

Case Study



The Workforce Opportunity for Rural Communities Initiative

Place-Based Workforce Development in Appalachia, the Lower Mississippi Delta and the Northern Border Regions of the United States



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Overview



Location	The United States, focusing on the Appalachian (13 states), Lower Mississippi Delta (eight states) and Northern Border regions (four states)
Initiative	The <i>Workforce Opportunity for Rural Communities Initiative</i>
Program snapshot	In 2019, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration partnered with the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Delta Regional Authority — two regional economic development agencies — to launch the <i>Workforce Opportunity for Rural Communities (WORC) Initiative</i>. In 2023, the initiative expanded to include the Northern Border Regional Commission. Since its launch, six rounds of grants have invested over \$209 million in 158 projects. The initiative awards grants to locally administered, place-based workforce development projects in rural communities that are grappling with long-term economic distress linked to the decline of traditional industries, such as coal mining, forestry and manufacturing. In 2024, the initiative’s sixth funding round expanded eligibility for so-called energy communities, including those with brownfields and areas with a coal-plant or -mine closure, to link rural workforce development with decarbonization goals. The <i>WORC Initiative</i> supports projects that identify and address regional workforce needs and boost local employers’ competitiveness. Its goal is to help communities retain residents by connecting them to family-sustaining, in-demand and quality jobs through career training and supportive services. Examples of funded projects include locally delivered up-skilling and retraining programs, vocational training and apprenticeships, career counselling and entrepreneurship support, short-term certification and qualification programs and initiatives to build employment pipelines with local employers.
Sector focus	Projects are driven by local conditions and priorities. The 158 grant projects to date span sectors such as health care, trade, information technology, aviation, manufacturing, aerospace, clean energy and agricultural technology.
Time frame	Launched in 2019, the <i>WORC Initiative</i> completed six grant rounds between 2019 and 2024. A seventh round is currently under development. ²

2 The president’s budget for the 2025 fiscal year requested \$50 million for the grant program, and the Northern Border Regional Commission notes that a funding announcement is under preparation. Actual funding will depend on the final appropriations process, which could be impacted by President Trump’s most recent budget proposal for fiscal year 2026. The latter includes significant cuts to the Department of Labor and select regional commissions (Executive Office of the President, 2025).



Foundations of the Transition

Background and context

The *Workforce Opportunity for Rural Communities (WORC) Initiative* targets skills training and workforce development as a primary tool for addressing industrial decline and economic distress in three U.S. regions.

Since the last funding round in 2024, the initiative explicitly supports the net-zero transition by directing funds to so-called energy communities, such as those with brownfields and areas affected by coal-plant or -mine closures (Interagency Working Group on Coal and Power Plant Communities and Economic Revitalization, n.d.a, n.d.b). Rural communities in the United States face persistent challenges in areas such as education, infrastructure and broadband access (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). Since the 1980s, regional inequality in the United States has widened (Andes, 2019), producing growing disparities in health, housing markets and labour markets (Shambaugh & Nunn, 2018). Nationwide income inequality aligns with these regional gaps: the U.S. Gini index — a statistical measure of income distribution in which higher scores indicate greater concentration of income among top earners — rose from 34.7 in 1980 to 41.3 in 2022 (World Bank, n.d.).

These trends reflect shifts in local economies in which global competition and technological advancements have disadvantaged traditional economic development strategies reliant on industries such as manufacturing (Andes, 2019). Between 1979 and 2019, the U.S. manufacturing industry, including both durable and non-durable goods, lost more than 6.7 million jobs, over one-third of the sector's 1979 workforce (Harris, 2020). Regions reliant on fossil fuel industries, particularly coal, have also been hit hard by shifting energy markets and technology (Lawhorn et al., 2023). Between 2005 and 2015, employment in the U.S. coal industry fell by about 27 per cent, with job losses heavily concentrated in the Appalachian region, where coal mining employment fell from more than 52,000 to less than 38,000 workers (Bowen et al., 2018). These concentrated layoffs in coal communities have shrunk local tax bases, affecting areas with limited economic diversification especially hard (Lawhorn et al., 2023).

In 2019, the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration partnered with the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and the Delta Regional Authority (DRA) — two statutorily chartered federal-state regional economic development bodies co-chaired by state and federal representatives — to launch the *WORC Initiative* (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.a). In 2023, the initiative expanded to include the

Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC). The *WORC Initiative* aims to address historic regional inequities and foster positive employment outcomes in the Appalachian, Delta and Northern Border regions (see Figure 1) (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023).

