of the regional planning under the Workforce Skills Cabinet and WIOA is to use the same regional boundaries between economic development, workforce, education, and key partners. Each region has therefore been asked to identify business demand for skills, create regional strategies, and

align existing resources to this process. The goal is to ensure that regional employers, educators, and workforce training officials are coordinated in a way that creates strong talent pipelines, for both middle-skilled and highly skilled jobs. The regional planning will support the development of cross-secretariat partnerships formed to support sector initiatives/career pathway initiatives that includes education and training, credential attainment, work-based learning (OJTs or apprenticeships), etc.

Local Workforce Development Boards (working as multi-region partners) have been tasked with convening regional leaders in partnership with education and economic development partners to coordinate strategic workforce priorities, activities, and performance metrics.



THE FOLLOWING INDIVIDUALS WERE INVITED TO BE A PART OF THE REGIONAL PLANNING PROCESS:

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Paul Gilbody

CEO
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Rebecca Marois

President
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Area Director
Massachusetts Rehabilitation
Commission



DESCRIPTION OF THE REGIONAL PLANNING PROCESS:

As noted previously, the Central MA region consists of the Central MA and North Central MA Workforce Development Areas. The two local workforce development boards, the MassHire Central MA Workforce Board (MCM-WB) and the MassHire North Central MA Workforce Board (MNCWB), have fully embraced the concept of collaborative regional workforce planning and have assembled a strong and diverse team of stakeholder representatives from private industry, education, workforce development, and economic development. The region has conducted planning sessions since the start of the planning process and during these sessions the stakeholders have reviewed regional population demographics, labor market information, and the additional data necessary to confirm industry priorities and supply gaps in our region, including the results of a survey conducted specifically for distribution to the *Worcester Business Journal* circulation audience. This survey was sent to the entire Worcester Business Journal audience of key decision makers and top executives in the region. The data was collected during the months of November and December of 2023.

Approximately 350 business leaders responded to the survey, yielding

detailed information regarding their priorities, challenges, and needs. Brad Kane, the editor of the *Worcester Business Journal* categorized the results as mostly positive (see chart A) about our Central Massachusetts economy with several key data points that relate to our strategic blueprint overarching assertions.

According to Brad Kane, “Workforce issues remain top of mind, as 65% expect to hire **ADDITIONAL STAFF**

next year (see chart A), but 51% are concerned they will not be able to find the right people with the right skills for the job (see chart B). More than a fifth of the survey takers said the biggest impediment to business growth is a lack of available workforce (22%). (see chart C).

For the last few years Central Massachusetts companies have given greater attention to their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives. (see chart D).



Chart A

Do you plan to hire additional staff next year?

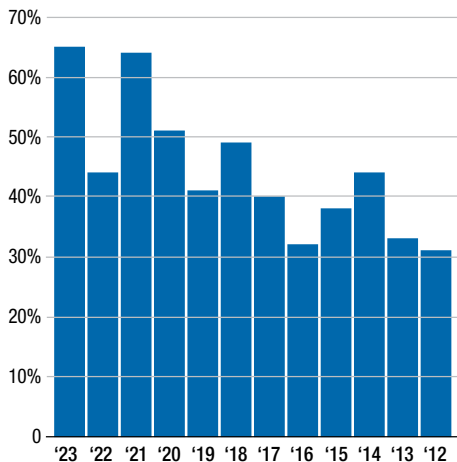


Chart B

How concerned are you that you'll be able to find people with the right skills for when you hire for any job openings?

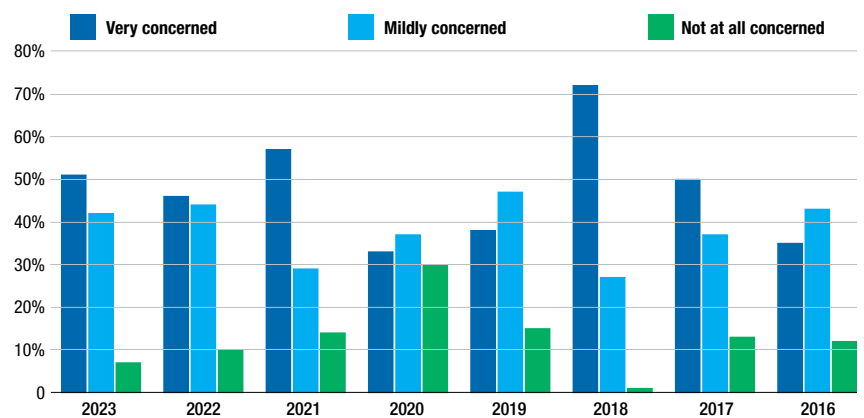
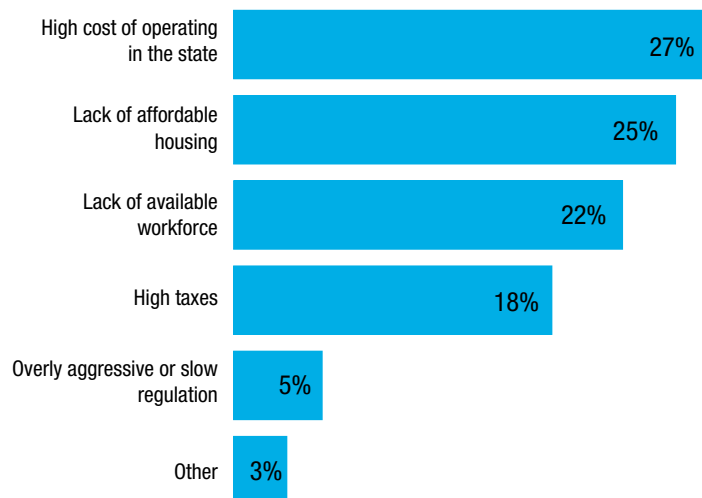


Chart C

What's the biggest impediment to business growth in Massachusetts?

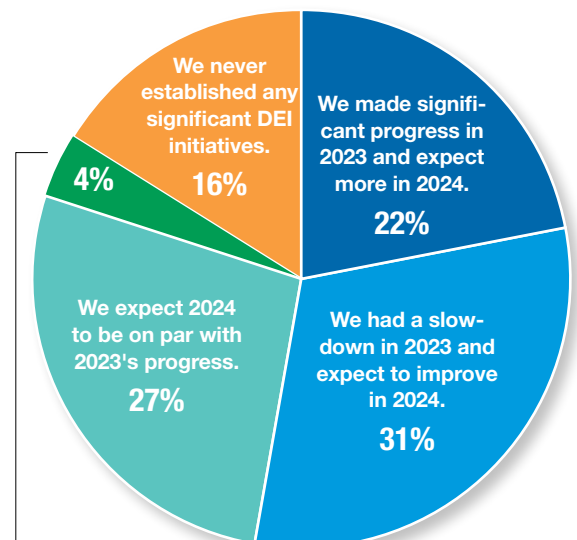


Other answers:

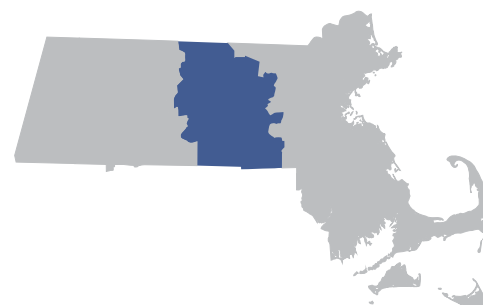
- High utility costs & high interest rates (access to capital)
- Globalization
- Irresponsible leadership for the past 10-12 years
- Uncertainty, leading to cautious investment

Chart D

For the last few years, a number of companies have given greater attention to their diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. If your company does have DEI goals, how much progress do you anticipate in making toward those goals in 2024?



Our DEI efforts regressed in 2023, and we don't expect them to rebound.

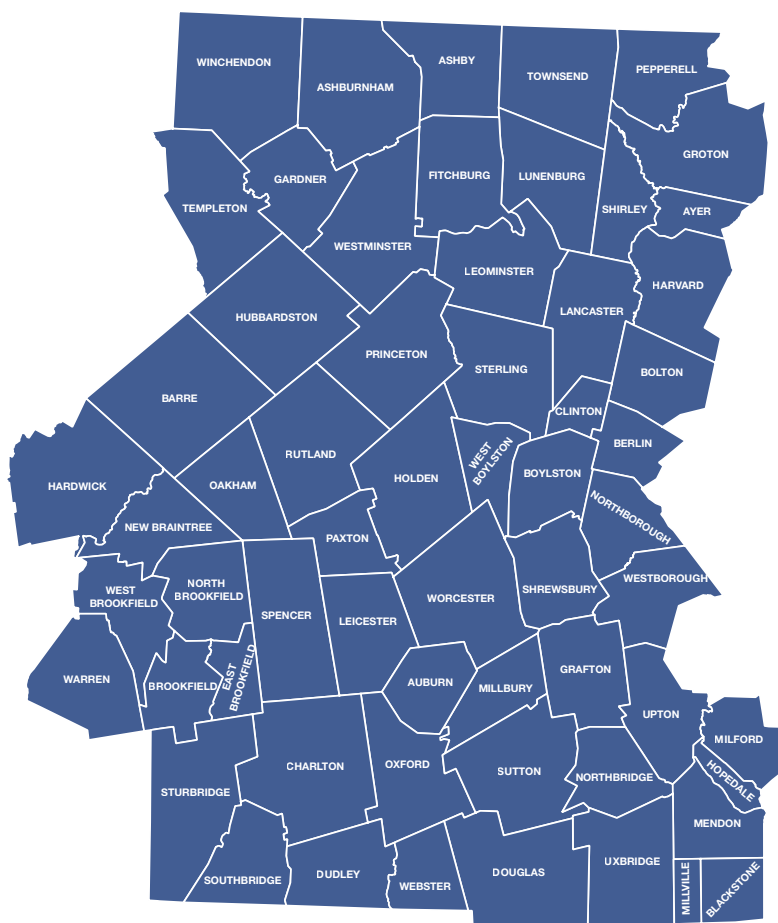


DESCRIPTION OF THE CURRENT STATE OF OUR REGION:

The Central MA region consists of 61 communities, anchored by New England's second largest city, Worcester, as well the twin cities of Fitchburg and Leominster. The region borders three other regional labor markets: Pioneer Valley, Northeast, and Metro South/ West. The total population of the two regions is 980,161 with a labor force of 437,249. The region boasts of natural attractions such as Mount Wachusett, Lake Quinsigamond, and Purgatory Chasm, as well as historic sites dating back to the local Native American tribes and prominent locations from the French and Indian War, the American Revolution, and later, the Industrial Revolution.

