

# **Southwest Planning Region**

## **Local Workforce Development Areas**

Allegheny County

City of Pittsburgh

Southwest Corner

Tri-County

Westmoreland-Fayette

**Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act**

**Multi-Year Regional Plan**

**PY2025 - PY2028**

Effective: July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2029

## 1.1. Identify the Region

Regional Plan Effective Date: July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2029

Workforce Development Region: Southwest Planning Region

Local workforce development areas that comprise the region:

- Allegheny County Workforce Development Area (SW005)
  - *Counties:* Allegheny County
- City of Pittsburgh Workforce Development Area (SW095)
  - *Counties:* Allegheny County
- Southwest Corner Workforce Development Area (SW165)
  - *Counties:* Beaver County, Greene County, and Washington County.
- Tri-County Workforce Development Area (SW110)
  - *Counties:* Armstrong County, Butler County, and Indiana County
- Westmoreland-Fayette Workforce Development Area (SW045)
  - *Counties:* Fayette County and Westmoreland County

Four local workforce development boards (LWDBs) oversee these local areas:

- **Three Rivers Workforce Development Board (TRWDB)**, d/b/a Partner4Work
  - Allegheny County Workforce Development Area
  - City of Pittsburgh Workforce Development Area
- **Southwest Corner Workforce Development Board (SCWDB)**
- **Tri-County Workforce Investment Board Inc.**, also known as Tri-County Workforce Development Board (TCWDB)
- **Westmoreland-Fayette Workforce Development Board (WFWDB)**

Southwest Region – Regional Plan Committee Members

- Robert Cherry, TRWDB
- Mary Salony, TCWDB
- Ami Gatts, SCWDB
- Janet Ward, WFWDB

Key Regional Planning Meeting Dates

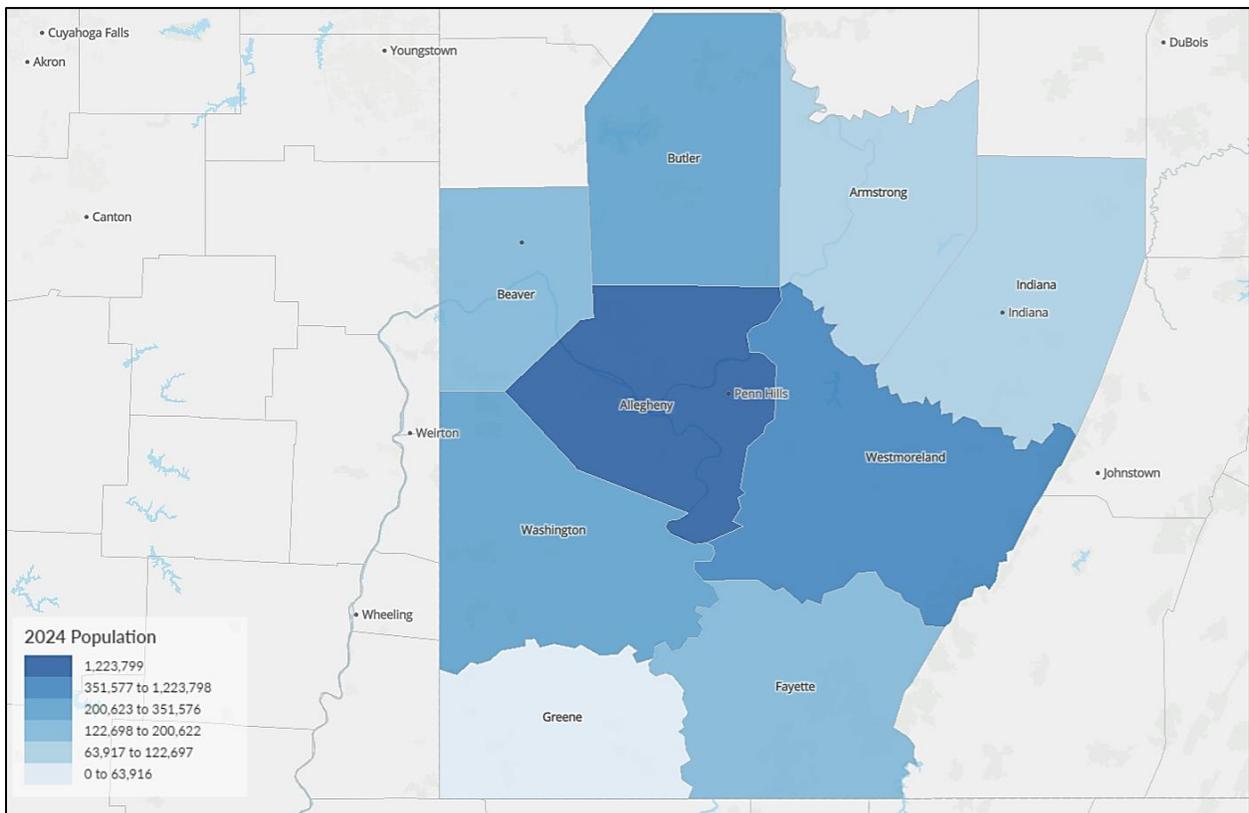
- October 1, 2024 (Regional Planning Meeting #1)
- December 11, 2024 (Regional Planning One-on-One Meeting, SCWDB)
- December 16, 2024 (Regional Planning One-on-One Meeting, TCWDB)
- December 16, 2024 (Regional Planning One-on-One Meeting, WFWDB)

**1.2. Regional Analysis: Based on the analysis of the regional labor market and economic conditions, describe the region’s workforce and economic development-oriented vision and goals. Describe the collection and analysis of regional labor market data (in conjunction with the Commonwealth).**

Regional Population

The Southwest Planning Region is comprised of the Allegheny County Workforce Development Area (WDA), City of Pittsburgh WDA, Southwest Corner WDA, Tri-County WDA, and Westmoreland-Fayette WDA. The region includes nine counties: Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Washington, and Westmoreland counties. Overall, the area is home to approximately 2,455,704 people.<sup>1</sup>

**Map 1: Population in the Southwest Planning Region**



Source: Lightcast

The population data for Southwest Planning Region reveals varying trends across counties from 2014 to 2024. In total, the region experienced a decline of 25,416 people, or 1%. Allegheny County is most populous, with 1,223,799 residents or 50% of the total regional population. Butler County experienced the most significant growth, increasing by 14,749 people or 8%. Washington County also saw a modest growth of 1%. Conversely, several counties faced more significant population declines: Greene County experienced the largest percentage decrease at 10%, followed by Fayette County with an 8% decline.

<sup>1</sup> US Census Bureau. (2024). Quick Facts Tables. Census.gov.

Other counties, including Westmoreland, Beaver, Indiana, and Armstrong, saw decreases ranging from 2% to 5%. These trends indicate a blend of growth and decline, with some counties struggling with substantial population loss over the past decade.