The *WORC Initiative* funds community-led, locally administered and place-based projects that tackle local workforce gaps in rural communities in three U.S. regions hit hard by industrial decline, economic distress and slower recovery in recent decades (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.a). The initiative takes a long-term view to promote community economic resilience and diversification. Grant-funded projects are required to propose bottom-up and wholistic solutions that align with existing community-led local economic development plans, workforce development strategies and relevant state-level strategic plans. This alignment reinforces the *WORC Initiative's* comprehensive, place-based and bottom-up approach to tackling long-standing challenges in the regions (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023).

Appalachia (13 states) — Driven by stricter environmental rules, automation, industrial transformation and global market shifts, the decline of coal and mining industries has depressed incomes and increased poverty in the Appalachian region (Bowen et al., 2021). Central Appalachia has been hardest hit; between 2018 and 2022, its median household income was \$46,722, substantially below the U.S. national median income of \$75,149, and its poverty rate was 21.7 per cent versus 12.5 per cent nationally (Srygley et al., 2024). Meanwhile, 20.1 per cent of Central Appalachian households received benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, compared with 11.5 per cent nationwide (Srygley et al., 2024). Persisting opioid addiction (Schalkoff et al., 2021) and mass incarceration (Perdue, 2018) have further strained the region.

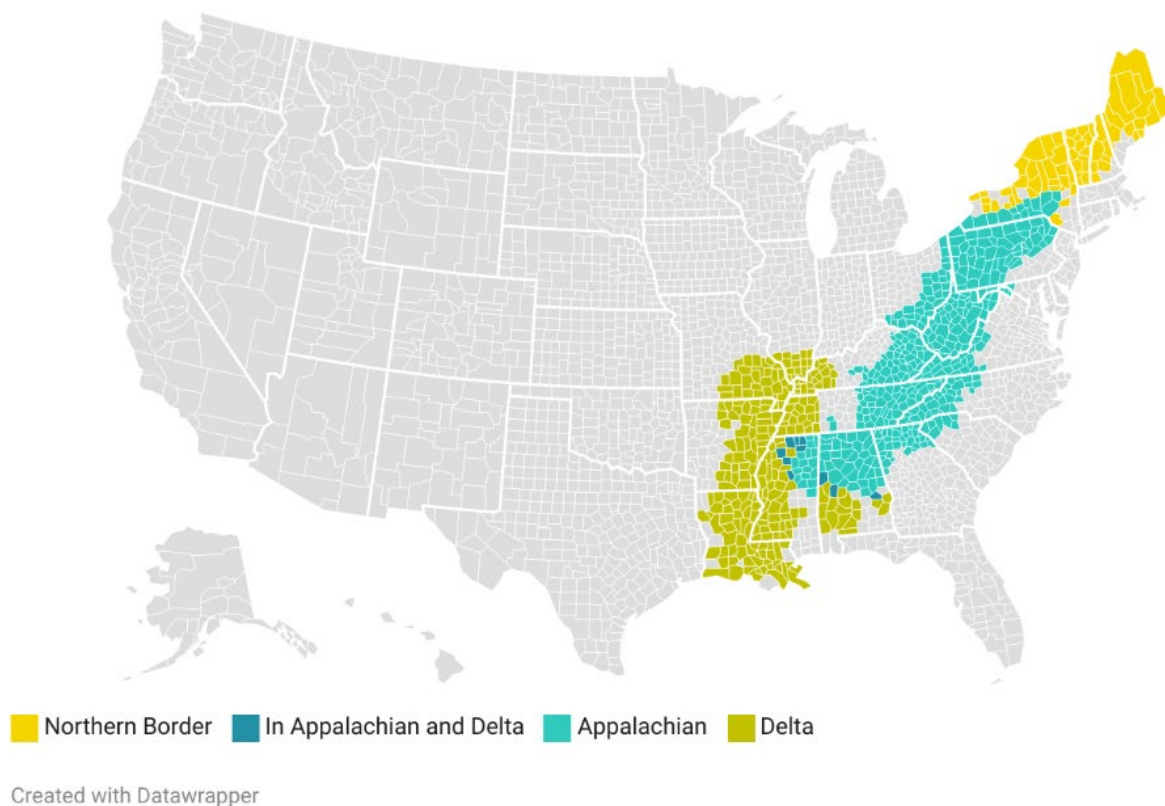
Lower Mississippi Delta (eight states) — The Lower Mississippi Delta region faces deep-rooted gaps in infrastructure, education and health-care access (DRA, n.d.a). In 2019, the local unemployment rate reached 6.5 per cent, compared with 3.5 per cent nationally, and labour force participation was 57.3 per cent versus 63 per cent nationwide (Forbes et al., 2021). The region's poverty rate is twice the national average, and its workers have lower education-attainment rates, with