Our region also features prominently as a bellwether for the US economy, being built upon agriculture at the start of our nation and then moving during the industrial age to become a major force in development of machine-powered manufacturing through the start of the 20th century centered around the abundant water power of our rivers and streams. This rise in manufacturing, however, has given way to other industries over the past fifty years. Healthcare, retail, and human services have grown to take a larger role as manufacturing, especially traditional manufacturing, has faded. In the recent past, state, and local officials have made a concerted effort to invest in the life-sciences industry and have had success in attracting biotech/biomedical companies to the region and supporting the growth of new life-science firms.

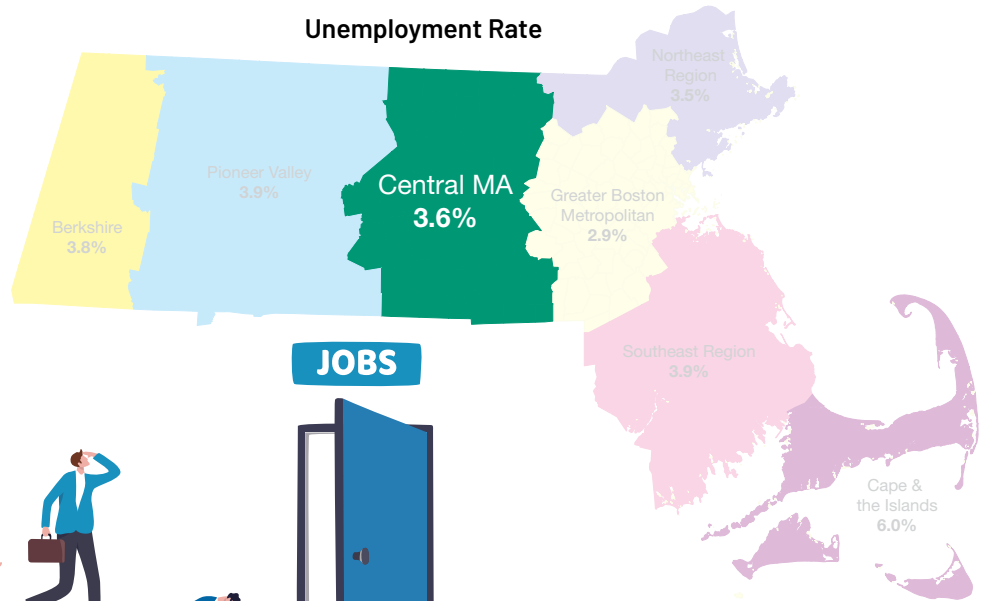
In terms of employment rates, the Central MA region continues to mirror the state as a whole economically; our



COMMUNITIES IN CENTRAL MA

Ashburnham	Hardwick	Princeton
Ashby	Harvard	Rutland
Auburn	Holden	Shirley
Ayer	Hopedale	Shrewsbury
Barre	Hubbardston	Southbridge
Berlin	Lancaster	Spencer
Blackstone	Leicester	Sterling
Bolton	Leominster	Sturbridge
Boylston	Lunenburg	Sutton
Brookfield	Mendon	Templeton
Charlton	Milford	Townsend
Clinton	Millbury	Upton
Douglas	Millville	Uxbridge
Dudley	New Braintree	Warren
East Brookfield	North Brookfield	Webster
Fitchburg	Northborough	West Boylston
Gardner	Northbridge	West Brookfield
Grafton	Oakham	Westborough
Groton	Oxford	Westminster
	Paxton	Winchendon
	Pepperell	Worcester

Unemployment Rate



JOBS



Illustration / Nuthawut

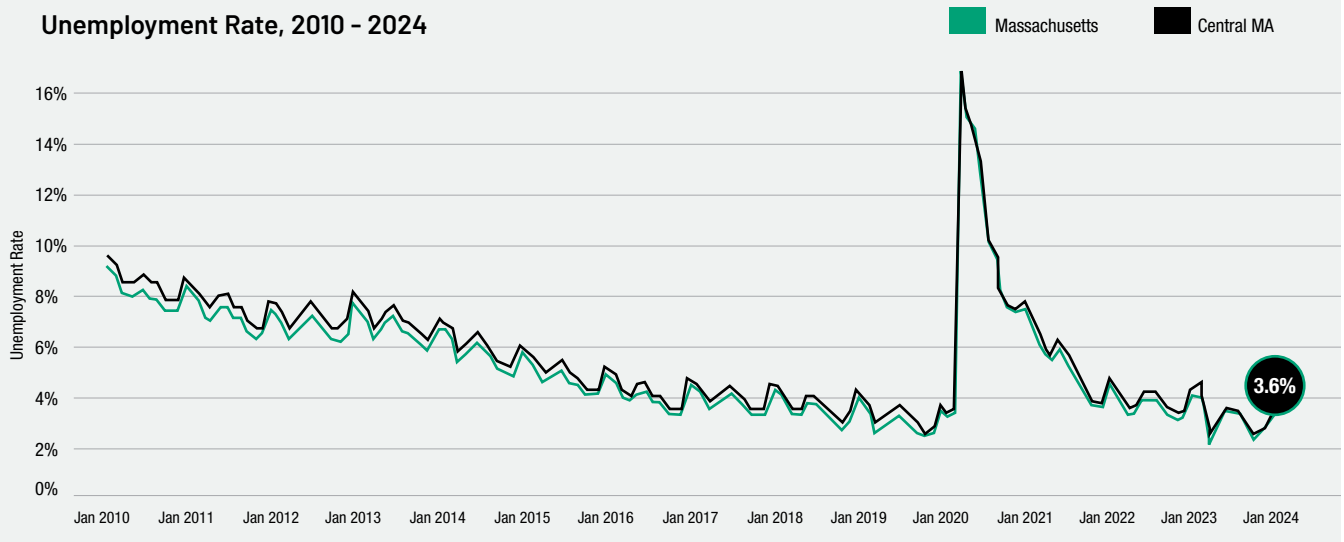
region's unemployment rate hovers around 3.6% — a low rate by historical standards.

This low rate, however, masks some of the challenges our region's workforce faces. First, this low rate indicates that many residents in the region actively seeking work are able to find it — making the labor market for these workers more competitive and therefore

harder for employers to find candidates without raising wages. But there are additional challenges associated with this data that are less obvious. This includes the fact that the official unemployment rate as announced by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the “U-3” rate, only includes those who are in the labor force and actively looking for work within the previous four weeks. If a person is unemployed and was looking for work in the last year, but not in the past four

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Unemployment Rate, 2010 - 2024



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weeks, the individual is considered a “discouraged worker” by the BLS, and not counted in the U-3 rate. If you were to broaden the U-3 measure to count these discouraged workers (plus those working part time who wish full-time work) as the BLS does in its U-6 measure, the unemployment rate in Central Massachusetts climbs to 6.0%, double the statewide U-3 rate of 3.0%. Yet even this statistic, as broad as it is, only includes those who have looked for work in the past year. If you were to measure those who have given up looking for work for more than one year, the statistic no doubt climbs much higher still — but it is difficult to measure since this population, being much harder to define from available data, is not tracked by the BLS and has thus been largely made invisible in official statistics.

UI CLAIMANT POPULATION AND THE REGION’S LARGEST SUPPLY OF UNEMPLOYED WORKERS BY JOB TYPE:

A review of the UI Claimant reports for December 2023 shows that there were 7,541 claimants for the region and the average weekly wage claim was \$1092.39. Of these claimants, 5.8% were between ages 20-24, 22.8% were ages 25-34, 23.1% were ages 35-44, 19.3% were ages 45-54, and 19.6% were ages 55-64.

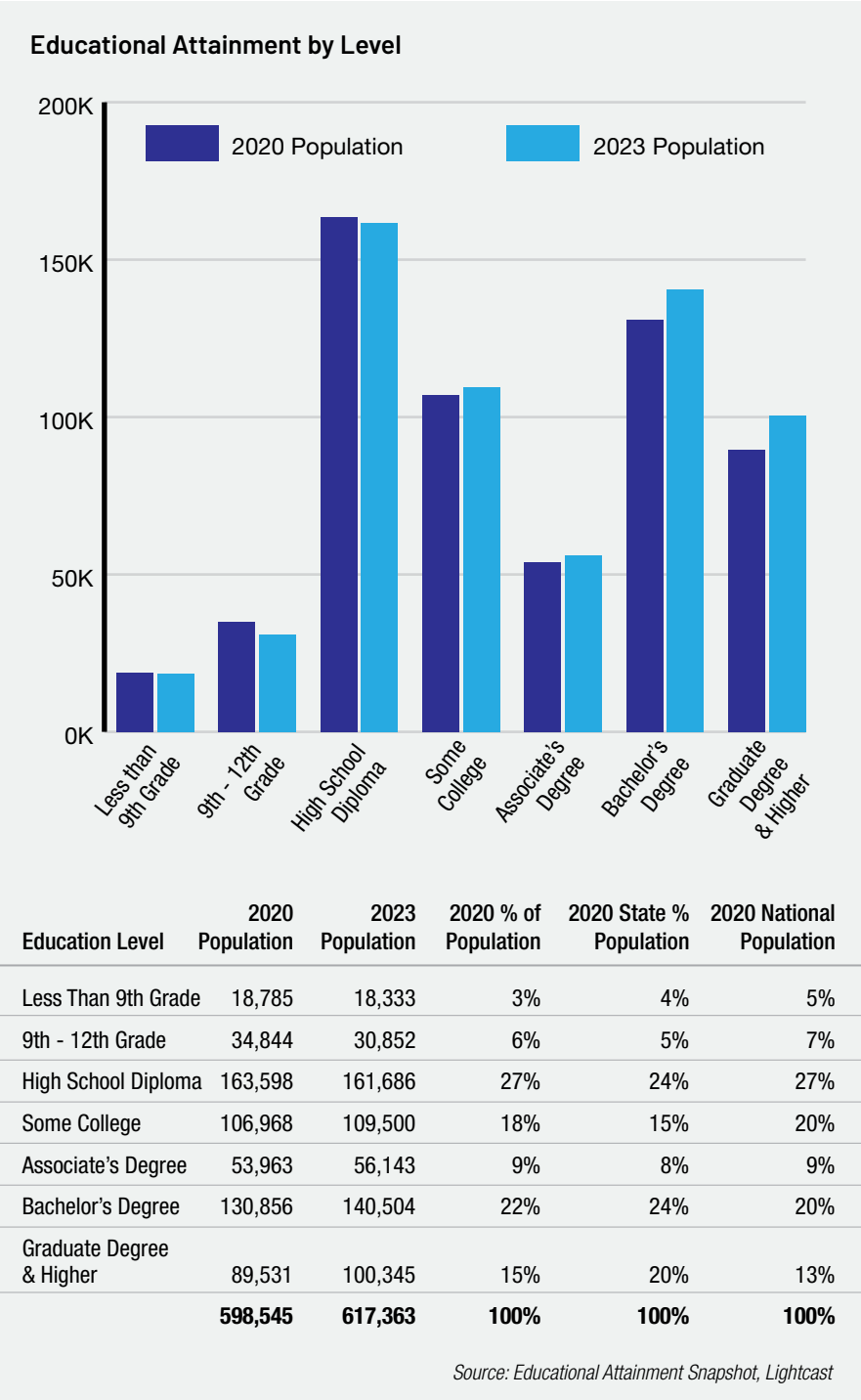
In terms of occupational backgrounds:

