



Workforce Issuance

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☐ Policy ☒ Information

To: MassHire Workforce Board Chairs
MassHire Workforce Board Directors
MassHire Career Center Directors
MassHire Fiscal Officers
MassHire MDCS Operations Managers

cc: WIOA State Partners

From: Beth Goguen, Director
MassHire Department of Career Services

Date: September 29, 2026

Subject: **Funding Opportunity: Rural Workforce Development Innovation Initiative**

Purpose: To direct funding to address specific barriers to implementation experienced by local workforce boards with substantial rural service delivery areas, including but not limited to, barriers to transportation, lower density employers, declining populations, and smaller economies of scale.

Background: In partnership with the MassHire Department of Career Services (MDCS), the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD) has identified specific barriers faced in delivering career services and responding to employer needs in rural service areas. These areas are not densely populated and span large geographies with fewer transportation options available for jobseekers, students, and employers. In addition, these areas often include communities that are post-industrial and no longer have a density of employers, increasing the barrier to delivering services to networks of many small employers.

EOLWD has identified the need to address these issues through a targeted funding opportunity for the current fiscal year.

1. Funding opportunity

In partnership with MDCS, EOLWD will deploy up to \$500,000 of WIOA discretionary funding to scale locally driven strategies for addressing workforce development in identified rural communities. Two to four local workforce boards will be chosen after receipt of responses for grants of up to \$150,000 per board, with a total statewide cap of \$500,000 allocated to this opportunity during the pilot phase. Each board will be eligible for a Rural Workforce Development Innovation Funding grant of \$100,000 with additional allocations for innovative regional strategies between partner boards. Funds will be expendable from November 1, 2026 to September 30, 2028. Mid-grant evaluations may lead to further funding opportunities for successful pilot efforts.

2. Qualifying boards

Boards eligible for this grant opportunity must have at least 15% of their service area population residing in Level 2 Rural Communities, as designated through the Massachusetts Department of Public Health definition of a rural community. This designation includes Berkshires, Franklin/Hampshire, and the Cape and Islands workforce development areas.

3. Innovative strategy implementation

Boards must complete the attached ***Request for Information*** that includes specific information for how the Board proposes using the funds to address the needs of delivering workforce development services in rural areas within the defined workforce area. Boards are encouraged to explore new ways to deliver services with the funding opportunity and to ensure that sustainable operations are developed for service delivery. Boards should identify key barriers the funding is intended to address and metrics for tracking progress on impacting those barriers. Proposed strategies may involve new staffing models, transportation incentives, marketing, partnerships with CBOs, Chambers of Commerce, or economic development entities, or other strategies boards identify for addressing the needs of rural workforce development.

Boards that meet the qualifying standards will also be eligible for up to \$50,000 in additional funding to implement strategies that involve collaboration with other workforce boards. Boards pursuing this additional funding should create a shared collaborative with up to two other workforce boards to pursue regional strategies. The additional funding request will be evaluated as a single request among the two or three boards as submitted. Each board will receive a portion of the regional funding to execute the model described in the RFI response.

4. Documentation

Qualifying Boards should submit information specific to the use of the Innovation grant funds, data relevant to current state limitations for service delivery and for expected impact and outcomes, information about how the funds will be budgeted, and a combined narrative with partner workforce boards for the additional regional funding allocation.

Action

Required: MassHire Local Workforce Development boards are encouraged to respond to the attached RFI by no later than October 21, 2026. Eligible boards are encouraged to share this issuance with CBOs, Chambers of Commerce, and local economic development organizations for potential partnership opportunities on the grant.

Effective: September 29, 2026

Request for Information (RFI)

Rural Workforce Development Innovation Funding

Issued: September 29, 2026

Responses Due: October 21, 2026

Submit To: Lisa Caissie, MassHire Department of Career Services Lisa.J.Caissie@mass.gov

Purpose

The Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD), in partnership with the MassHire Department of Career Services (MDCS) is seeking information from eligible MassHire Local Workforce Development Boards regarding strategies to improve workforce development service delivery within rural communities. Information received through this RFI will be used to evaluate proposals for funding under the FY2027 Rural Workforce Development Innovation Initiative.

Up to \$500,000 in Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) discretionary funding will be awarded to support innovative, scalable, and sustainable approaches that address the unique workforce challenges experienced in rural service areas.

Eligible boards may request:

- **Innovation Grant Funding:** Up to **\$100,000** for board-specific initiatives.
- **Regional Collaboration Funding:** Up to **\$50,000** additional for collaborative initiatives involving two or three eligible workforce boards.

Section I – Applicant Information

Provide the following:

- Workforce Development Board Name
- Executive Director
- Primary Contact for this proposal (include name and title)
- Contact Information for Primary Contact
- Service Area
- Counties and Communities Served
- Documentation supporting eligibility

Section II – Innovation Funding Request

(Questions 1–6)

Question 1 – Rural Workforce Challenges

Describe the most significant workforce development barriers within your rural service area.