high school completion rates 10 per cent below the national average (Forbes et al., 2021). Frequent natural disasters, especially flooding, have further strained the living and employment conditions of predominantly rural African American communities (Lower Mississippi Delta, n.d.; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2024).

Northern Border (four states) — The region has struggled with the decline of its forest-based industries, aging population and youth out-migration (NBRC, n.d.a). From 2003 to 2013, the region's population over the age of 65 increased by nearly 22 per cent (NBRC, n.d.a). The region's median household income has remained below the U.S. average — \$70,392, compared with \$75,149 nationally, between 2018 and 2022 — and has even fallen to \$50,843 in some distressed counties (NBRC, 2025).



FIGURE 1:
Map of the Appalachian Regional Commission, Delta Regional Authority and Northern Border Regional Commission



Source: Institute for Research on Public Policy based on compiled data from the respective commissions and authorities.

Enablers

The U.S. Congress has sought to tackle persisting regional disparities by creating eight federal–state regional development commissions and authorities (Lawhorn, 2024), starting with the ARC in 1965. Chartered by statutes,² these intergovernmental bodies receive federal funding for their administration and programs, operate under congressional oversight and include federal representatives in their leadership structures (Lawhorn, 2024).

² Regional development commissions and authorities are established by specific acts of Congress, which also define their powers, funding authority and governance.

The ARC’s original mission was to support the 13-state Appalachian region in economically aligning itself with the rest of the United States (Lawhorn, 2024). This mission has since expanded to include boosting the region’s competitiveness amid shifting global economic trends (Lawhorn, 2024). This included various amendments to the *Appalachian Regional Development Act*, such as those in 2002 that widened support for human-capital development and added a new emphasis on ecological issues and those in 2008 that established an economic and energy development initiative (Lawhorn, 2024). Seven additional regional commissions and authorities, modelled on the ARC, deliver place-based programs in infrastructure, energy, environment and workforce development (Lawhorn, 2024). All rely on close co-ordination with local partners, knitting federal and state priorities to local conditions and needs (Lawhorn, 2024).



The *WORC Initiative* has been integrated into the U.S. Rural Partners Network, which helps rural communities access federal resources and funding (DRA, n.d.b). The initiative was also aligned with the Justice40 Initiative, a project of former president Joe Biden's administration that directed 40 per cent of select federal investments to disadvantaged communities that had historically faced under-investment and pollution (The White House, n.d.). The executive order that authorized the Justice40 Initiative was rescinded by President Donald Trump upon taking office in January 2025 (Jones, 2025).

Place-based strategy

Locally-driven partnerships ensure co-ordination across multiple community stakeholders, including employers, educators, unions, local governments and civic groups. Grant applicants are encouraged to work through wide community coalitions (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). All projects are integrated into and aligned with state and regional economic development strategies, ensuring a tailored, locally relevant approach to addressing workforce challenges (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). This place-based strategy allows the *WORC Initiative* to support a wide range of projects that support skills-based training tailored to the specific economic conditions and local characteristics of each community, rather than using a one-size-fits-all national approach. Projects include locally delivered, sector-specific upskilling and retraining programs, vocational training and apprenticeship programs, facility renewal and building (which cover renovating and equipping existing public or private training facilities to expand local workforce capacity), career counselling and employment services, entrepreneurship support, short-term certification and qualification programs and initiatives to build employment pipelines with local employers.

Addressing net-zero transition workforce challenges

The *WORC Initiative* builds workforce capacity and supports place-based skills development in rural regions of the United States that might otherwise struggle to participate in and benefit from the transition to a net-zero economy. By acknowledging the interrelated nature of net-zero challenges and economic distress in rural communities, the *WORC Initiative's* latest funding round expanded eligibility for energy communities, which are defined as communities with brownfields (polluted sites), census tracts (and their neighbouring tracts) with a coal-fired power plant or coal-mine closure and census tracts that meet certain employment and revenue thresholds (Interagency Working Group on Coal and Power Plant Communities and Economic Revitalization, n.d.a, n.d.b). Table 1 illustrates the main challenges commonly associated with net-zero transitions and shows how the *WORC Initiative* is well positioned to address them.