- 1,059 had Management backgrounds
- 1,106 had Construction and Extraction backgrounds
- 653 had Office and Administrative Support backgrounds
- 661 had Building and Grounds Maintenance backgrounds
- 406 had Production backgrounds

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Although our region boasts many education and training providers, the fact remains that far too many of our region’s residents, especially those for people of color, are not able to reach the

first rung of the career ladder and need additional education. This includes the development of additional ABE and ESOL programming aligned with regional employer demand to help prepare our most vulnerable residents gain entry level employment and set the foundation for continued career training and academic coursework.





Critical Trends



CRITICAL TRENDS IN REGIONAL DEMOGRAPHICS THAT IMPACT THE WORKFORCE:

The planning team has identified two demographic trends in our region that have a significant impact on our workforce as we move forward. The first is our aging population which is already having an impact in several industries, including manufacturing and other “traditional” trades. Many of the older, more experienced workers are retiring and this is leaving gaps that are proving difficult for employers to fill as younger workers are not choosing to enter these fields in numbers sufficient to meet the need. For example, there are a sizable number of maintenance mechanics and machine operator positions that will be available as the current workforce retires in the next 3-5 years. Without new candidates to replace these workers, the shortage will grow critical, jeopardizing the ability of these companies to meet customer demand, let alone growth opportunities they would need to forgo. Similarly, diesel technicians, construction workers, and other skilled trades appear to be of less interest to many youths. Some have argued that youth are counseled from an early age that a college degree offers them a better career path, and thus look to go that route instead of a hands-on



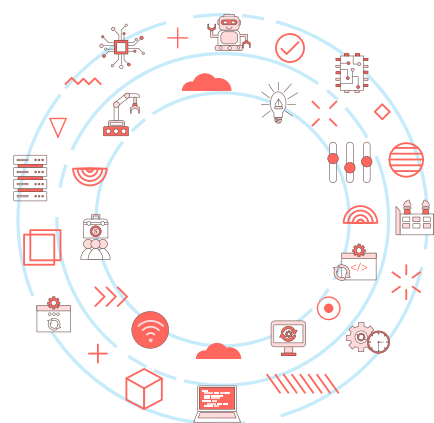
Illustration / hobbitfoot

Changing demographics in the population will have far-reaching effects on the labor force, the economy, and employment over the 2016–26 decade. The overall labor force participation rate is projected to decline as older workers leave the labor force, constraining economic growth. The aging baby-boomer segment of the population will drive demand for healthcare services and related occupations.

— US BLS; Projections overview and highlights, 2016–26

A corollary issue we are seeing with an aging workforce is that many older workers do not appear to be equipped with the appropriate skill set to work in a technology-rich workplace, such as advanced manufacturing. For instance, many older workers/job seekers are not familiar with Computer-Numeric Control (CNC) machining, which is becoming the norm within the manufacturing industry. CNC machining is an automated process and requires knowledge of software and programming. While we have already completed a large amount of CNC training in our region, we will need to do more to upskill our aging existing workers and prepare our younger workforce.

The second critical trend we are seeing is growth of our immigrant and refugee populations. While these new Americans bring the potential to fill many supply gaps in our priority industries, they also often present with more potential barriers to employment. Some of the barriers we are already seeing include a lack of English language proficiency, limited education beyond high school (or credentials that do not transfer here from their previous countries), and a lack of job-specific skills. It has been reported that the waiting list for our region for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes is greater than 1,000 candidates. These people's lives are on hold as their ability to work in living-wage jobs is significantly impaired by their lack of English fluency.



There are numerous high level industry trends occurring in our region that are impacting workforce needs, such as the rise of technology and automation, changes to business operations and management practices, issues involving the “pay squeeze” for some industries, and employer responses to public policy changes.

Increasing technology has been a major driving trend in our region, like others throughout the Commonwealth and beyond. Technology has always impacted workforce in a variety of ways and continues to do so today. In the past, modern technology such as the harnessing of electricity provided power to factories and freed them from the need to be near the rivers which drove the machinery. Gas motors forever changed the way we transport goods and materials – and changing the mix of workers needed to build and maintain the new automobiles and trucks, and the roads they ride on. Today, we see the rise of automated manufacturing, self-checkout kiosks in markets and gas stations, and now the growth of the “gig economy” made possible using real-time online platforms. This rise

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– Labor Market Trends in Massachusetts Regions:
Central Mass; Boston Federal Reserve

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in technology has reduced the need for employees doing lower-level, repetitive functions, and so, teen employment has dropped as a result. The gig-economy allows people the freedom to choose when and how they wish to offer their services, but the work comes with little or no benefits, job security, or growth potential – an Uber driver is unlikely to advance up the company ranks. In Information Technology, project-based gig work may be well paying, but comes with the stress of not knowing what work may be available in the future, and workers are increasingly competing with talent based overseas since production can be shared seamlessly over the world-wide web.

Automation in the manufacturing sector is creating greater efficiencies for manufacturers and yielding ever-higher productivity as companies can produce more goods with less workers, leading to layoffs in this industry. Unfortunately for employers, they are in a race with a generational shift as older workers begin to retire in greater numbers, overwhelming their ability to replace these aging workers with machines. And the jobs that remain in advanced manufacturing require ever more comfort with the use of computers to interface with the new machines on the shop floor. Our vocational-technical high schools are already attempting to address this need by adding programs in engineering, advanced manufacturing, and robotics, but not at a high enough scale to prepare the number of workers necessary to replace the existing workforce preparing to retire. Further, a considerable number of the students attending these schools are going off to college after graduation, and not directly entering into the local and regional workforce.

In the transportation industry there has been significant research on the development of autonomous (so called driver-less) vehicles and discussion in the workforce development world regarding the disruption this will have

upon employment as drivers. Discussions with local distribution industry professionals indicate that this innovation is many years away from having an impact locally – while the technology may be rapidly advancing, the prohibitive cost of buying and maintaining an autonomous delivery truck will prevent wide scale implementation and any noticeable decline in local jobs driving. More imminent, these professionals suggest, is the greater utilization of automation in the sorting, handling, and preparation of products as they move through the distribution network. Beyond the short term, it is anticipated that delivery trucks, even autonomous ones, will still need a human presence on board for the foreseeable future to ensure the safe handling and delivery of goods and material.

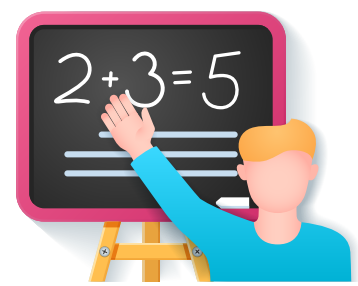
Changes to business operations and management practices

Another high-level industry trend that is affecting workforce development is the changing management structures that businesses utilize, such as the rise of outsourcing for much non-core business administrative and support services like human resources, payroll processing, marketing, custodial/janitorial services, etc. Businesses have also turned to the use of third-party temporary firms to fill short term employment needs or for greater screening for identifying qualified candidates for “permanent” status as a company employee. Businesses have increasingly turned to these alternate organizational models to achieve greater efficiency, however, they have also had some unintended consequences, including a lowering of business reputations in the community-labor pool, and a decrease in the ability to promote from within as talented entry level support staff learn about the business and further advance their careers through company-sponsored education and professional development.

Pay-Squeeze

Another trend in our region is the

trend whereby employers have been caught in a “pay squeeze” affecting their ability to pay workers more in times of greater employer demand; unfortunately, we are seeing across some of our priority industries such as manufacturing, health care and social assistance that salaries are not increasing at a rate keeping up with the demand (for instance, manufacturing saw a 2.95% increase in total wages over the past 10 year period and health care an increase of 4.99% total wages, both below the regional average for all industries of 7.82% and far lower than the increased hiring demand would anticipate). One likely reason for this is that while the Commonwealth has increased minimum wage over the past three years, the ability of the employers to pay their workers a higher wage relative to the minimum wage is being capped by the funding available on the revenue side. In health care, this is a result of a public reimbursement system that caps the rate of funding and therefore leaves the revenue side flat while employers in other industries around them (including fast food and retail) have increased their pay due to the minimum wage mandate. This is also occurring in child development centers where staff pay rates are highly dependent on the public voucher supports available to the Centers for the moderate and low-income families they serve. Without a rise in the voucher rates, paying staff more is a difficult proposition. Similarly, local manufacturers have faced pressure from their customers to meet the prices of their competitors, many of which are in countries with much lower pay rates, such as China. This pay-cap issue therefore alters the natural labor-market and the increase in pay expected in order to entice more people to seek employment in that field – especially if the work requires an investment in a potential candidate’s time and money for training in order to be qualified for the job(s) available. This, in and of itself, has large implications for the public workforce system, as it suggests increased training alone may



not be sufficient to meet the demand.

Employer Responses to Public Policy

As noted previously, the Commonwealth's increase in the minimum wage has fostered changes in the labor-market at the lower end of the pay scale. Employers in numerous sectors that pay at or slightly above minimum wage have had to adjust their budgets to accommodate the rise in hourly staff pay. For some, this has not appeared to have been a major burden as slight increases in product prices have offset the additional labor costs.