(175 word limit)

Please include:

- Geographic service delivery challenges
- Transportation limitations
- Employer characteristics and trends
- Population trends
- Other local barriers affecting workforce service delivery

Question 2 – Current Service Delivery Model

Describe your current workforce service delivery model and how the board delivers services to the most rural communities within the board area.

(175 word limit)

Include:

- Physical service locations
- Mobile or virtual services
- Staffing structure
- Employer engagement activities
- Existing partnerships

Within this question and the next, identify limitations in the current model that this funding would address. Include current data where applicable about difference in ability to deliver service in rural areas vs the denser areas the board covers. For example, per-capita comparisons of workforce area services delivered in significantly rural communities vs more dense communities in workforce area.

Question 3 – Proposed Strategy and Innovation

Describe the strategy you propose to implement using the Innovation funding. The description of the model proposal should include ways to address the areas identified in the previous question.

(250 word limit)

Explain:

- Activities proposed to be funded

- Why this approach was selected
- How it addresses identified barriers
- How it improves access for jobseekers and employers

Examples may include:

- New staffing models
- Mobile services
- Transportation solutions
- Technology-based service delivery
- Partnerships
- Employer engagement models
- Other locally developed innovations

Explain why this proposed strategy represents an improvement over current practices and include metrics the implementation will track to ensure progress in addressing rural barriers. Example metrics may include but are not limited to, rural business services delivered, new rural business relationships resulting from the pilot, rural jobseekers' skills gains, rural jobseekers finding employment, rural jobseekers receiving credentials, or other specific data points. Baseline data should be included in application if available.

Question 4 – Expected Outcomes and Performance Measures

Describe the measurable outcomes your board expects to achieve through this pilot. Boards are encouraged to create a data reporting sheet and submit as part of the RFI response.

Include:

- Performance metrics
- Baseline data (if available)
- Expected improvements, including financial changes for long-term service implementation
- Timeline for achieving results

Examples may include:

- Increased participant access
- Employer engagement
- Job placements
- Credential attainment
- Reduced transportation barriers
- Expanded outreach

Boards will be expected to submit quarterly reports on initiatives they are pursuing with the additional funding to support rural service delivery.

Question 5 – Sustainability

Describe how your proposed activities may be sustained after grant funding ends.

(175 word limit)

Include:

- Long-term funding plans
- Operational changes
- Partner commitments
- Strategies for ongoing implementation

Question 6 – Budget and Implementation Timeline

Provide in spreadsheet form with attached description:

- A summary budget by major cost category
- Proposed timeline for implementation
- Anticipated major milestones
- Responsible staff and/or partners

Describe how proposed expenditures will directly support the proposed activities.

Section III – Regional Collaboration Funding (Optional)

(Questions 7–12)

Each MassHire Board seeking additional regional funding must submit this section. Local boards that are partnering with each other will submit the same language in each of their own applications describing the regional effort. Partnering boards with successful proposals will each receive the additional collaboration funding.

Question 7 – Regional Partnership

(200 word limit)

Identify participating workforce boards and describe:

- The regional workforce challenges shared among participating boards
- Why collaboration is necessary to support the goals of the pilot

- Governance and decision-making structure
- Roles and responsibilities of each board
- Include any additional CBO or local partners that will play a role in the project

Question 8 – Regional Strategy

Describe the collaborative initiative.

(250 words limit)

Explain:

- Proposed activities to be implemented jointly
- Shared services or infrastructure
- Regional employer engagement strategies
- Expected benefits that cannot be achieved independently

Question 9 – Regional Outcomes

Describe the expected regional impact.

Include a table of metrics the board will be tracking with a 200-word narrative limit.

Include:

- Shared performance measures
- Regional outcomes
- Data collection methods
- Evaluation approach
- Success indicators for the collaboration

Question 10 – Regional Budget and Sustainability

Provide (175 word limit):

- Combined regional budget
- Funding allocation by participating board
- Description of each board's responsibilities
- Long-term sustainability plan for the regional initiative after grant funding concludes

Required Attachments

Applicants shall include the following:

1. Data supporting identified workforce challenges.
2. Proposed Innovation funding budget.
3. Project implementation timeline.
4. Letters of commitment from key partners, if applicable.
5. For regional requests, a jointly signed memorandum of understanding (MOU) or letter of commitment from participating workforce boards.

Evaluation Considerations

Responses will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

Category	Considerations
Need	Demonstrated workforce challenges and barriers in rural communities
Strategy	Clear, feasible, and innovative approach to addressing identified needs
Impact	Measurable outcomes and likelihood of improving workforce service delivery
Sustainability	Ability to continue successful strategies beyond the grant period
Organizational Capacity	Experience managing workforce initiatives and partnerships
Budget	Reasonableness and alignment of proposed expenditures
Regional Collaboration (if applicable)	Strength of partnership, shared governance, regional impact, and scalability