TABLE 1.
The *WORC Initiative*'s strategies to mitigate key workforce challenges in the net-zero transition

Potential challenges	The <i>WORC Initiative</i> 's strategies to mitigate potential challenges
Workforce displacement	Communities in the Appalachian, Delta and Northern Border regions have been hit hard by industrial decline and economic distress. Where job losses in the coal industry have been acute, such as in Central Appalachia, workers could face displacement without re-skilling and new job opportunities. Through the U.S. Department of Labor's Dislocated Worker Grants, <i>WORC Initiative</i> funds have targeted local re-employment services, retraining and temporary jobs for workers displaced by plant closures or mass layoffs.
Skills mismatches	As traditional industries, such as manufacturing, forestry and mining, decline, workers may lack the skills necessary to transition to new jobs and industries in their communities. <i>WORC</i> -funded projects provide sector-specific training, build employment pipelines with local employers, offer entrepreneurship support and career navigation services and help participants earn short-term certificates and qualifications.
Lack of diversity and inclusion	Historically disadvantaged communities, including the predominantly rural African American populations in the Delta region, face high poverty, social disparities and limited access to quality jobs. The <i>WORC Initiative</i> was aligned with the Justice40 Initiative, which directed 40 per cent of federal investments to disadvantaged communities that were facing historical under-investment and pollution. Funding Opportunity Announcements have widened the applicant pool to include governments of different levels, workforce development boards, school districts or education agencies, public or private higher education institutions, tribal governments and organizations, housing authorities and non-profits, especially those serving minority groups. <i>WORC</i> -funded projects identify local marginalized and disadvantaged groups with needs in employment and skills and provide tailored employment services and tools. Beneficiaries include women, veterans and military personnel, individuals impacted by substance use disorder, inmates and formerly incarcerated individuals, youth, Indigenous Peoples, new entrants to the labour force and incumbent workers.
Insufficient training infrastructure and delivery	Lack of sufficient training facilities and resources to meet the growing demand for the green economy can create bottlenecks in skills development, contributing to worker shortages. Projects funded through the <i>WORC Initiative</i> provide locally designed and delivered up-skilling and retraining programs, vocational training and apprenticeship programs, facility renewal and building, career counselling and employment services and entrepreneurship support, enabling residents to re-skill and up-skill without relocating.

Potential challenges	<i>The WORC Initiative's strategies to mitigate potential challenges</i>
Barriers to geographic mobility	As local traditional industries, such as coal mining, manufacturing and forestry, decline, some U.S. regions face population stagnation or even out-migration. <i>WORC</i> -funded projects provide place-based training and career development services as well as tools to assist impacted individuals with locally driven solutions. By connecting workers to family-sustaining, in-demand and quality local jobs, the <i>WORC Initiative</i> helps communities keep their population and talent at home.
Lack of cross-sector collaboration	Cross-sector collaboration and community-wide coalitions are key elements of the projects funded through the <i>WORC Initiative</i> . Projects must integrate with state-level strategic plans and regional economic development strategies to ensure comprehensive co-ordination across sectors and efforts. By bringing local partners together to develop place-based skills programs and by ensuring that these projects align with state and regional economic development strategies, <i>WORC</i> projects leverage local networks to tackle complex regional workforce challenges.
Income insecurity	Industrial transformations and global trends can result in job losses — the coal industry alone shed more than 34,000 Appalachian jobs between 2011 and 2022, leaving many rural households with lost income and mounting financial instability. <i>WORC</i> projects provide supportive services that cushion income insecurity through stipends and wraparound supports, including child or dependent care, housing aid, transport passes, health and financial counselling and certification-fee assistance to keep workers afloat during retraining. Projects generally aim to assist affected workers with family-sustaining employment opportunities that provide stable income.

Source: Institute for Research on Public Policy based on Andes, 2019; ARC & DRA, n.d.a, n.d.b; Bowen et al., 2018, 2021; Bureau of Business and Economic Research, 2023; Employment and Training Administration, 2024; Forbes et al., 2021; Lawhorn et al., 2023; NBRC, n.d.a; Srygley et al., 2024; U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.a, 2020, 2024; The White House, n.d.