**Table 1: Population Change by County**

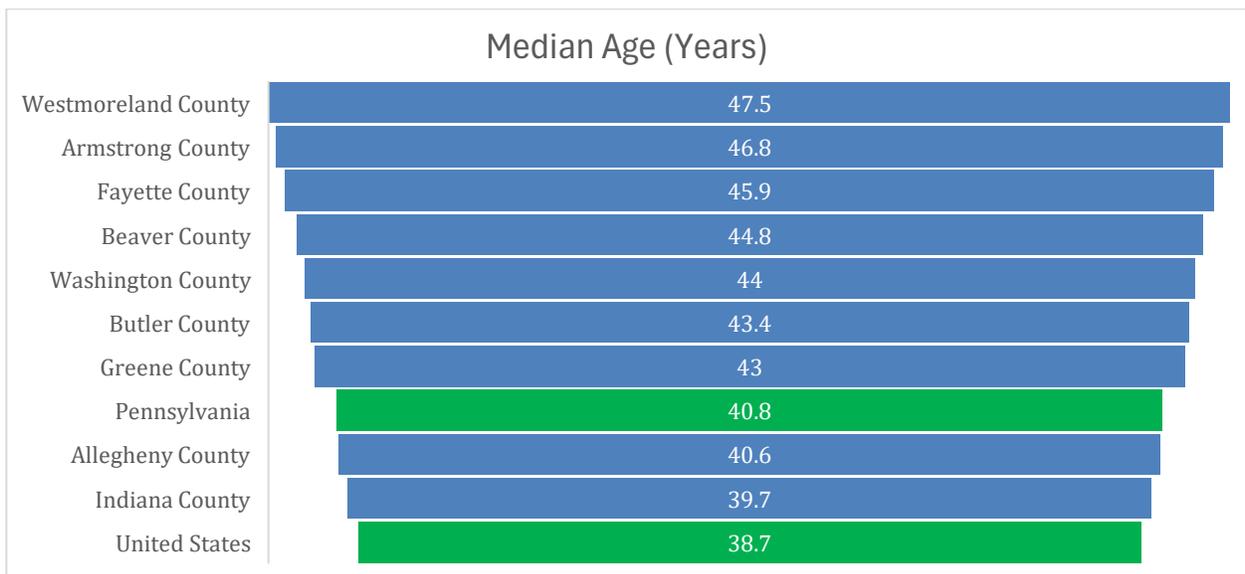
County	2024 Population	2014-2024 Change	2014-2024 % Change
Allegheny	1,223,799	-9,618	-1%
Westmoreland	351,577	-7,354	-2%
Washington	211,098	3,048	1%
Butler	200,623	14,749	8%
Beaver	165,991	-3,042	-2%
Fayette	122,698	-11,311	-8%
Indiana	83,083	-4,376	-5%
Armstrong	63,917	-3,714	-5%
Greene	33,983	-3,798	-10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,456,769</b>	<b>-25,416</b>	<b>-1%</b>

Source: Lightcast

### Age

The Southwest Planning Region’s population is older in comparison to state and national rates. The median age for counties in the region ranges from 39.7 years (Indiana County) to 47.5 years (Westmoreland County), compared to the median ages for Pennsylvania (40.8 years) and the United States (38.7 years).<sup>2</sup>

**Chart 1: Median Age**



<sup>2</sup> US Census Bureau. (2024). 2019-2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

An older population and an aging workforce in the region create the urgent need to strengthen the pipeline of youth and young adults prepared to fill jobs as older workers retire. As experienced workers leave the labor market, employers face potential skills gaps and labor shortages, making it critical to engage the next generation in workforce development. Strategies that can help address this need include those that promote career exploration and career pathway development, programs that connect in-demand industries and educational providers, and training programs, such as registered apprenticeships that enable young people to become employed more rapidly in high-demand industries while accessing on-the-job training and credentialing. Our region’s strategies for delivering workforce development services to youth and young adults will be discussed in upcoming sections of this plan, including **Section 1.3** and **1.6**.

### ***Race/Ethnicity***

Both Pennsylvania and the Southwest Planning Region have a majority white population with 80.6% of Pennsylvanians identifying as white; the region’s share of white residents ranges from 79.1% in Allegheny County to 97.1% in Armstrong County. The percentage of Black/African American individuals in the Southwest Planning Region ranges from 1.1% in Armstrong to 13.5% in Allegheny County, with the highest density of Black/African American individuals living in the City of Pittsburgh.

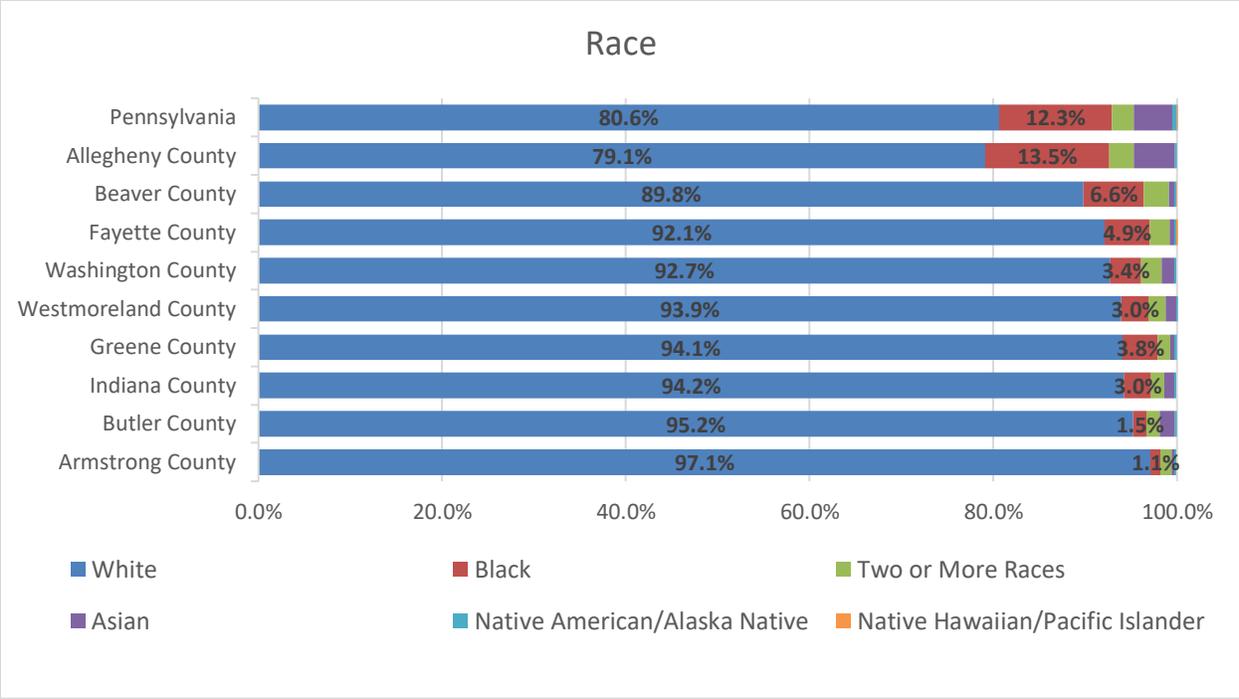
Over the past 10 years the Southwest Planning Region has grown more diverse, with a notable increase in the Hispanic/Latino population, especially in Allegheny County which saw its Hispanic/Latino population increase from 1.8% of the population in 2013 to 3.0% in 2023.<sup>3</sup> The percentage of the population who are Hispanic/Latino ranges from 1.0% in Armstrong County to 3.0% in Allegheny County, which is still well-below the rate of 8.9% in Pennsylvania.