Another operational trend we have identified is that costs to employers for health insurance continue to climb and this trend is not anticipated to change any time soon. At the Federal level, the Affordable Care Act (ACA) appears to be slowly being dismantled and the actual coverage for services is declining. Our smallest employers often cannot afford to offer health insurance to their employees. Massachusetts law allows employers of fewer than 50 full-time equivalent positions to choose whether to offer health insurance. Since our region has many small companies – in fact, the average number of employees per company is just below 38 — workers in our region often must purchase health insurance through the Massachusetts Health Connector at their own cost. The rising cost of health care puts upward pressure on insurance premiums. In response, employers and health plans try to limit premium increases using strategies such as offering more high-deductible plans and increasing co-payments, co-insurance, and out-of-

pocket maximums. These approaches represent a cost shift from insurers and employers to workers and further complicate the labor market as workers fear the loss of employer-sponsored health insurance and employers must decide how to meet the rising costs.

CRITICAL TRENDS IN OCCUPATIONAL EMPLOYMENT HISTORY IN THE REGION:

Shifting of the region's Industry/Occupational Mix

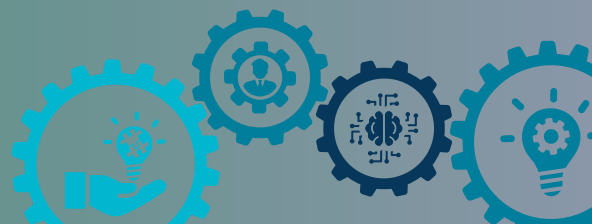
As noted previously, the industrial base of the Central MA region has shifted the past several decades from a manufacturing focused economy to one that is more balanced between industry sectors, including healthcare, education, professional services, and retail. While this shift has meant less dependency upon a single industry sector, it has also meant the loss of many family-supporting wage jobs for those with limited formal education.

There continues to be a rising need for health care workers at most levels of clinical services and at a variety of health care providers, including community health centers and patient triage clinics, long term care facilities, and hospitals. According to the MA Department of Economic Research, the projected employment in Health Care and Social Assistance from 2020 to 2030 in our combined Central MA region will rise by nearly 10,000 positions – from 69,997 employees to 79,584. Similarly, retail employment is

expected to grow by 3,049 from 35,619 to 38,668 across the region. During this same timeframe, educational services (including teachers and teacher assistants) are anticipated to grow by 3,548 employees.

One sector we are seeing a significant rise in is the life sciences sector (an anticipated gain of more than 1,700 employees). Fortunately, with four public institutions of higher education in our region offering training/education to prepare people for careers at various levels of this growing sector, we are well positioned to take advantage of this opportunity.

Regional Workforce Priorities



TOP 3 REGIONAL WORKFORCE PRIORITY INDUSTRIES:

Based upon the State criteria and regional criteria set by the planning team the following industries were deemed priority industries for the region:

Healthcare

- CNA/PCA (*inc. EKG and phlebotomy*)
- LPN – RN
- Pharm. Tech
- Medical Asst
- Direct care workers
- Medication technician
- CHW/patient navigator
- Clinical behavioral health staff – licensed mental health counselor
- Technologists – surgical techs; Radiology techs, respiratory techs, Medical Lab techs
- Medical interpreters

Manufacturing

- CNC Machinists
 - Quality Control Techs
 - Production Workers
- New:
- Robotic – Machine Techs & instrument/calibration technicians
 - Photonics
 - Biotechnology (*formerly within professional services*)

Transportation/Logistics/ Warehousing

- CDL Drivers
 - Diesel Technicians
- New:
- Facilities Maintenance mechanics

Additionally, the following industries were identified as critical industries for our region:

Professional and Tech Services

- Occupational Groups: Software/ Web Developer, Cyber Security
- Anticipated growth of STEM fields, including IT and life sciences
- High average wage sector
 - Web Developer: \$59.9K
 - Biomanufacturing: \$44.9K

Construction

- Occupational Group: HVAC Mechanics, Apprenticeship Trade Occupations
- High employer need, low education barriers, large pool of candidates
- Strong wages
 - HVAC: \$55K
 - Building Trades: \$52.7K

Retail/Hospitality

- Combined, these two sectors for the region's 2nd largest employment sector (19.5%)
- Low educational barriers, multiple industry pathways

Education

- Region's 3rd largest employment sector (12.7%)
- Strong wages with average sector wage at \$64K

Top Regional Challenges and Opportunities

INDUSTRIES CURRENTLY FACING THE MOST SIGNIFICANT WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES:

The planning team has identified Healthcare & Social Assistance, Manufacturing, and Transportation, Warehousing, and Logistics as facing the most significant workforce development challenges, followed by the critical industries identified on the previous page, Professional and Technical Services, Construction, Retail/Hospitality, and Education.

TOP THREE CHALLENGES FACING THE REGION'S BUSINESSES AND INDUSTRY OVER THE NEXT FOUR YEARS:

A survey of *Worcester Business Journal* audience results of local businesses helped identify the top challenges facing employers regionally. Overwhelmingly, employers identified finding and retaining talent as one of their top three challenges, with high operating costs and lack of affordable housing (see chart C on page 7). Overwhelmingly the survey reiterates the “very” concerned response as the highest percentage among respondents who could also reply “mildly” concerned or “not at all” concerned when it comes to employer’s confidence. Matching with the right people with the right skills when there is a job opening is top of mind (see chart B on page 7). Our regional blueprint survey data and research supports within the challenge of finding and retaining talent, the most significant factors involved included the aging of our workforce, lack of work-readiness/social-emotional skills, and barriers to employment such as English language competency, unreliable transportation, criminal background concerns, and substance abuse.

THE TOP OCCUPATIONS OR OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS IN WHICH THE REGION IS FACING THE MOST SIGNIFICANT EMPLOYEE SHORTAGES:

The top occupational groups in which the region is facing the most significant employee shortages are:

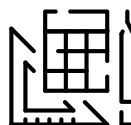
OCCUPATIONAL GROUP 1: Health Occupations

- Certified Nursing Assistant, LPN, RN, Pharmacy Tech, Direct Care Worker, Medical Assistants, Direct care workers, Medication Technician, Community Health Worker/Patient Navigator, Medical Interpreters, clinical behavioral health staff – licensed mental health counselors, and technologists – including Surgical Technicians; Radiology Technicians, Respiratory Technicians, and Medical Lab Technicians.



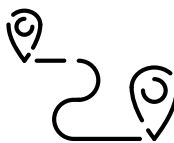
OCCUPATIONAL GROUP 2: Manufacturing Occupations

- CNC Machinist, Quality Control Technicians, Production Workers, Robotics - Instrument/calibration technicians, life-science, and photonics production staff



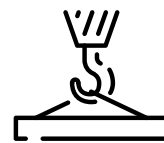
OCCUPATION GROUP 3: Transportation, Warehousing and Logistics Occupations

- Commercial Drivers; Diesel Technicians; Industrial Maintenance Mechanics



OCCUPATIONAL GROUP 4: Construction Occupations

- Apprenticeship Trade Occupations, HVAC Mechanics, energy efficiency technicians



OCCUPATIONAL GROUP 5: Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services Occupations

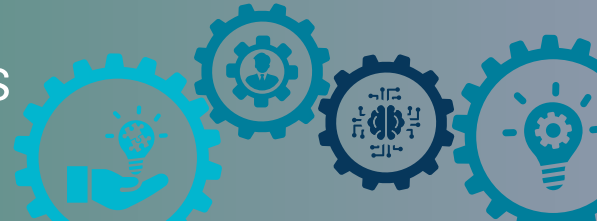
- Software/Web Developer, Cyber Security



OCCUPATIONS OFFERING A “CAREER PATHWAY” FOR WORKERS TO MOVE TO HIGHER SKILLS AND WAGES, ESPECIALLY WORKERS STARTING AT ENTRY-LEVEL:

We are fortunate in our region that we have several occupations that offer a career pathway for workers that are supported by a strong network of career development and educational institutions. It is our goal to strengthen articulation agreements between regional partners to ensure students seeking to enter or advance in their careers will have access to education and training linked together to scaffold their success. As a regional strategy we are also supporting the development of a strong apprenticeship system to allow workers to advance their careers through paid hands-on work and formal education. Apprenticeships and associated pre-apprentice training has been established in the building trades, manufacturing, commercial drivers, diesel technicians, and pharmacy technicians.

Broad Labor Supply Challenges and Opportunities



THE MOST SIGNIFICANT BROAD LABOR SUPPLY CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACING THE REGION OVER THE NEXT 5 YEARS BASED ON EXISTING REGIONAL WORKFORCE:

The most significant broad labor challenges facing the region over the next five years are:

- Aging workforce
- Lack of employment readiness & social/emotional skills
- Increase in share of workforce needing English skills.
- Affordable childcare
- Limited transportation

Aging workforce

Based on our recent employer survey, the most significant challenge facing our businesses is finding and retaining talent. Employers report the loss of older workers as they retire is creating larger supply gaps within our priority industries and this is bolstered by the data of our region's workforce (25.5%) is aged 55 or older. The added challenge is that these workers are often the most experienced so when they retire, it is difficult to replace them with workers with the same level of knowledge and skill set.

Lack of employment readiness & social/emotional skills

Employers also report that they often see job candidates and new hires that do not have the soft skills needed for performance in the workplace. These skills include time management, communication, social-emotional awareness, and teamwork. Complicating this challenge is the fact that these skills are hard to measure and difficult to teach in a classroom setting.

Increase in share of workforce needing English skills

The regional demographic trends indicate that the region's population growth has been fueled by net inflow of New Americans (immigrants, refugees).

Over the past decade, the share of foreign-born residents has grown by 8%, and the percent of residents in the region of Hispanic ethnicity has grown by 14%.

This inflow of New Americans includes a significant portion that have limited English communication skills. Regionally, it is reported that 8% of residents have limited English proficiency. To overcome their barriers to employment, this population typically requires remedial services in English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and/or Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes. Depending upon their past work experience, they may also need occupational training prior to being hired. A small percentage of our immigrant/refugee population may arrive highly skilled but non-credentialed here in the U.S. They may also be faced with a language barrier and/or a need for an additional certification or credential before being hired. Unfortunately, the current wait list for enrollment into ESOL classes is more than 1,000 and funding for additional classes is limited.