Program Implementation

Program delivery

The *WORC Initiative* operates through a partnership between the U.S. Department of Labor (federal level) and three regional economic development commissions and authorities (the ARC, DRA and NBRC).

It delivers competitive grants to locally administered, place-based workforce development programs in economically distressed rural communities across states in the Appalachian, Delta and Northern Border regions. Launched in September 2019, the *WORC Initiative's* first round of grants awarded \$150,000 to \$2.5 million per project in the ARC and DRA regions (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). The initiative has now completed six rounds of funding and granted over \$209 million to 158 projects across three regional commissions and authorities (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.a). The initiative expanded to include the NBRC in 2023.

The *WORC Initiative's* Funding Opportunity Announcements emphasize collaboration that demonstrates a “strong and diverse community-wide coalition” (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024, p. 7). The initiative welcomes applicants from diverse backgrounds, including governments of different levels,

workforce development boards, school districts or education agencies, public or private higher education institutions, tribal governments and organizations, housing authorities and non-profits, especially those serving minority groups (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024). Applicants are expected to design projects that will reach individuals from historically marginalized groups, such as Black people, Indigenous Peoples, people of colour, women, veterans, people with disabilities and individuals without a college degree (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024).

Regional commissions and authorities partner closely with local development districts (LDDs), which are multi-county planning organizations that facilitate community-based economic development by leveraging local partnerships guided by community leaders, local businesses and other stakeholders (ARC, n.d.b). Familiar with federal programs and local needs, LDDs provide administrative assistance to local grantees (NBRC, n.d.a). They also conduct local outreach and provide feedback to the commission to improve services. LDDs enable programs such as the *WORC Initiative* to reach smaller, rural communities that often face barriers to economic-diversification planning and to applying for federal programs (Interagency Working Group on

Coal and Power Plant Communities and Economic Revitalization, 2023). States develop their priorities with input from the LDDs (Lawhorn, 2024), and LDDs advise on local priorities, conduct outreach and administer grants, receiving fees from the grant awards for their administrative work (Lawhorn, 2024).

Governance and funding

WORC grants are funded entirely through the U.S. Department of Labor's Dislocated Worker Grants (DWG; U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.b). DWGs are competitive discretionary federal funds that support displaced workers in areas affected by emergencies and natural disasters or major economic events (Lawhorn et al., 2023). The *WORC Initiative* falls under the Employment Recovery DWGs, strengthening local capacity to deliver training and services to dislocated workers who have experienced qualifying events, such as a plant closure or mass layoff (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.b). DWGs fund re-employment services, such as retraining for career changes and access to temporary jobs to alleviate the immediate impacts of a crisis (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024). For the 2025 fiscal year, the U.S. Department of Labor (n.d.c) requested \$1.37 billion from the federal budget to support the Dislocated Worker program, of which \$50 million was requested for the *WORC Initiative's* annual appropriation. The House of Representatives' Committee on Appropriations

followed up with a proposed \$55 million for the *WORC Initiative* — a \$5 million increase — signalling continued federal commitment to the initiative (House of Representatives, 2024).

Regional economic development commissions and authorities administer the *WORC Initiative*. They are not typical federal agencies; rather, they are federally chartered entities that integrate federal funding and direction into state and local economic development priorities. These intergovernmental regional commissions and authorities give the U.S. Congress a vehicle to support strategic economic development at the local level and across state jurisdictions (Lawhorn, 2024). The commissions and authorities are primarily governed by state-based commissioners, and federal representatives serve as co-chairs (Lawhorn, 2024; Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.a). Activities of the regional commissions and authorities are subject to congressional oversight, and the administrative costs of the commissions and authorities are shared equally between the federal and state governments (Lawhorn, 2024).

By statute, each regional commission or authority must direct a portion of its overall funding toward counties formally classified as distressed (Lawhorn, 2024). The ARC devotes at least 50 per cent of its funding to counties identified as distressed based on a composite index that includes three-year unemployment, per-capita market income and poverty rates. The DRA channels 75 per cent of its funds to counties or parishes whose unemployment exceeds the national U.S. average by more than 1 percentage point for 24 months and whose per-capita income is less than 80 per cent of the national level, with half of that amount reserved for basic infrastructure and transportation. The NBRC allocates 50 per cent of its funds to counties (or isolated areas of distress) that exhibit persistent poverty, high unemployment or sustained out-migration. Projects are ranked and funded through commission votes at the NBRC (Lawhorn, 2024).