### **Chart 2: Race<sup>4</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> US Census Bureau. (2024). 2019-2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.



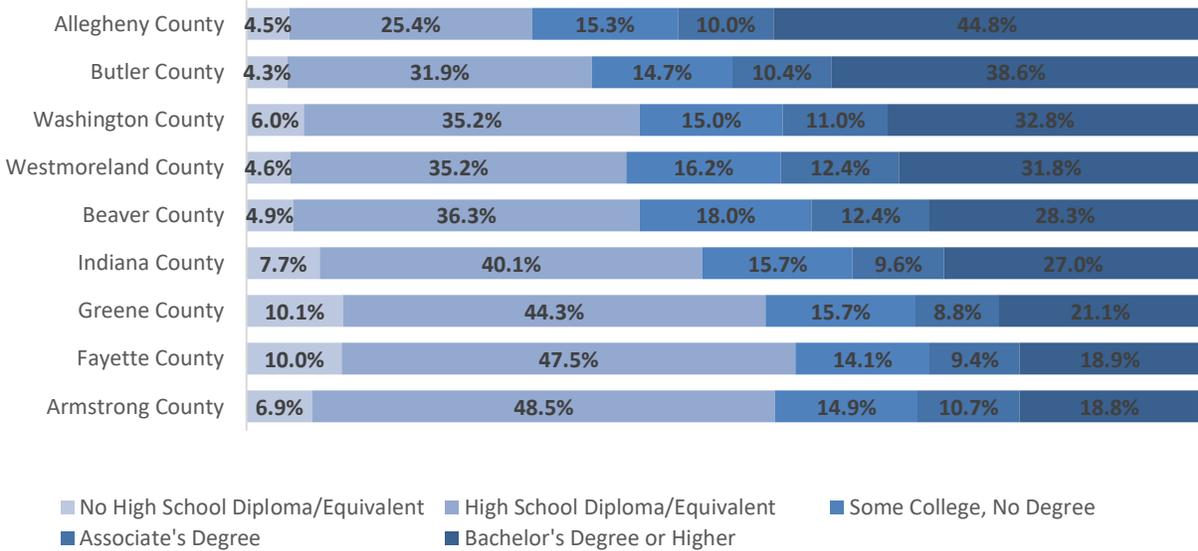
**Education**

In Pennsylvania, 93.0% of residents ages 25 and older have received a high school diploma/equivalent and 39.7% have received a bachelor’s degree or higher. Comparatively, 94.5% residents in the Southwest Planning Region have received a high school diploma/equivalent and 33.7% have received a bachelor’s degree or higher. **Chart 3** below highlights the educational disparities that exist across counties in the Southwest Planning Region. For instance, the percentages of adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher vary substantially from 18.8% in Armstrong County to 44.8% in Allegheny County. Further, the percentage of adults whose highest educational attainment is a high school diploma or equivalent ranges widely from 25.4% in Allegheny County to 48.5% in Armstrong County.

**Chart 3: Educational Attainment of Population Ages 25 and Over<sup>5</sup>**

<sup>5</sup> US Census Bureau. (2024). 2019-2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

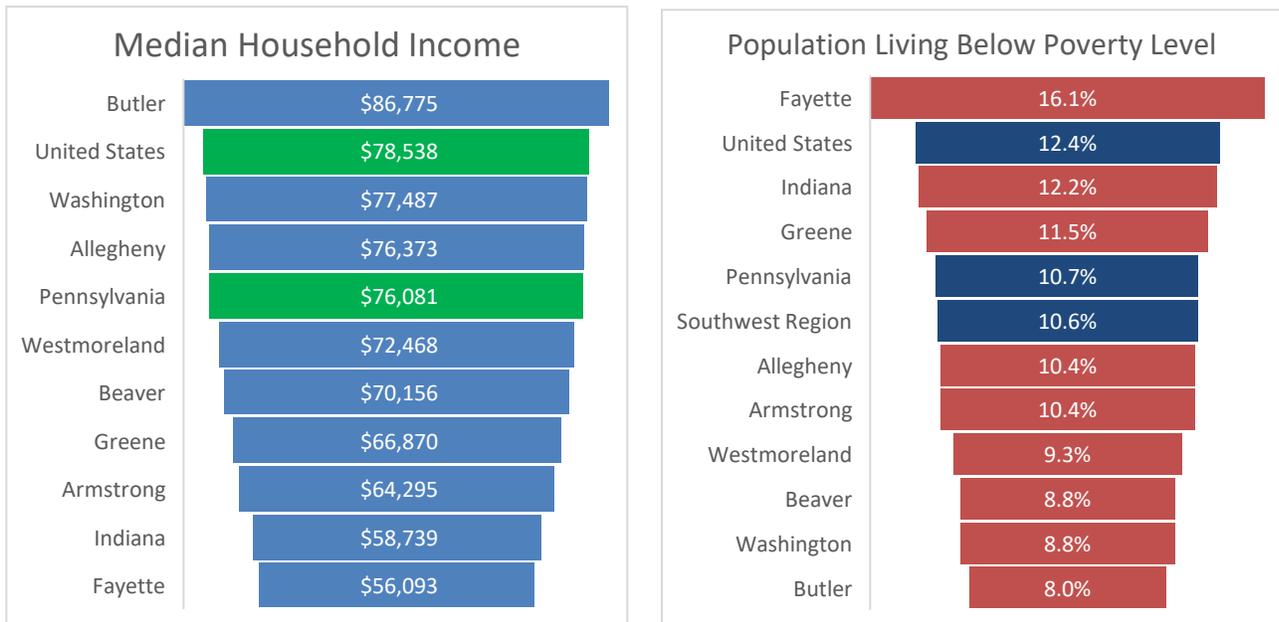
### Educational Attainment (Individuals Ages 25+)



### Income and Poverty

Income disparities exist when comparing counties within the Southwest Planning Region; median household incomes range from \$56,093 (Fayette County) to \$86,775 (Butler County). Allegheny County, Butler, and Washington counties have higher median household incomes compared to Pennsylvania (\$76,081), while Butler County is the only county with a median household income greater than national median (\$78,538). A similar percentage of people in the Southwest Planning Region (10.6%) are living below the poverty level compared to the rate for Pennsylvania (10.7%), while these rates are lower than the national rate (12.4%). The percentages of people living in poverty within the region varies from 8.0% in Butler County to 16.1% in Fayette County.