Challenges Surrounding Childcare in the Region

Available and affordable childcare continues to be a significant barrier to employment for residents (families?) in the Central region. Following COVID, many childcare facilities closed, the majority in the family childcare sector. This left some families with no choice other than to require a stay-at-home arrangement. For others, the high cost of

childcare meant a reduction in income available to pay for housing, food, and other necessities.

Another issue is the wage paid to childcare workers. This industry does not generally pay a living wage until a childcare worker reaches the higher levels such as lead teacher or Center Director.

Limited Transportation

The Central MA area contains a few cities, numerous towns, and also rural communities. This variety affords residents opportunities to experience the rich diversity of these various communities; however, it makes transportation a challenge for those without a dependable vehicle. Public transportation is available throughout much of the region through fixed bus routes from the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority which serves 21 communities in the northern part of our region and the Worcester Regional Transit Authority which serves 35 communities. Connection to the MBTA commuter rail service is offered in Fitchburg, Leominster, and Worcester, and paratransit service is also available throughout most of the region. Unfortunately, given the limited amount of fixed route service outside of Worcester and Fitchburg, utilizing public transportation for employment outside these cities is often not a viable option for job seekers/employees.

THE TOP 3 BROAD LABOR SUPPLY OPPORTUNITIES FACING THE REGION OVER THE NEXT 5 YEARS BASED ON THE EXISTING WORKFORCE IN THE REGION:

The top broad labor supply opportunities facing the region over the next 5 years based on our existing workforce in the region includes integration of



New Americans into the workforce, incumbent staff development, and expanding the labor pool to non-traditional workers.

Integration of New Americans into the workforce

As noted previously, the growth of our region's workforce has been fueled by the influx of people born outside the United States settling in our region. This includes immigrants, refugees, and other foreign-born residents legally able to work in the US.

Incumbent staff development

The second opportunity is increasing the skills of existing staff to meet company demand. This requires employer commitment to employee mentoring, training and development, but may be done more easily than attempting to lure workers from outside the region, especially for entry and middle-level jobs that typically do not pay enough to entice people to uproot their residence and requires additional costs to employers attempting to have a meaningful presence away from the location they're hiring in.

Some of the ways businesses might develop their employees could include:

- Skills training, either in-house or through outside training centers
 - Opportunities for promotion and/or career development
 - Coaching and mentoring
 - Offering tuition reimbursement
 - Encouraging pursuit of continuing education
 - Development of a formal Registered Apprenticeship to promote a set career advancement pathway for staff
- Employees report feeling valued when they see that the company is investing in them. This growth and development help employees expand their

knowledge, skills and abilities and apply the competencies they have gained to new situations. This translates into positive gains for the organization by enhancing organizational effectiveness, improving work quality, and helping business to attract and retain top talent.

Expansion of the traditional labor pool

A third opportunity exists in expanding the existing labor pool through skill preparation, training, and work support for non-traditional workers in various industries. This includes increased hiring of people with a disability in manufacturing, expanded career opportunities for people with criminal backgrounds/ex-prisoners, and older workers seeking a second career.

CHARACTERISTICS OF UNEMPLOYED AND UNDEREMPLOYED WORKERS IN THE REGION:

The four prominent characteristics of the unemployed and underemployed workers in our region that the regional planning team identified are:

- Older workers & long-term unemployed
- Lower formal education level
- Lack of English proficiency
- Geographic location/transportation

Many of our older workers continue to struggle with finding full-time employment and a significant portion of them are long-term unemployed. Their biggest challenge is that they come with years of experience and often at a high salary. They find themselves trapped by employer stereotypes such as not sticking around long (flight risk) and costing too much in terms of salary, health insurance and retirement. Businesses often do not want to take a chance on these older workers. Another issue facing the long-term unemployed workers

is discrimination based on the duration of their unemployment. They are often faced with an uphill battle when competing for employment with currently working younger job applicants. We need to work with our business partners to more clearly understand that hiring should be based on one's ability to do the job, not his or her age or current employment status.

Education level is another characteristic of our unemployed and underemployed workers. Some workers only have a high school diploma or high school equivalency credential when employers require a college degree. Many are raising families and do not have the resources and/or time to step away from the work world and return to school. Working with our education partners, we need to continue to find alternative ways to help these workers get the education or training they need. Possibilities include tuition reimbursement from the employer, evening or weekend classes, and online education.

As noted previously, there exists an extremely high need in our region for ESOL classes. One of the biggest barriers to employment right now is the lack of English proficiency in our job seekers combined with the fact that our local, publicly funded ESOL programs have extensive waiting lists. One way for us to address this issue is to educate our business partners and encourage them to apply for a Workforce Training grant to provide ESOL training for their workers.



Existing Pipeline and Education

Photo / JK_kyoto

DESCRIPTION OF THE REGION'S EXISTING PIPELINES OF NEW WORKERS (CREDENTIALS) ACROSS PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECONDARY AND POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS:

There are many educational institutions and training entities in Central MA and an extensive amount of career-related education and training that is already taking place or anticipated to begin over the course of the next four years. Educational institutions in the Central MA region include three public universities (the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester, Fitchburg State University, and Worcester State University), two community colleges (Quinsigamond Community College and Mount Wachusett Community College), several private four-year colleges (Nichols, Holy Cross, Assumption, Anna Maria, Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, Massachusetts College of Pharmacy, Becker, Clark, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute), as well as the Grafton and Shriver Job Corps Centers, and five vocational schools, which offer

both day and evening programs; Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical High School, Worcester Technical High School, Bay Path Regional Vocational High School, Blackstone Valley Vocational High School, and the Leominster High School Center For Technical Education Innovation (additionally, the Assabet Valley Vocational High School is located on the edge of our region, providing programming to day and evening students residing in our region). There are numerous Career Technical Education (CTE) providers including the Worcester Community Action Council, the Fieldstone School, Youth Opportunities Upheld (YOU), Inc., the Blackstone Valley Hub for Workforce Development, Training Resources of America, Peak Medical, the South Middlesex Opportunity Council, Worcester Public Schools Night Life and Adult Basic Education Center. Additionally,, Career Technical Initiative providers including, Montachusett Regional High School, Minute-man Vocational Tech, Worcester Public Schools, and Nashoba Valley Technical High School.

These regional education and training partners, and others not mentioned by name above, are doing much to align their efforts with the demands of our region's employers. Some of these efforts include:

■ As the region's largest school district, the **Worcester Public Schools** offers an example of the range of programs available. The WPS 2023-2028 Strategic Plan and newly released Vision of a Learner demonstrate the district's commitment to helping all WPS students to become future-ready to lead meaningful and purposeful lives after high school. WPS scholars will leverage a broad set of multi-literate skills to graduate as problem solvers, curious learners, empowered individuals, effective communicators, and engaged community members.

■ WPS also remains committed to numerous efforts to expand access to high-quality CTE programs including but not limited to:

- Worcester Technical High School (WTHS) continues pushing the enrollment limit of 1,500 students.

WTHS has 23 vocational-technical programs. The building and its 23 programs are the cohesive infrastructure supporting many community programs, Innovation Career Pathways, and Nightlife programs.

- WPS is also expanding program offerings at their academic high schools. North High School is offering Business Technology along with its existing Allied Health program. They also offer a non-Chapter 74 Early Childhood Education program. Doherty is continuing its Engineering program and is adding 3 new Chapter 74 programs in the fall. Those programs are Programming and Web Development, Construction/Craft Laborer and Marketing, Management and Finance. Doherty will also be exploring a Biomedical program at the new High School over the next few years. South High will continue its Diesel Technology, Culinary, and Early Childhood programs. They also offer a non-Chapter 74 Automotive program.

- Innovative Career Pathways (ICP) WPS has the largest ICP program in the state supporting 300 WPS annually to access high-demand industries across seven career pathways: Advance Manufacturing, Allied Health, Biotechnology, Business & Marketing, Computer Science, Construction & Related Engineering, and Information Technology. ICP students learn industry relevant knowledge and skills in two pathway specific technical courses offered as part of an extended day program at WTHS. Students receive extensive career exploration and development support and have opportunities to take dual enrollment courses, earn industry recognized credentials, and participate in multiple paid internships. Industry partnerships and networking opportunities are embedded throughout all ICP pathways.

- WPS, in partnership with QCC, is offering an evening certificate HVAC program for 15 students at WTHS. This program is currently

a certificate program that QCC is looking to move to as an Associate degree program in the near future, with possible Pell eligibility.

- WPS has expanded its Night Life (evening CTE program) to offer area residents access to additional in-demand, affordable, short-term CTE programs such as Clinical Medical Asst Training, Diesel Technician Training, Pharmacy Technician Training, Electrical Code & Theory Classes, Plumbing Code & Theory Classes, and Intro to Welding.

CENTRAL AREA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

■ **QUINSIGAMOND COMMUNITY COLLEGE** is deeply committed to aligning our programming to effectively meet the evolving needs of local employers and the broader workforce. The key initiatives include:

- **Equipping Non-English Speakers for Employment:** QCC develops and delivers programs tailored to non-English-speaking individuals and those with limited English proficiency. These programs encompass:

- Integrated Basic Education and Training (IBEST) programs in crucial fields such as healthcare, accounting, early education and care, biotechnology, and advanced manufacturing.
- Career training programs offered in Spanish within healthcare and business domains.
- Dual-language programs specifically crafted for Early Education and Care.

- **Empowering through Apprenticeships:** QCC boasts a robust apprenticeship program that seamlessly blends classroom instruction

with on-the-job training, priming individuals for successful careers. These apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships span priority sectors including healthcare, hospitality, biotechnology, and IT. We are actively exploring avenues to expand this program to include the awarding of apprenticeship degrees, underscoring our commitment to growth in this area.

- **Fostering Competency-Based Education:** QCC is actively developing competency-based education programs with the aim of streamlining career preparation and facilitating a quicker entry into the workforce.

- **Supporting Adult Learners through Mass Reconnect:** Through the Mass Reconnect program, QCC is dedicated to supporting adults without college credentials to enroll in certificate or degree programs, equipping them with the skills needed to fill regional job vacancies.