The *WORC Initiative* launched in 2019, awarding over \$29 million to 18 projects in its first year (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.a). In its sixth round in 2024, nearly \$45 million supported 32 new projects across 18 states. To date, the *WORC Initiative* has invested over \$209 million in 158 grant projects through its six funding rounds (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.a).



Implementation challenges and adaptations

As a place-based workforce development program, the *WORC Initiative* is highly adaptive to local contexts. However, as noted by the Interagency Working Group on Coal and Power Plant Communities and Economic Revitalization (2023), one of the most significant barriers to implementing federal place-based policies is the lack of local capacity to access resources, convene stakeholders and meet cost-sharing requirements. Rural non-profit organizations, in particular, face challenges in securing competitive federal grants (Walters, 2020). To address local capacity challenges, the *WORC Initiative* allows funds to go toward activities such as establishing or expanding partnerships that last beyond the length of the grant (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.a). Partnerships with LDDs are also important for supporting local applicants and addressing barriers to participation. These LDDs conduct local outreach, and they lead and leverage local partnerships with guidance from community leaders, local businesses and other stakeholders (ARC, n.d.b). Their familiarity with both federal assistance programs and local needs make LDDs effective at providing administrative assistance to local grantees (NBRC, n.d.).

Like many place-based programs, the *WORC Initiative* faces challenges when standardizing reporting and tracking outcomes at a high level. Given that each region and community has unique characteristics, it is important that local projects account for local expectations of growth and outcomes (Crane & Fenstermaker, 2024). To address this, the *WORC Initiative* provides some flexibility for reporting on project outcomes. At the time of application, initiative applicants must demonstrate both immediate employment outcomes addressing project-specific challenges as well as long-term benefits that align with the program's three core principles (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). These three core principles include promoting the availability of good jobs, which could include expanding the number of good jobs and increasing skills to attain good jobs and expected wage increases; prioritizing equity, which could include recruiting marginalized individuals, ensuring underserved groups have access to effective workforce programs and redesigning existing services to include a focus on equitable recruitment and outcomes; and driving and sustaining economic transformation, which could include an explanation of how the grant-funded activities will continue to provide benefits after the end of the project and how they enable residents to remain in their community (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024).





Impact and Relevance

Outcomes to date

Comprehensive, program-wide results are not yet available. Most *WORC* projects are still in their early stages, and their workforce development impact will depend on the success of complementary economic-development efforts and on the stability of federal appropriations, funding that could contract if a federal administration shifts policy or budget priorities.

Some *WORC*-funded projects focus on urgent needs unique to the regional demographic and workforce landscape. For example, the Sustaining Future Farms in Louisiana project, funded in 2021, is aimed at addressing the state's aging and declining farming population by providing students at Louisiana State University Eunice with a free Introduction to Agriculture course and with skills-based training to support "the next generation of technologically advanced farmers" (Louisiana State University, 2022, para. 1). In 2023, a group of four school districts in Maine developed a coordinated system of supports and training opportunities to expose high school students to careers in predominant regional industries, including forestry, tourism, hospitality and outdoor recreation (ARC & DRA, n.d.c).

Other projects provide training and qualification in high-paying industries to retain new entrants and future workers in their communities. For example, the Kentucky Dataseam Initiative, funded in 2022, designed a two-year, three-phase IT apprenticeship program to provide public school students with paid information technology experience that would enable future high-paying, stable careers (ARC, n.d.c). The Mid-South Advanced Automation and Robotics Center at the University of Memphis, which was awarded a *WORC* grant in 2020, is focused on providing students with high-quality career pathways by delivering certificate-based training in high-demand automation technologies that support the local material handling and manufacturing industries (ARC & DRA, n.d.d).

At the time of application, projects must demonstrate how they will meet the immediate, specific challenges outlined in their project description and statement of need as well as how they will deliver long-term benefits that achieve the purpose of the *WORC Initiative* (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). At a minimum, applicants must estimate how many participants will obtain new or improved employment outcomes and how many participants they will engage in grant-funded services. Additional points are awarded to applicants who demonstrate their alignment with the program's core principles: "promoting availability of good jobs," "prioritizing equity" and "driving and sustaining economic transformation" (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023, p. 22–23).