**Chart 4: Median Household Income<sup>6</sup>; Chart 5: Living Below the Poverty Level<sup>7</sup>**



**Barriers to Employment**

WIOA programs prioritize serving populations who are low income or who have other common barriers to employment or participation in education/training. The following table highlights key examples of target populations for WIOA services in the Southwest Planning Region:

**Table 2. Populations with Barriers to Employment**

Population	Data and Information
<b>Low Income Individuals</b>	Data from the ACS (5-Year Estimates, 2018-2023) indicated that 10.7% of Pennsylvanians ages 16 and older are living below the poverty level, compared to 10.6% in the Southwest Planning Region. The percentage of those 16 and older living below the poverty level in the region ranges from 16.1% in Fayette County to 8.0% in Butler County. Compared to the state, Fayette, Greene, and Indiana counties have a larger percentage of 16 and older individuals living below the poverty level. <sup>8</sup>
<b>Single Parents</b>	Single parents face a variety of challenges including multiple demands on their time. The need for childcare and related expenses can also negatively impact their ability to maintain a job or grow a career. <sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> US Census Bureau. (2024). 2019-2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Lindholm, M. (2021). Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2021/04/creative-strategies-from-single-parents-on-juggling-work-and-family>

	<p>Approximately 28.8% of households with children in the Southwest Planning Region are single parent households, compared to 33.1% in Pennsylvania. The percentages of households with children that are single parent households range from 20.6% in Butler County to 34.3% in Fayette County.<sup>10</sup></p>
<b>Reentry Population</b>	<p>Research conducted by The Brookings Institution, using the tax records of incarcerated individuals, indicated that for years prior to incarceration and for years following incarceration, formerly incarcerated individuals have a history of higher rates of unemployment and lower earnings when employed compared to those not incarcerated. Previously incarcerated individuals also tend to have lower education attainment, employment experience, and skill levels. These characteristics, in addition to employers' reluctance to hire previously incarcerated individuals can lead to chronic unemployment and low wages.<sup>11</sup></p> <p>In 2023, a total of 6,759 people in Pennsylvania and 876 people in the Southwest Planning Region were sentenced by a court to a state correctional facility. In the Southwest Planning Region, the number of individuals sentenced ranged from 304 in Allegheny County to 11 individuals in Greene County. Additionally, in 2023, 11,396 individuals were released from state correctional institutions across Pennsylvania and 8,055 of them were released on parole.<sup>12</sup></p>
<b>Individuals with Disabilities</b>	<p>Approximately 13.0% (167,954 individuals) of the working age population in the Southwest Planning Region have a disability, which is above the 11.7% rate in Pennsylvania. The percentage of working age individuals with a disability in the region ranges from 9.6% in Butler County to 17.5% in Fayette County. People with a disability experience higher unemployment rates and lower labor force participation rates across the region and state. For example, the unemployment rate for working age individuals with a disability in Pennsylvania was 12.8% compared to 4.7% for individuals without a disability. The labor force participation rate for working age individuals with a disability was 43.6% compared to 82.8% for individuals without a disability in Pennsylvania.<sup>13</sup></p>
<b>Pregnant or Parenting Youth</b>	<p>Teen pregnancy or childbearing can lead to increased social or economic costs for teen parents and their children.<sup>14</sup> Teenage mothers experience lower high school graduation rates compared to women who do not give</p>

<sup>10</sup> Federal Reserve Economic Data. (2024). <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/release/tables?eid=360857&rid=412>.

<sup>11</sup> Looney, A. & Turner, N. (March 2018). Work and opportunity before and after incarceration. The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>12</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Annual Statistical Report. (2023).

<sup>13</sup> US Census Bureau. (2024). 2019-2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

<sup>14</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (November 2021). About Teen Pregnancy. <https://www.cdc.gov/teenpregnancy/about/index.htm>. Retrieved 12/20/2022.

	<p>birth during adolescence.<sup>15</sup> The children of teenage mothers are also more likely to drop out of high school, be incarcerated at some point during adolescence, give birth as a teenager, and face unemployment as a young adult.<sup>16</sup></p> <p>Using 2016-2020 data, the reported teenage pregnancy rate for ages 15 to 19 in Pennsylvania was 20.1%. Compared to the state, there was a lower rate of teenage pregnancy in Allegheny (17.5%), Beaver (20.0%), Butler (9.4%), Indiana (12.1%), Washington (15.0%), and Westmoreland (13.7%) counties. However, there were higher rates of teenage pregnancy for ages 15 to 19 in Armstrong (20.8%), Fayette (31.4%), and Greene (21.3%) counties during that same time.<sup>17</sup></p>
<p><b>Technology/Internet Access</b></p>	<p>Seeking employment has largely become a digital process, reliant on digital literacy and broadband access. U.S. Census data from 2023 indicated that 94.8% of U.S. households have a computer and 89.7 % of households have internet access, and 92.9 % of Pennsylvania households have a computer and 88.5% have internet access. The percentage of households across the Southwest Planning Region with a computer ranges from 93.4% in Butler County to 88.3 % in Fayette County and access to the internet ranges from 89.8% in Allegheny County to 78.9 % in Indiana County. The number of households with a computer and/or internet access has decreased since 2021, which may in part be due to a shift away from remote and hybrid school and work.<sup>18</sup></p>
<p><b>English Language Barrier</b></p>	<p>The percentage of the population who have indicated that they speak English less than ‘very well’ ranges from 2.5% of residents of Allegheny County to 0.5% of residents of Greene County.<sup>19</sup> Local boards in the Southwest Planning Region work closely with our Title II Adult Education partners to connect job seekers with English language learning and related programming for individuals in need of the services to support their education and employment goals.</p>
<p><b>Substance Use Disorder (SUD)</b></p>	<p>Pennsylvania has identified opioid use as one of the Commonwealth’s worst public health crises in a generation. Between January 2018 and January 2024, 96,337 doses of Naloxone were administered by EMS and there were 58,065 emergency department visits for opioid overdoses across the Commonwealth<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, 68,861 individuals 12 years old and older who</p>

<sup>15</sup> Perper K, Peterson K, Manlove J. Diploma Attainment Among Teen Mothers. Child Trends, Fact Sheet Publication #2010-01: Washington, DC: Child Trends; 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Hoffman SD. Kids Having Kids: Economic Costs and Social Consequences of Teen Pregnancy. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press; 2008.

<sup>17</sup> PA Department of Health. (2021). Enterprise Data Dissemination Informatics Exchange (IEDDIE).

<sup>18</sup> US Census Bureau. (2024). 2019-2023 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Opendata PA, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Opioid Data Dashboard. <https://data.pa.gov/stories/s/9q45-nckt/>. Retrieved 12/4/2024.

are living in the Southwest Planning Region have been identified as having a substance use disorder during 2020. Pennsylvania data indicate that 1,059 individuals across the Region have died due to substance overdoses during 2023.<sup>21</sup>

Substance use disorder can be associated with worker absenteeism, a reduction in productivity, increased hospitalization costs, and higher unemployment. Additionally, it is estimated that substance use disorder is associated with 17% per person productivity loss. The productivity loss is associated with a loss in wages ranging from \$6,931,744 in Greene County to \$408,766,285 in Allegheny County.<sup>22</sup>

## Regional Labor Market

### Overview

The Southwest Planning Region has a labor force of 1,228,464 people, including approximately 40,000 unemployed individuals. When comparing this to the size of the working-age, non-institutionalized population in the region, the labor force participation rate is 60.4%. The largest industries in the region include Healthcare and Social Assistance, Government, Retail Trade, Accommodation and Food Service, and Manufacturing. Collectively, these industries account for more than half of the employment in the region.