- **Industry Partnership Initiatives:** Through the Center for Workforce Development and Continuing Education, QCC collaborates closely with employers to leverage state grants aimed at addressing workforce needs in priority industries. Programs such as the Donnelley Success grants, SCALE grants, and the Returning Citizens grants are specifically tailored to prepare workers

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with the requisite credentials for meaningful employment opportunities.

• **Fast-Track Skill Development:**

Through the Center for Workforce Development and Continuing Education, QCC offers Fast-Track skill development programs designed to expedite the journey from skills training to employment. These programs feature streamlined timelines without compromising on quality, ensuring rapid entry into the workforce. Additionally, we provide a comprehensive suite of programs tailored for career advancement and career transition, allowing individuals to pursue their professional goals and provide employers with the skilled workers needed.

• **Basic Skills for Adult Learners:**

Through QCC's Adult Community Learning Center, QCC delivers programming for English language learners and adults seeking a high school equivalency, such as a GED. These programs prepare adult learners to move directly into the workforce or into additional training and education.

Quinsigamond Community College offers a diverse range of healthcare certificate & degree programs that are designed to meet the evolving needs of the regional workforce in healthcare. Programs in allied health, emergency services and nursing ensure we have a pipeline of health professionals available for local employers.

■ **MOUNT WACHUSETT COMMUNITY COLLEGE** serves the labor demands of the region through diverse programming spanning credit and non-credit course offerings across multiple divisions of the college, maximizing opportunities for youth through Early College partnerships and the United Way Youth Venture Programs as well as Adult Learners through comprehensive education and training programs offered through the Division

of Lifelong Learning and Workforce Development. MWCC engages in relentless efforts to align evidence-based practices and an equity-framed organizational mindset with emerging trends in program design, teaching and learning, and workforce development. As such, MWCC develops deep connections with the communities and employers we serve, positioning ourselves as the conduit to social change and the driver of economic stability within North Central Massachusetts. MWCC seeks to increase the educational attainment and earnings power of North Central Massachusetts residents through structured cross-agency partnerships, deep employer engagement, accelerated pathways to learning such as non-credit to credit pathways/apprenticeship programs/on-the-job training programs/etc., while maximizing technology and remote services to mitigate time and space barriers that disproportionately impact adult learners and learners of color across the region.

• **MWCC Early College**

MWCC Early College Programs drive K-12 partnerships and workforce development across the region. Through various initiatives Early College Programs provide opportunities for students across the region to simultaneously earn high school and college credit accelerating learning and creating attainable pathways to post-secondary education for high school students across the region. Many Early College partnerships embed workforce preparation activities preparing the regions' youth for the modern work environment while also embedding industry training programs offered through the MWCC Division of Lifelong Learning and Workforce Development providing pathways to industry recognized credentials within priority industries such as healthcare, manufacturing, and information technology for Early College Students.

• **MWCC Division of Lifelong Learn-**

ing and Workforce Development

The MWCC Division of Lifelong Learning and Workforce Development offers low-cost or cost-free programming for individuals seeking any number of education and training opportunities. The Division operates five distinct departments serving the region's students and employers: (1) The MassLINKS Adult Education Online Academy at Mount Wachusett Community College (2) The Department of Adult Education (3) The Department of Workforce Access and Education (4) The Department of Correctional Education, and (5) The Department of Corporate Training and Community Education. All of these Departments work in collaboration to move the division and college mission of access and equity forward across the region.

• **MassLINKS Adult Education Online Academy at MWCC**

The MassLINKS Adult Education Online Academy at MWCC is the only statewide fully remote program operating out of the Public Adult Education Systems of the Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS) unit of DESE. MassLINKS serves roughly 700 students per year seeking either their High School Equivalency (HSE) or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses. All courses are cost free for students and the program provides technology for students without technology sufficient for academic success and in its first full-year of operation produced Measurable Skill Gain Outcomes above the 6-year statewide average for all Adult Education Programs. In FY24 MassLINKS partnered with the MassHire North Central Career Center to pilot ESOL courses specifically designed for Migrant Populations within North Central Massachusetts geared to workplace language development and enrollment in training programs aligned to priority industries within the region creating pathways to increased earnings for individuals newly arrived to the country and region.

- **The Department of Adult Education**

The Department of Adult Education offers cost-free, site-based courses out of the MWCC Leominster Campus for individuals seeking their High School Equivalency or English for Speakers of Other Languages courses. Courses are offered during the day or evening and provide high quality, face-to-face options for eligible individuals within the region.

- **The Department of Workforce Access and Education**

The Department of Workforce Access and Education provides cost free, short-term, occupational training programs aligned to priority industries across the region. Eligibility for these programs is generally dictated by funding sources. However, programs are designed to serve un or unemployed individuals within the region. Currently, the Department of WAE at MWCC offers site-based and online short-term training programs in Healthcare, Early Childhood Education, Advanced Manufacturing, and Information Technology. Healthcare programs include CNA and Certified Medical Administrative Assistant while Manufacturing programs focus on robotics and production technician training programs. Information Technology courses include IT Support Specialist and Cybersecurity. All programs lead to industry recognized credentials, included non-credit to credit pathways to accelerate credit attainment, and incorporate work-based learning opportunities where appropriate.

- **The Department of Correctional Education**

The MWCC Department of Correctional Education operates the MWCC Prison Education Programs at both NCCI-Gardner and MCI-Shirley. These programs are credit-based certificate and Associate's Degree programs in Business Administration and Accounting. Programs offer academic courses, support services, academic advising and financial assistance, as well as

post-release transitional support for individuals within the incarcerated environment at North Central Massachusetts DOC facilities.

- **The Department of Corporate Training and Community Education**

The MWCC Department of Corporate Training and Community Education leads employer relations at MWCC which includes partnering with regional employers to identify organizational needs, customize training options to meet those needs, and identifying funding available to support talent development and incumbent worker training programs. Corporate Training programs are unique to each organization and project and vary greatly in scope. Trainings can encompass everything from one-time workshops to multi-cohort, multi-year projects tailored to employer size, need, and incumbent worker population. Community Education programming offers lifelong learning and personal enrichment and youth programming to the community.

In addition to these departments specifically focused on workforce development initiatives within the region, MWCC partners with the MassHire Department of Career Services and the MassHire North Central Workforce Board to Operate the MassHire North Central Career Center. Co-located at Erdman Way, this collaboration ensures the effectiveness and efficiency of the vast network of regional providers and state agencies committed to regional service and growth.

Fitchburg State University and Mount Wachusett Community College are collaborating with Leominster High School, Fitchburg High School, Gardner High School, and Sizer Charter School to expand on existing Early College pathways for students who are interested in health care, pre-engineering, information technology and other STEM careers. The initiative provides deep career exploration beginning in 9th grade, and students can gain 12

or more college credits, and even a credential, prior to high school graduation.

FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES/ UNIVERSITIES

■ **FITCHBURG STATE UNIVERSITY** offers several degree options at both the graduate and undergraduate level geared towards individuals who work full or part-time and need greater flexibility in their schedules. These programs are in areas such as business, nursing, and education, which align with regional workforce needs to prepare or advance students in their careers. Additionally, Fitchburg State offers several on-line undergraduate degree completion options including programs in business administration, RN-BS, Early Education and Care, and Interdisciplinary Studies to provide access to working adults who would like to finish their bachelor's degree and apply their real-world experience to their education.

- **Non-Credit Professional Development**

The University also offers several other programs that align with the regional blueprint:

- Fitchburg State University's Center for Professional Studies and the School of Education have continued to cultivate training for regional Para educators via DESE-funded grant programs and other school/workforce partnerships.
- Online and face-to-face Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure preparation workshops to aspiring teachers in our region and has hosted a series of Cultural Competency courses for local educators and school administrators that helped them to improve their understanding of the depth and scope of various issues around race and culture, and how they impact public schools in

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the United States.

- Online course for regional educators on how best to support LGBTQIA+ students in an educational setting.
- Artificial Intelligence/Chat GPT training for educators.
- Wilson Language Training Certification.
- An online undergraduate Production Technology Certificate program for entry-level manufacturing employees (currently under development).
- Non-credit online self-paced professional development certification courses in the areas of business, IT, cybersecurity, human resources, and sustainable management via a collaboration with MindEdge.

• Education Career Pathways

An occupational/vocational education Bachelor of Science degree is available online to vocational technical teachers located across Massachusetts. The program offers up to 12 credits in recognition of the work experiences of the participating students through the University. Candidates may apply for the trade experience through the Prior Learning Assistance Program after completing 80 credits in the program.

The School of Education also offers several programs to engage diverse middle/high school student populations.

- Future Falcon Academy provides middle school English Language Learners with an enriching on-campus university experience. The focus is for local middle school students to experience Fitchburg State's culture and environment and see themselves as future students and potentially future educators.
- Tomorrow's Educator Pathway provides an option for high school students to earn badges through an affiliated program called the Future Educator Academy at Fitchburg State University. The Academy enables high school students to take col-

lege-level education courses prior to graduating, exploring education as a career, and eventually a pathway to a bachelor's degree.

• Science and Technology

In support of the North Central MA Regional Blueprint, the university has launched a new fully online Master of Science in Construction Management program. The online program will prepare students to manage complex construction projects and enhance their decision-making processes; provide pathways to students to advance into the field of construction management from related disciplines and/or prior construction experience; provide employers with a well-educated and skilled workforce, capable of performing valuable construction management services and ready to serve in managerial and leadership positions. This program supports the Healey/Driscoll Administrations new Affordable Homes Act by providing highly qualified construction management professionals.

■ **WORCESTER STATE UNIVERSITY (WSU)** is leading a multi-year effort to encourage interest among high school students in careers in K-12 education, with a particular focus on encouraging students of color to consider this career path. It is grounded in their Education Department and led by WSU's Associate Dean of Education, Dr. Raynold Lewis, with special emphasis on identifying potential students from the Worcester Public Schools.

WSU also has a long history in the area of teaching English to non-native speakers, and currently boast of three outlets in that regard: through the Latino Education Institute, WSU offers English language training and assistance to both students in the local school system and their parents; through their Intensive English Language Institute (and the WSU Graduate & Continuing Education division) that offers a collegiate-focused preparation program suitable for students

and professionals; and a graduate level program for teachers of ESL.