Lessons learned and relevance to Canada

✓ Lesson 1

Harmonization of workforce training and economic development strategies

The *WORC Initiative* demonstrates that workforce development projects can effectively integrate with broader economic development strategies. This type of wholistic integration has long been called for by scholars, practitioners and policymakers in the United States (Gilothe, 2000; Harper-Anderson, 2008). By requiring alignment with existing community-led plans, state-level strategic priorities and regional development strategies, the *WORC Initiative* ensures that interventions directly support local skills needs and economies. Rather than a one-size-fits-all national policy, local partnerships drive programs tailored to unique regional conditions and workforce priorities. Canada's forthcoming *2025 Sustainable Jobs Action Plan* could similarly map congruencies between federal, provincial or territorial and regional economic development and workforce priorities to support the net-zero transition.

✓ Lesson 2

Leveraging regional economic development organizations

U.S. regional commissions and authorities and Canada's Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) share important similarities. Both focus on regional economic development that aligns with federal government goals. They operate across geographic boundaries (states in the United States and provinces and territories in Canada) and leverage local organizations to support rural communities in need of additional assistance (local development districts in the United States and Community Futures organizations in Canada; ARC, n.d.b; Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2019). Unlike the U.S. commissions' explicit workforce mandate, Canada's RDAs focus on supporting businesses, entrepreneurs and innovators (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2024). RDAs could do more to integrate these efforts with regional workforce development and training

opportunities. For instance, RDAs could be key to achieving the country's Innovation and Skills Plan. Yet, in the government's progress tracker for the plan, five out of the six mentions of the RDAs address investment attraction or firm growth, with none in the "People and Skills" section (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2020). Skills-related programming largely falls under the mandate of Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC); co-ordination between RDAs and ESDC would be needed to ensure that the RDAs' business-growth supports and that ESDC-led workforce initiatives reinforce one another rather than operate in silos. Strengthening Canada's RDA links to workforce development would mirror the *WORC Initiative*'s integrated approach.

✓ Lesson 3

Bottom-up, community-led project approach to skills development

The *WORC Initiative* recognizes that communities, residents and local workers are best suited to understand their unique workforce- and skills-development challenges and needs. Unlike top-down federal policies, the *WORC Initiative* shows how local project design and community-wide coalitions can deliver a wide range of local, context-specific creative solutions. In Canada, education is a provincial responsibility, but labour market policy is shared among federal, provincial and territorial governments. A substantial portion of employment and skills training is funded and delivered through bilateral Labour Market Development Agreements between the federal, provincial and territorial governments (Bonen & Oschinski, 2021). Other skills training initiatives, such as those delivered through Canada's interim *Sustainable Jobs Plan* for 2023 to 2025, are delivered by federal departments, such as Employment and Social Development Canada (Natural Resources Canada, 2023). Given this complex ecosystem, Canada should integrate more bottom-up, community-led approaches to skills development, particularly when designing new federal initiatives and during the renegotiation or amendments of the Labour Market Development Agreements.



Appendix A

URLs and Official Websites

Programs, Initiatives and Strategic Frameworks

Workforce Opportunity for Rural Communities (WORC) Initiative

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/dislocated-workers/grants/workforce-opportunity>

National Dislocated Worker Grants (DWG)

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/dislocated-workers>

Justice40 Initiative

<https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/environmentaljustice/justice40/>

Rural Partners Network

<https://dra.gov/resources/federal-initiatives/rural-partners-network/>

Organizations and Implementing Bodies

United States Department of Labour, Employment and Training Administration

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta>

Appalachian Regional Commission

<https://www.arc.gov/>

Delta Regional Authority

<https://dra.gov/>

Northern Border Regional Commission

<https://www.nbrc.gov/>

Local Development Districts

<https://www.nbrc.gov/content/about-local-development-districts>

<https://www.arc.gov/map/local-development-districts>

<https://dra.gov/resources/local-development-districts/>

Canadian Policies and Organizations Mentioned for Comparison

Employment and Social Development Canada

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development.html>

Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada

<https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/ised/en>

Regional Development Agencies

<https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/ised/en/canadas-regional-development-agencies>

Community Futures Organizations

<https://communityfuturescanada.ca/>

Interim Sustainable Jobs Plan (2023-2025)

<https://natural-resources.canada.ca/transparency/reporting-and-accountability/plans-and-performance-reports/sustainable-jobs-plan/25381>

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