**Chart 6: Southwest Planning Region Labor Force<sup>23</sup>**



Source: Lightcast

**Chart 7** illustrates the trends in annual unemployment rates for the Southwest Planning Region, Pennsylvania, and the United States from 1990 to 2023. Across the three regions, unemployment rates exhibit cyclical patterns consistent with economic expansions and recessions. Peaks in unemployment

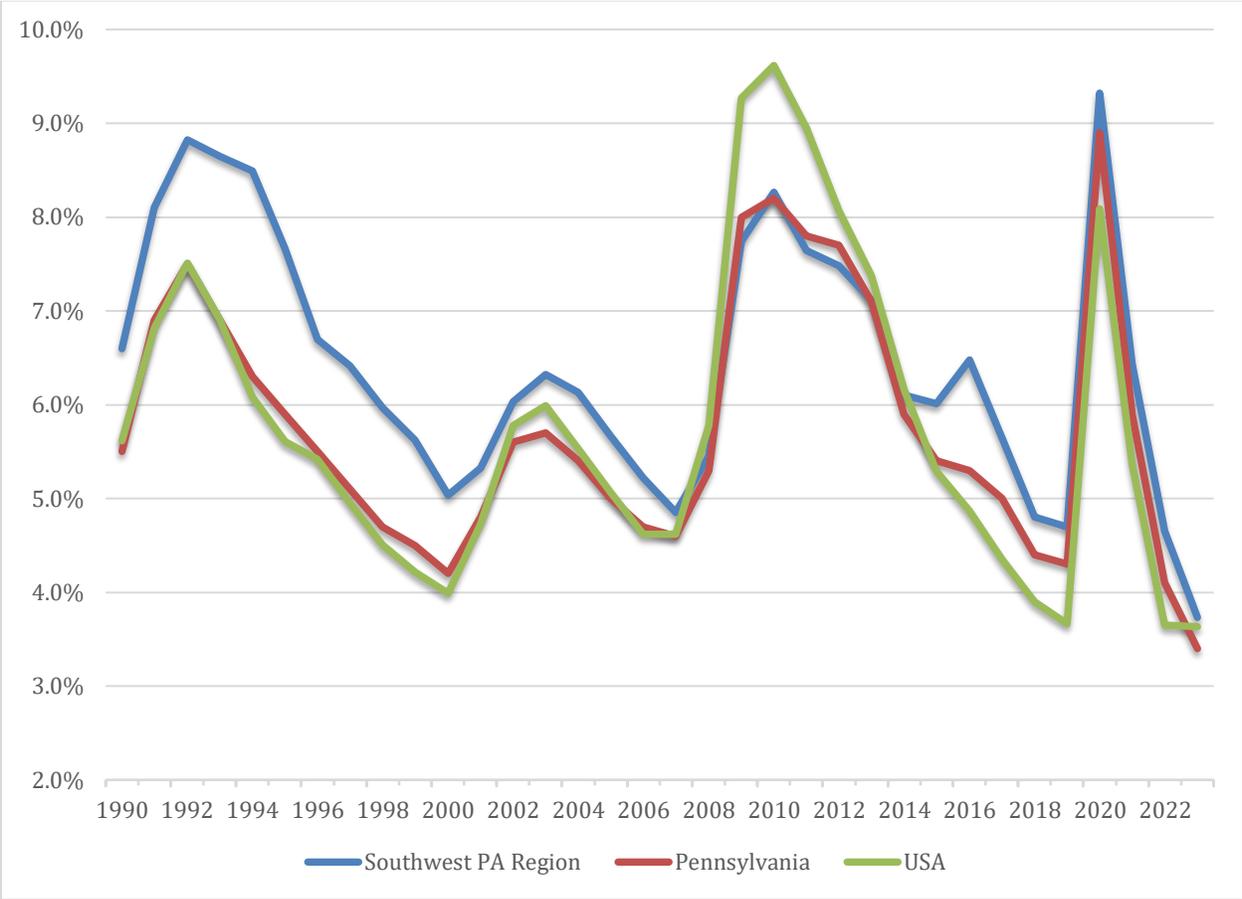
<sup>21</sup> Opendata PA, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Opioid Data Dashboard. <https://data.pa.gov/Opioid-Related/Estimated-Accidental-and-Undetermined-Drug-Overdos/apm5-9wfy>. Retrieved 12/4/2024.

<sup>22</sup> Opendata PA, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Opioid Data Dashboard <https://data.pa.gov/stories/s/enh4-nazt>. Retrieved 12/4/2024.

<sup>23</sup> Lightcast 2024.4

align with major economic downturns, notably in the early 1990s, early 2000s, the Great Recession of 2008–2009, and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Post-recession recovery periods show all three regions returning to similar unemployment levels. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a dramatic spike in unemployment across all regions in 2020, followed by a rapid decline by 2022, reflecting a strong recovery.

**Chart 7: Annual Unemployment Rate<sup>24</sup>**



**Industries**

The five largest industries in the region include Healthcare and Social Assistance, Government, Retail Trade, Accommodation and Food Services, and Manufacturing account for 52.3% of the regional employment. Overall, the region experienced a 4.9% decrease in employment between 2019 through 2024 with the largest percentage decreases occurring in Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction (-28.4%), Finance and Insurance (-23.6%), Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services (-9.2%), Construction (-9.0%), Wholesale Trade (-8.9%), and Utilities (-6.1%).

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Unemployment Rate, retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis: <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/> (January 2025)

A smaller percentage decrease is projected between 2024 and 2029 with growth expected in Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation (+4.9%), Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting (+4.8%), Management of Companies and Enterprises (+3.6%), and Educational Services (+3.2%).

**Table 3: Employment Changes by Industry<sup>25</sup>**

Industry	Employment (2024)	Past Employment Change (2019-2024)	Projected Employment Change (2024-2029)
Health Care and Social Assistance	207,025	-4.8%	0.8%
Government	123,468	-4.6%	-3.6%
Retail Trade	122,574	-4.2%	-4.8%
Accommodation and Food Services	100,668	-3.4%	0.3%
Manufacturing	89,873	-1.9%	0.0%
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	84,825	-2.3%	-2.0%
Construction	68,101	-9.0%	-2.6%
Educational Services	65,339	-0.1%	3.2%
Other Services (except Public Administration)	63,700	-5.2%	-1.1%
Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services	52,892	-9.2%	-3.3%
Finance and Insurance	48,015	-23.6%	-13.6%
Transportation and Warehousing	46,792	3.4%	0.9%
Management of Companies and Enterprises	39,895	5.7%	3.6%
Wholesale Trade	35,622	-8.9%	-5.9%
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	25,607	0.8%	4.9%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	18,308	2.0%	0.6%
Information	17,220	-5.5%	-1.8%
Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	10,617	-28.4%	-7.5%
Utilities	5,905	-6.1%	-7.5%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	3,277	18.1%	4.8%
<b>Total - All Industries</b>	<b>1,229,723</b>	<b>-4.9%</b>	<b>-1.5%</b>

Location Quotients (LQ) quantify how concentrated a particular industry, cluster, occupation, or demographic group is in a region as compared to rate nationwide. Location quotients can reveal what makes a particular region unique in comparison to the national average. The location quotients for the 2024 key industry clusters are provided in **Table 4** below for the U.S., Pennsylvania, and the Southwest Planning Region.

Comparatively, the data indicate the Southwest Planning Region is more concentrated than the nation or the state in the following areas: Management of Companies and Enterprises; Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction; Utilities; Other Services (except Public Administration); Retail Trade; Educational Services; Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation; and Health Care and Social Assistance.