■ **CLARK UNIVERSITY** is privately funded, coeducational, and nonsectarian, and offers bachelors, masters, certificate, and doctoral degree programs in a wide range of disciplines. Many of these disciplines apply directly to the needs of priority industries and occupations in Central Massachusetts. Responding to these needs, Clark's Corporate Outreach Programs provide flexible offerings focused on in demand skills development. We understand that one size does not fit all and offer delivery, financial and operational models that fit the unique needs of businesses and their employees.

Clark's Micro credential Program delivers rapid cycle training that is online, skills driven and extremely cost effective. Upon completion, students earn digital badges and certificates for in-demand skills like data management and cyber security. Additionally, Clark can offer employers customized credentials based on graduate courses based on an employer's unique needs. Finally, Clark's Graduate Programs offer advanced degrees and certificates in



Business disciplines like Management, Accounting, Finance, Business Analytics and Marketing. Technology degree programs include Computer Science, Information Technology and Cyber Security, Data Analytics and Project Management.

- Rapid Cycle Training
- Clark Curated Micro credentials
- Online, cost effective and skills driven
- Digital badges and certificates
- Customized Credentials
- Graduate level courses packaged for your unique needs
- Customization and new course development as needed
- Graduate Certificates
- Business Analytics, Post MBA, Management Fellows, Non Profit Leadership
- Advanced Degree Programs
- Business
- Marketing, Finance, Accounting, Business Analytics, Management
- Technology
- Data Analytics, Information Technology, Computer Science, Project Mgt

■ **The UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS CHAN MEDICAL SCHOOL**, the state's first and only public medical school, is a world-class health sciences campus located in Worcester that is renowned for the quality and scope of its medical research and education. Perennially ranked in the top 10 percent for primary care education by U.S. News & World Report, UMass Chan Medical School advances the health and

well-being of the people of the Commonwealth and the world through pioneering education, research, and health care delivery. The three UMass Chan graduate schools are the T.H. Chan School of Medicine, the Morningside Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, and the Tan Chingfen Graduate School of Nursing. The T.H. Chan School of Medicine is committed to training in the full range of medical disciplines, with an emphasis on practice in the primary care specialties, in the public sector and in underserved areas of Massachusetts. The Morningside Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences students receive a broad background in the basic medical sciences and are trained in their selected specialty area in preparation for research with direct relevance to human disease. The Tan Chingfen Graduate School of Nursing offers master's, post-master's and doctoral degrees, providing high quality education to prepare registered professional and advanced practice nurses in nurse practitioner and nurse educator specialties and for faculty, research and other nursing leadership positions.

REGIONAL VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS

■ **MONTACHUSETT REGIONAL VOCATIONAL TECHNICAL SCHOOL** "Monty Tech" has been providing students across North Central Massachusetts with high-quality

vocational-technical training for more than 50 years. With twenty-one different vocational training programs and a commitment to maintain currency and alignment with regional workforce needs, program instructors work closely with Advisory Committee members who offer guidance regarding curriculum, training equipment and emerging technologies in their respective industries. For example, based on the input of those advisory committee members, the district capitalized on grant funds to fully renovate its Dental Assisting program (\$150,000) as well as to purchase multiple training simulators in our HVAC & Property maintenance program (\$399,546). These critical relationships not only enhance the training program, but also improve student outcomes, with committee members often hiring current students through the school's popular co-operative education program, or recent graduates for entry level careers.

In terms of recent workforce training innovations, Monty Tech proudly entered into a partnership with Fitchburg Public Schools, Gardner Public Schools, and Narragansett Regional School District, in an effort to provide students in those districts with meaningful vocational training opportunities. Monty Tech found and secured a vacant property close to campus and was awarded a record-setting \$1.88M grant to renovate and equip the facility, turning it into a state-of-the-art training facility for carpentry, electrical and plumbing occupations. Monty Tech's own students and instructors will completely renovate the space resulting in three new training spaces that will be the new home to the Montachusett Vocational Partnership (MVP) Academy in September 2024. School leaders will continue to promote the innovative partnership and modified "After Dark" schedule, as a model program that, if funded properly, could satisfy concerns for lack of access to vocational programming across the Commonwealth.

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The Central Region is home to seven leading private colleges/universities. These include Anna Maria College, Assumption University, College of the Holy Cross, Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, Tufts University, Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences (MCPHS), Nichols College, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute

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Monty Tech officials look forward to building upon this exceptional partnership that is expected to serve as many as 125 students when all programs are in operation.

The Adult Continuing Education program has grown to include several more workforce readiness programs to ensure the school meets the needs of our local workforce. An emphasis has been placed on the expansion of health-care, manufacturing, transportation, and hospitality training. Unemployed and under-employed adults, adults continuing their education, or those seeking new career pathways may enroll in any of the programs offered during the evening at Monty Tech to gain the skills and credentials necessary to meet the demand in the local workforce.

Worcester Technical High School (WTHS) is a vocational-technical high school, part of Worcester Public Schools district. The current facility opened on August 28, 2006, replacing the old Worcester Vocational High School (formerly known as Worcester Boys' Trade High School from 1909 to about 1975) at 2 Grove Street.

■ **WORCESTER TECHNICAL HIGH SCHOOL** has 22 different trades from which students can choose, from the 4 different Academies – Alden Design and Engineering (Alden), Allied Health and Human Services (A.H./service), Coghlin Construction Academy (construction), Information Technology and Business Service (I.T.). WTHS is also home to most of the Worcester Public Schools evening career technical training programs offered by the Nightlife adult education and training program.

■ **BAY PATH REGIONAL VOCATIONAL TECHNICAL HIGH SCHOOL** serves students from its member Worcester County communities of Auburn, Charlton, Dudley, N. Brookfield, Oxford, Paxton, Rutland, Spencer, Southbridge, and Webster. The

school's programs are also available to pupils outside these areas on a tuition basis. Bay Path is located 60 miles southwest of Boston, 10 miles south of Worcester, and 40 miles east of Springfield. Bay Path has been a visible part of our community by providing services to nonprofit organizations and municipalities. We offer a diverse course selection that addresses both your academic and career goals. Explore our 22 career areas at Bay Path. Evening programs at Bay Path include Advanced Manufacturing, Culinary Arts, or Heating Ventilation, and Air Conditioning (HVAC), and Practical Nursing.

■ The **BLACKSTONE VALLEY VOCATIONAL** Regional School District was formed in 1964 to provide an exciting and rewarding career education option for students in the towns of Bellingham, Blackstone, Douglas, Grafton, Hopedale, Mendon, Milford, Millbury, Millville, Northbridge, Sutton, Upton, and Uxbridge, Massachusetts. The school offers 18 vocational-technical programs and a challenging academic curriculum, as well as post-secondary programs. BVT also offers evening career technical training in Advanced Manufacturing Foundational Skills, Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning & Refrigeration, and Practical Nursing.

In addition to the schools listed above, the region also contains several comprehensive high schools that include Chapter 74 vocational programs and/or innovation pathways designated career educational programs including: Leominster, Worcester, Leicester, Webster and others.

ADDITIONAL PROGRAMS SUPPORTING THE NEXT GENERATION OF WORKFORCE

■ **YouthWorks** – The Region's Workforce Boards provide funds, made available by the State through the Commonwealth Corporation, to

support subsidized work experience for income-eligible youth ages 14-25. Work placement sites include for-profit companies, non-profit organizations, and municipalities/public agencies, allowing the program to leverage support from host site staff for supervision and mentorship. In North Central, the program is managed directly through the Workforce Board and in the Central region, the Workforce Board contracts with partner organizations to manage the program day to day.

■ **WIOA Youth** includes a comprehensive program for young people ages 14-24 who face barriers to education, training and employment. The program has 14 required elements — such as tutoring, paid and unpaid work experiences and leadership-development opportunities — and gives preference to supporting out-of-school youth. The 14 elements of WIOA produce a promising workforce of young adults for the future.

■ **MY TURN, Inc.** is a top provider of youth services in North Central MA. With locations in both Leominster and Gardner, two of the area's larger cities, MY TURN provides robust and diverse services to youth across the 27 communities that make up North Central Massachusetts. Addressing the labor force needs of North Central's communities, MY TURN's goal is to equip young people with the knowledge and skills necessary to become contributing members of the leading industries within the region.

MY TURN delivers academic & tutoring services, job readiness workshops, career pathway exploration, post-secondary education support, paid internships, occupational skills training, leadership development, entrepreneurship skills, financial literacy and much more, all with a dedicated staff offering continuous support, guidance, and counseling along the way.

Upon program completion, all participants receive twelve months of follow up support and case management

to maintain their accomplishments.

In addition to MY TURN, the Central region, also contracts with three organizations to provide WIOA Youth services:

- **Youth Opportunities Upheld, Inc.** provides occupational skill training in IT, CNA, Phlebotomy Tech, EKG training, and high school equivalency preparation, pre-employment/world of work services, enrichment workshops, and follow-up to clients in Worcester, Milford, Whitinsville, and Webster areas.

- **Worcester Community Action Council, Inc.** provides high school equivalency preparation with a concentration on career exploration and post-secondary education enrollment, pre-employment/life skills training, computer skills training, and follow-up to participants who reside in Worcester area and surrounding towns.

- **Fieldstone School** provides Nurse Aide/Home Health Aide, Phlebotomy Tech, EKG training, pre-employment skills and enrichment workshops, and follow up in the Worcester area.

■ **Connecting Activities** - In Central Massachusetts, students are presented with numerous opportunities to engage in meaningful work experiences and internships that align with the region's workforce development blueprint through the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) funded School to Career Connecting Activities program. The Workforce Boards play a crucial role in encouraging, promoting, and coordinating these efforts, particularly by collaborating closely with the region's high schools. The Workforce boards and Connecting Activities partnered schools and intermediaries prepare students to enter the workforce with the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary for success in the modern job market specifically aligned with the region's workforce development blueprint.

Every fall, partner schools are offered a menu of career readiness activities & services provided by the Workforce Boards and our partners. Depending on the school's specific needs and goals, they can choose from a variety of options, including assistance with organizing and recruiting for job fairs, coordinating field trips, inviting guest speakers, hosting career readiness workshops, and facilitating professional development for school administration and staff. These resources and supports are designed to complement each school specific needs, acknowledging the difference in industries and school districts across the region.

In the Central Region, the Workforce Board partners with the Worcester Public Schools and the Blackstone Valley Hub for Workforce Development to coordinate the various events, programs, and activities offered in partnership with more than twenty school districts in the Central Region.