<sup>25</sup> Lightcast 2024.4

**Table 4: Location Quotients by Industry<sup>26</sup>**

Industry	US	Pennsylvania	Southwest Planning Region
Mining, Quarrying, and Oil and Gas Extraction	1	0.96	2.50
Management of Companies and Enterprises	1	1.51	2.17
Educational Services	1	1.70	2.10
Utilities	1	1.02	1.41
Health Care and Social Assistance	1	1.29	1.28
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	1	1.00	1.16
Retail Trade	1	0.99	1.07
Other Services (except Public Administration)	1	1.01	1.05
Accommodation and Food Services	1	0.86	0.98
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	1	0.94	0.97
Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	1	0.94	0.97
Construction	1	0.86	0.96
Finance and Insurance	1	1.11	0.96
Manufacturing	1	1.14	0.95
Transportation and Warehousing	1	1.16	0.87
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	1	0.73	0.84
Wholesale Trade	1	0.93	0.80
Information	1	0.81	0.76
Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services	1	0.83	0.72
Public Administration	1	0.75	0.71
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	1	0.65	0.23

**Occupations**

Between 2019 and 2024, most occupations experienced declines in employment, with some seeing significant reductions of greater than 10%, such as Computer and Mathematical (-15.5%) and Office and Administrative Support (-14.0%). This trend reflects a broader shift in the labor market likely driven by automation, industry shifts, and other economic factors, including accelerated retirements that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Projected changes from 2024 to 2029 show a slower pace of decline, with some occupations stabilizing or experiencing minimal decreases. Despite the trend toward stabilization, the total regional employment is still projected to decrease by 1.5% between 2024-2029.

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<sup>26</sup> Lightcast 2024.4

**Table 5: Employment Changes by Occupation**

Occupation	Employment (2024)	Past Employment Change (2019-2024)	Projected Employment Change (2024-2029)
Office and Administrative Support Occupations	149,516	-14.0%	-6.8%
Food Preparation and Serving Related Occupations	102,541	-4.4%	-0.5%
Sales and Related Occupations	100,327	-13.3%	-0.7%
Transportation and Material Moving Occupations	97,837	2.6%	-4.6%
Management Occupations	86,826	25.1%	-0.2%
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations	86,374	-7.7%	0.0%
Educational Instruction and Library Occupations	75,765	-2.0%	-0.4%
Business and Financial Operations Occupations	74,327	9.1%	-1.8%
Healthcare Support Occupations	64,664	-5.9%	4.3%
Production Occupations	60,018	-7.5%	-2.1%
Construction and Extraction Occupations	59,449	-9.9%	-2.6%
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair Occupations	49,130	-4.5%	-2.0%
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance Occupations	37,301	-3.3%	-1.0%
Personal Care and Service Occupations	34,576	-11.5%	2.1%
Computer and Mathematical Occupations	33,649	-15.5%	0.6%
Community and Social Service Occupations	25,248	-1.2%	1.5%
Protective Service Occupations	25,006	-5.2%	-2.5%
Architecture and Engineering Occupations	21,980	-12.9%	-0.1%
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media Occupations	19,649	1.5%	1.0%
Life, Physical, and Social Science Occupations	10,520	-9.9%	1.2%
Legal Occupations	10,302	-8.8%	-3.8%
Military-only occupations	2,843	-7.8%	-5.7%
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry Occupations	1,874	-2.7%	3.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,229,723</b>	<b>-4.9%</b>	<b>-1.5%</b>

Regional Vision, Goals, and Priorities

The Southwest Planning Region shares the Governor’s vision of serving Pennsylvania’s residents and businesses through the creation of a skilled workforce. We embrace the priority goals outlined in Pennsylvania’s WIOA Combined State Plan, with their focus on 1.) Apprenticeship and Career & Technical Education; 2.) Sector Strategies and Employer Engagement; 3.) Youth; 4.) Continuous Improvement of the PA CareerLink® System; 5.) Barrier Remediation; and 6.) Addressing Workforce Shortages of Critical Industries.

Our region recognizes the importance of a coordinated and innovative workforce development system.

We strive to present a seamless face for PA CareerLink® services throughout Southwest Pennsylvania, while preserving local boards' flexibility to innovate in serving local workforce needs. We have established the following regional priorities and goals for a more effective, streamlined, and accessible workforce system that meets the needs of both job seekers and employers:

- **Recovery and Resilience:** Our region will increase its ability to sustain and recover from economic shocks by integrating employers into the development of a strong network of short- to mid-length training programs and stackable credentials. This system will be better able to react in real-time to employer and community needs. We have developed a wide range of partnerships to support diverse job opportunities and are focused on industries which will drive the regional economy. Together, we will ensure these industries have the talent available to continue to lead the local economy. We will codify lessons learned and understand why some interventions work better in some industries than in others. These lessons will prepare the system for responding to future shocks.
- **Increasing Opportunities for People facing Systemic Barriers:** Our region will work to increase training and employment opportunities for individuals facing systemic barriers to employment, with a focus on serving disadvantaged communities. Partnering with regional workforce development organizations, we will address both the supply and demand sides of the labor market—ensuring job seekers receive the necessary support during and after training while encouraging employers to establish accessible career pathways. We will enhance recruitment efforts and prioritize helping individuals overcome barriers and ensure training programs are within reach.
- **Improved Workforce Development System:** Our region will focus on continuous improvements to the existing workforce development system infrastructure, while developing a more cohesive regional workforce development network and creating significant workforce training opportunities aligned with industry demand.
- **Career Pathways and Talent Pipeline Development:** This will be addressed through an emphasis on building pathways into a wide variety of high-demand occupations, accessible without a 4-year college degree, through short-term training, apprenticeship, and other work-based training opportunities. As an example, the local boards in the Southwest Planning Region will support our partners in the Southwestern Pennsylvania New Economy Collaborative on an initiative to grow the region's existing robotics and AI-related workforce training portfolio to reach beyond the typical urban core and Tier 1 universities, where it is currently concentrated. This initiative is being funded through the U.S. EDA Build Back Better program.

Sections 1.3 and 1.4 provide greater detail on the strategies our region will employ to achieve these regional goals and priorities

**1.3. Regional Strategy: Based on the analysis of regional labor market and economic conditions, describe the regional service delivery strategies for addressing the identified conditions through the coordination of appropriate services in the region.**

The Southwest Planning Region will implement the following core service strategies to achieve the vision, goals, and priorities, ensuring responsiveness to the regional labor market and economic conditions identified in Section 1.2:

### Employer Engagement and Businesses Services

Our region prioritizes building strong relationships with regional employers to help achieve the vision, goals, and priorities highlighted in Section 1.2. Workers in our region cross county lines for employment and regional employers draw their workforce from counties across Southwest Pennsylvania. These regional labor market trends mean that the same employers often interface with multiple LWDBs, underscoring the need for a regional and collaborative approach to employer engagement and business services that minimizes the administrative burden on the employers our region serves.

#### ***PA CareerLink® Business Services Teams***

Much of our employer engagement and business services strategy is achieved through the work of PA CareerLink® Business Service Teams (BSTs), which are collaborative groups of staff across PA CareerLink® partner programs who provide a personalized and coordinated approach to employer engagement. BSTs collaborate regionally and work with chambers of commerce, economic development agencies, and other partners to understand the needs of local businesses and connect them with valuable resources. Employers can access a comprehensive package of services through PA CareerLink®, including hiring/recruitment assistance, work-based training (on-the-job training, customized training, etc.), participation in job fairs and on-site recruitment events, labor market information, tax credit and federal bonding guidance, Equal Employment Opportunity compliance resources, and other services.