A major focus of the region's workforce development blueprint is the manufacturing industry. There are six Innovation Pathway manufacturing designated schools in Central Massachusetts. Students enrolled in these programs benefit from specialized teaching, hands-on classroom experiences, and exposure to a wide array of manufacturing-specific opportunities. These include internships, job fairs, and mentorship programs, all geared towards providing students with practical skills and exposure to the manufacturing sector. Manufacturing IP students are expected to complete a 100-hour internship or capstone project prior to graduating.

In the education sector, for select students interested in pursuing careers in education, the region offers the High School Senior Education Internship Program (HSSEIP). This program allows students to participate in a 100-hour internship within their district's K-8 schools, providing valuable experience and insight into the field of education. Additionally, several districts collaborate with Fitchburg State Uni-

versity and Mount Wachusett Community College to offer educational tract training programs, further preparing students for careers in education.

In healthcare, Worcester North High School, Fitchburg High School, and our region's four vocational high schools offer dedicated Healthcare pathways to students interested in this field. Through specialized coursework and practical experiences, students gain a comprehensive understanding of the healthcare sector and are equipped with the skills needed to pursue careers in various healthcare professions.

Partner schools use Connecting Activities and the database at various levels of intensity. Connecting Activities monitor and guide youth with structured, paid & unpaid internships, and employment opportunities. Connecting Activities is designed to transform every youth employment and exposure into a work-based learning experience, with the goal of enhancing the student's job performance and future employability. Work-based learning can be credit or non-credit bearing and used for credit recovery or to meet graduation requirements.

■ **Other Youth Workforce Development Initiatives** – beyond the initiatives highlighted above there are other efforts happening and available in the central MA area that affords young people the opportunity to explore careers and increase work-readiness. These include several career technical programs happening through the DESE-funded Innovation Pathways initiative, federally-funded training through YouthBuild and Job Corps (with Centers throughout the Northeast, including two in our central area – the Grafton and Shriver Job Corps Centers), as well as a myriad of programs happening in non-school hours offered through community-based organizations, including programming aligned with the region's STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) network.

Vision, Mission, Goals



The regional planning team has established the following **vision statement** for the region's efforts:

The residents of Central MA have the skills needed to live prosperous, productive lives which support a strong regional economy.

MISSION STATEMENT:

Our mission as a collaboration of Central MA workforce stakeholders is to create a responsive and connected workforce system that prepares residents throughout their lives for living wage career opportunities by meeting the labor demand needs of our local businesses.

To support this mission, we as partners collectively agree to take ownership for actively engaging with our partners to integrate our services and develop programming that aligns with our region's workforce needs.

The regional goals that the planning team has established are:

GOAL 1: Align and coordinate regional Education, Workforce Development, and Economic Development systems.

- Convene Partnership leaders twice annually to review progress and regional labor market information, and to adjust programming and planning, as necessary.
- Interconnect existing workforce structures and membership between the partner systems to ensure real-time communication and programmatic alignment.
 - Workforce Development Boards, Youth Councils, and Adult/Career Center subcommittees
 - MassHire BizWorks regional team
 - Central and North Central WIOA Partner oversight groups
 - School industry advisory committees (including Chapter 74 career technical training program and Innovation Pathway program industry advisory committees)
- Collect business service performance and outcome data from all stakeholders to create a comprehensive regional “dashboard” report for public audience to highlight the value we collectively bring to businesses, including the development of qualified labor for the region's employers.

GOAL 2: Provide industry with a training system responsive to workforce needs.

- Ongoing coordination with the regional Mass BizWorks “response-team” to serve as the connection between businesses in need and system partners (see attachment 5 – Regional Demand-Driven Programming Development).
- Continuously Integrate business need feedback into regional Youth Council, Career Center, and partner program development processes – including Chapter 74 career technical education and Innovation pathways, Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund, and the Career Technical Training Initiative programming.
- Support the MA EOLWD Recruitment Solutions Initiative (RSI) referral process at all of the region’s MassHire Career Centers

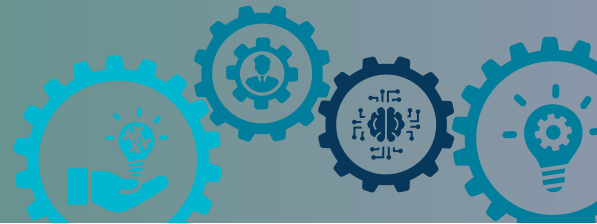
GOAL 3: Improve the foundational and work readiness/soft skills of our region’s labor force.

- Increase exposure to soft skills in high schools, colleges, training programs and career centers through the creation and expanded access to career readiness training materials.
- Increase career awareness activities in the region’s high schools – and better align them with employers and labor market information.
- Build stronger foundational computer skills for residents (both youth and adults).

GOAL 4: Close the skills gap for priority industries and occupations.

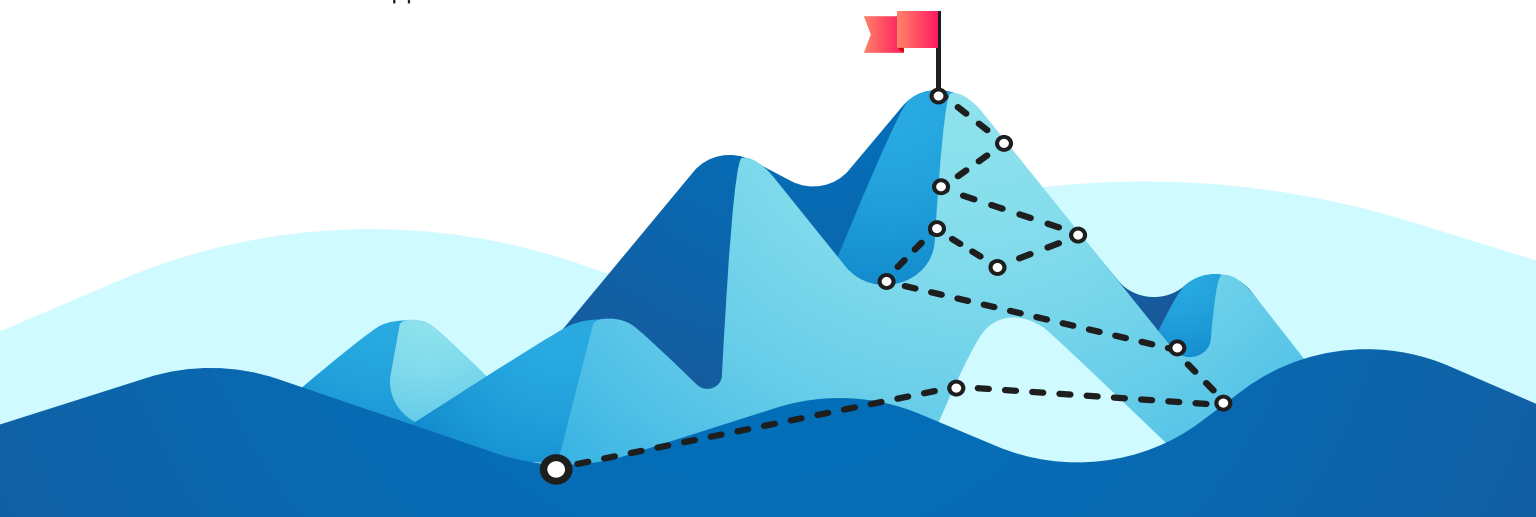
- Regularly review regional baseline measures for priority industries/ occupation goals and set target goals, including:
 - Decrease vacancy rate.
 - Increase the number of CTE program placements.
 - Improve the supply/demand ratio.
 - Increase the business utilization percentage rate for Mass BizWorks-affiliated partner services.
 - Improve career center/WIOA Partner performance (number of businesses served, job orders, job referrals, and hiring).
- Expand Career Technical Education (CTE and CTI), both day and evening, for priority industries and occupations.
- Increase exposure in secondary education to high priority industries.
- Expand incumbent worker career advancement and Registered Apprenticeships for priority industries.
- Increase contextualized ABE and ESOL programming that trains for high priority industries.
- Expand articulation agreements between education and training institutions for priority industries and occupations.

How Do We Get There?



The regional planning team has identified several strategies to achieve our goals. These include:

Strategy	Responsible entity
Sharing accountability through a Regional Partner Leadership Team (RPLT)	All (MassHire Boards to serve as convener)
Development of baseline measures and key metrics and a public outcomes dashboard report to measure our progress	RPLT
Creation of articulation agreements between educational and training institutions	K-12, higher-ed, other training partners
Expanding contextualized ABE and ESOL programming for priority industries/occupations	ABE and ESOL provider partners
Alignment of CTE programs with industry needs and expansion of off-hours programming at our Vocational Technical high schools and other training facilities	MassHire, K-12, higher-ed, other training partners
Creation of apprenticeships across priority industries	MassHire
Expansion of a regional MassHire BizWorks peer-to-peer team and real-time online platform to support their work	MassHire BizWorks
Utilizing and inter-weaving existing structures and frameworks to support our work	RPLT





CONTINUOUS COMMUNICATION

The regional planning group will continue to meet a minimum of twice per year. This will help the blueprint team to identify changes in industry trends and be able to make changes in the region's course direction, if needed. There will be regular communication with our core team through quarterly meetings to assess progress and needs. The region will also use the regional workforce development board meetings and the previously noted existing regional committees and workgroups (including WIOA partner groups, the Mass BizWorks regional team, and school industry advisory committees) to actively engage employers, share relevant information, and drive new programming.

MUTUALLY REINFORCING ACTIVITIES

Education

- Create/expand CTE and CTI programs for priority industries/occupations (high school, afterschool & evening, college) including Pell-eligible programs.
- Create new training programs in the priority industries/occupations between now and 2027, including fast-track (boot camp) style programs and competency-based programs.
- Maintain bridge programs designed as a pathway from ESL to a career technical certificate and/or associate degree.

Workforce Development

- Utilize demand-driven approach at region's MassHire Career Centers – increase referrals to job openings and training in priority industries and occupations
- Increase soft-skills training for career center customers
- Prioritize the priority industries/occupation for WIOA Youth, YouthWorks subsidized youth employment placements, and other youth career development programs
- Increase services to businesses in priority industries/occupations, including referrals to Workforce Training Fund and other resources

Economic Development

- Increase the number of business referrals from ED to workforce in priority industries and occupations
- Align business services/support data between ED and workforce systems – establish data sharing platform