Employers can complete PA CareerLink® registration on their own or contact PA CareerLink® business services staff for assistance. Job orders can be placed on the PA CareerLink® website once the employer has been approved, where it can be viewed by thousands of interested job seekers. Recruitment assistance will be offered to employers in terms of promoting their recruitment events through advertisement at the PA CareerLink® and resumes can be collected on their behalf. Recruitments and screening interviews can also be held on-site at PA CareerLink® locations.

Local areas in our region have adopted data tracking to assess outcomes of PA CareerLink® services on businesses. Success is measured by metrics such as numbers of job orders, job placements, work-based training programs, job fairs, repeat business customers, and other metrics. Our region is also committed to success in achieving “Effectiveness in Serving Employers” requirements under WIOA in collaboration with our PA CareerLink® partners and the Commonwealth.

#### ***Industry Partnerships***

Industry partnerships (IPs) are collaborative efforts between workforce development boards, employers, training providers, and other stakeholders to address the workforce needs of specific industries or sectors. These partnerships are designed to foster sector strategies, which focus on aligning workforce development efforts with the demands of high-growth and high-demand industries. Each local board in our region oversees industry partnership programming for our local areas in industries, such as Manufacturing, Healthcare, and Construction. The local boards in our region regularly coordinate with each other to identify opportunities for alignment of our industry partnership efforts.

Local boards in our region currently oversee the following industry partnerships:

Local Workforce Development Board (WDB)	Industry Partnerships
Southwest Corner WDB	Advanced Manufacturing Construction & Building Trades Healthcare Steel Alliance
Three Rivers WDB	Construction Energy Financial Services Healthcare Information Technology Manufacturing
Tri-County WDB	Agriculture Healthcare Information Technology Manufacturing
Westmoreland-Fayette WDB	Healthcare Manufacturing

### Coordination with Economic Development and Regional Initiatives

The Allegheny Conference on Community Development (ACCD), is a key regional economic development organization, which includes the Pittsburgh Regional Alliance, the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce, and the Economy League of Greater Pittsburgh. The ACCD service area aligns with the Southwest Planning Region. ACCD released the report, *2020/2030 Next is Now: A 10 Year Vision of Vitality in the Pittsburgh Region*.<sup>27</sup> The report notes that the regional economy has experienced slow growth compared to statewide growth in Pennsylvania and growth nationally. The report emphasizes making economic growth a priority and sets three core goals:

- **Thriving People:** Improve the standard of living by 25% for all populations. This goal includes two components, average wage and per capita GDP.
- **Quality of Place:** Reduce greenhouse gas emissions to meet Paris Accord targets and implement strategies toward UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- **Strong Economy:** Double the projected job growth, resulting in 75,000 new jobs. This measure prioritizes job growth over GDP growth to factor in talent attraction targets.

The Southwest Planning Region’s work will align with this vision of a thriving population and strong economy in the Pittsburgh region, as we establish strategies and goals to meet the needs of youth, job seekers, workers, and businesses across the Region.

Our region also engages with ongoing region-wide programs and initiatives. As an example, the Southwest Pennsylvania Partnership for Regional Economic Performance (PREP) consists of the economic

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<sup>27</sup> Allegheny Conference on Community Development. (2020). *2020/2030 Next is Now: A 10 Year Vision of Vitality in the Pittsburgh Region*.

development partners of the nine-county Southwest PREP region working together to organize and achieve economic results. PREP partners offer one-on-one counseling, specialized workshops, online training, and financial incentives to new businesses and existing companies looking to grow. Each regional PREP team works together to coordinate the resources and services offered by local economic development service providers, including Local Development Districts (LDDs), Industrial Resource Centers (IRCs), Industrial Development Corporations (IDCs), and Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs). The local boards in our region are non-funded members of PREP and work with the funded PREP partners to continue efficient and effective coordination of workforce and economic development.

The local boards in our region also plan to collaborate with Engage! program partners. Engage! is a PA Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) business retention and expansion program designed to interact with targeted companies. Engage! works to retain existing businesses in a community and to help them grow and expand by building relationships with business owners or key decision makers and economic and workforce development partners. Engage! programs work closely with businesses to:

- Identify needs and match resources to help existing businesses and industries address their challenges to become more competitive and successful.
- Demonstrate to local businesses and industries that the community recognizes and depends on their contributions to the local/state economy.
- Build business and community capacity to sustain growth and development.
- Understand and address the common themes articulated by PA businesses in order to drive policy and the menu of PA DCED and partner services for long range business retention and expansion efforts.

Each of the local boards in our region is also a partner to the Southwestern Pennsylvania (SWPA) New Economy Collaborative, which is an 11-county coalition of labor, nonprofit, and university partners advancing the region's robotics and automation cluster through public-private-philanthropic partnership. The Collaborative is one of 21 winners of the Build Back Better Regional Challenge, the marquee initiative of the U.S. Economic Development Administration's American Rescue Plan, which aims to boost economic recovery from the pandemic and rebuild American communities. The Collaborative was awarded a \$62.7 million grant to fund five regional projects focused on robotics adoption, commercialization, and workforce development. Together, these projects are designed to provide long-term opportunities for individuals, businesses, and communities in Southwest Pennsylvania to participate in our growing robotics sector and succeed in our evolving economy.

### Coordination with K-12, Higher Education, and Adult Education

The Pittsburgh Region is fortunate to have an education environment that is both diverse and deep in post-high school opportunities for credentialing, including 88 regional universities and post-secondary career, technical and vocational schools. These organizations together confer more than 45,000 degrees annually, including 12,000 technology degrees and certificates.<sup>28</sup> The Southwest Planning Region regularly explores ways to leverage the higher education resources in our region to meet the increased demands for talent driven by events such as recent federal investments in advanced manufacturing, infrastructure, broadband, and clean energy – our aforementioned partnership with the SWPA New Economy Collaborative is a key example. Coordination with higher education also includes working closely with our

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<sup>28</sup> Pittsburgh Regional Alliance (2020)

post-secondary Perkins partners, who are required one-stop system partners in each local workforce area. Further, each of our local boards will continue to strengthen our connections with community colleges in our region, as important resources for education and training.

Given the region's aging workforce and the potential of area youth, investing in the future talent pipeline is a key area of focus for the planning region. Each of the local boards in our region has formed relationships with K-12 schools and school districts in our areas, along with our area's applicable intermediate units, to capitalize on opportunities to form stronger connections between K-12 education and workforce development. This has included state-funded initiatives, such as Business Education Partnership grants that have funded programs to connect educators with employers to better understand regional talent needs, while also enhancing work-based learning and work-readiness skills development in schools.

A key example of success from these initiatives is *PartnerUp*, a career exploration program that was initially developed through a BEP grant in Allegheny County. Led by PNC Bank in partnership with a coalition of regional employers, this program offers an alternative path toward a professional career without the burden of student loan debt. Since its February 2018 launch, the program has created a talent pipeline of early career professionals ready to enter the workforce after high school graduation in entry-level roles. The program has been rolled out in over 50 high schools and to 6,000 students across the Southwest Planning Region and beyond, offering an in-school curriculum for participating junior and senior students. Throughout the program's five-year existence, 16 partner employers have participated and offered students the chance to land positions in a variety of industries. PNC has offered roles at the company to over 100 graduates of the program with dozens of others landing at partner companies. In the spring of 2025, PartnerUp is hosting a regional career fair that Partner4Work is supporting through an additional partnership with the Consortium for Public Education.

In addition, our region will continue to leverage our close partnerships with Adult Education Providers, which deliver a range of services aimed at equipping individuals with the foundational skills necessary for career success and economic mobility. These services include adult basic education, literacy and numeracy instruction, high school equivalency preparation, and English language acquisition for non-native speakers. Additionally, providers often offer career readiness training, digital literacy instruction, and contextualized learning programs that integrate workforce skills with academic education. These services are crucial to local workforce development areas as they address skill gaps, enhance employability, and prepare individuals for participation in job training programs or higher education. WIOA Title II – Adult Education providers are core partners to the PA CareerLink® system and often deliver services on-site at PA CareerLink® locations.

### Registered Apprenticeship and Pre-Apprenticeship Strategies

Expanding access to registered pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship opportunities will also be an important component of our regional strategy. The Southwest Planning Region will continue to establish partnerships with current registered apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs, and form new partnerships with employers, education providers (including post-secondary and career and technical centers), labor organizations, and other stakeholders to increase the registered apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programming in the region. A focus will be on increasing opportunity for those job seekers who can benefit from an apprenticeship program and grow the regional talent pool in related occupations.

To do this, our region will leverage our industry partnerships, local board memberships, and other connections to convene key stakeholders around apprenticeship. Our region will also ensure close coordination with Pennsylvania's Apprenticeship & Training Office (ATO). This will include regular communication with the Western Region Apprenticeship & Training Representative (ATR), helping to ensure partners are aware of the apprenticeship information and resources available through ATO, and applying for additional funding through ATO and other grants to support apprenticeship expansion.

In addition, each local workforce development area in the region has a menu of training options that may be used, where appropriate, to support registered apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship. These may include:

- Individual Training Accounts (ITAs): ITA funds can be used to support the related technical instruction (RTI) component of an RA program, including tuition, fees, books, equipment, and other training-related costs.
- On-the-Job Training (OJT): OJT contracts with employers may be able to support on-the-job learning component of RA through wage reimbursements.
- Incumbent Worker Training (IWT): in accordance with WIOA regulations, IWT contracts with employers can support the cost of training and upskilling for existing employees who have been employed by the same business for a period of six months or longer.
- Customized Job Training (CJT): CJT may be able to assist RAs by supporting the cost of training designed to meet the needs of one or more employers.
- Supportive Services: Eligible individuals may be able to receive additional services that help them participate in a registered apprenticeship or pre-apprenticeship, which may include fees, books, supplies, childcare, transportation, tools, and uniforms.

Our region will also consider ways of facilitating stronger connections between apprenticeship programs and PA CareerLink®. These may include: 1.) Encouraging employers/sponsors to post open RA jobs on the PA CareerLink® website; 2.) Making information available to PA CareerLink® customers about the process of how/when to apply to RAs; 3.) Encouraging local RAs to have their programs included on the Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL); 4.) Hosting informational sessions to educate RA sponsors about the funding and other resources available through PA CareerLink®; or 5.) Hosting job fairs that lead to RA opportunities. Our region will also ensure PA CareerLink® staff take advantage of training and resources offered through ATO and coordinate with our regional ATO representative to conduct additional apprenticeship related training as needed.

Local boards in our region have also prioritized professional development through staff participation in the Registered Apprenticeship Navigator Program, a year-long training initiative developed by the Keystone Development Partnership (KDP). This program equips workforce professionals with the skills to establish, manage, and expand apprenticeship programs. Participants, known as Navigators, complete 144 hours of virtual classroom instruction on topics such as program design, registration, project management, and mentorship, along with 2,000 hours of on-the-job training within their organizations. Upon completion, they earn credentials as Training & Development Specialists and become members of the Keystone Apprenticeship Alliance (KAA), a statewide network dedicated to advancing apprenticeships across diverse industries.

In addition, SCWDB is a participant in the U.S. Department of Labor's Apprenticeship Ambassador Initiative, which is a national network of employers, labor organizations, educators, and stakeholders committed to expanding Registered Apprenticeships across industries. Launched in 2021, it aims to promote apprenticeship awareness, scale innovative workforce practices, increase access for

underrepresented populations, and highlight the business benefits of apprenticeships. The initiative fosters new apprenticeship programs, outreach efforts, and resource development to strengthen workforce opportunities nationwide.

A searchable list of the current active registered apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships in the region is available [here](#).

### Serving Targeted Populations and Individuals with Barriers

Across all our strategies, our region will prioritize programming that helps build our regional labor pool and helps our region’s workers and businesses thrive. We will work to improve access to training and employment opportunities to individuals with systemic barriers to employment through outreach, recruitment, and barrier remediation services. Our region will also prioritize job quality as a key component for improving outcomes for workers and employers. This will include consideration of multiple job quality factors in addition to wage, such as health insurance, retirement, stable work schedules, paid leave, and other criteria. The Southwest Planning Region will identify potential job quality tools, that can be made available to partner employers to evaluate their job quality and to assess areas of improvement.

Greater detail on the strategies and specific programming our region will employ to serve target populations and individuals with barriers to employment is available in **Section 1.6** of this plan.

#### **1.4. Describe the regional service strategies aimed at achieving the vision and goals established for the region.**

Regional strategies aimed at achieving the vision and goals established for the region are described in multiple sections of this plan. Below is a summary of how our region will address key workforce development needs, along with section references for more detailed information.

#### Sector and industry strategies, including an apprenticeship strategy:

Our region has established strong industry partnerships in fields like healthcare, manufacturing, construction, and technology. Our local boards are also expanding registered apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs by coordinating with employers and training providers to address workforce shortages, focusing on high-demand industries and emerging sectors like clean energy and robotics. (See also **Section 1.3** and **1.5**)

#### Coordination of services with regional economic development services and providers:

The local boards in our region collaborate closely with organizations like the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, PREP partners, and the SWPA New Economy Collaborative to align workforce development with broader economic growth initiatives. These partnerships ensure workforce strategies are tied to regional economic priorities, such as attracting new businesses and advancing technology adoption. (See also **Section 1.3** and **1.5**):

#### Connecting targeted populations with barriers to employment to career services and training activities:

Our region prioritizes connecting people facing barriers—such as people who are low income, have a disability, have been impacted by the criminal justice system, and/or those experiencing substance use disorder—to career and training services through PA CareerLink® centers. Strategies include co-

enrollment with programs such as adult education, wraparound supportive services, specialized youth and reentry programs, and employer engagement to promote inclusive hiring practices. (See also **Section 1.3, 1.6, and 1.7**)

Employment of regional business services strategies, including how coordination of these strategies will impact the operational level of services:

Regional PA CareerLink® Business Services Teams (BSTs) work across local areas to offer coordinated recruitment, hiring, and training support to employers, reducing administrative burdens. Collaboration among BSTs and regular data tracking ensures businesses have consistent access to qualified candidates and workforce resources across the entire Southwest Region. (See also **Section 1.3**)

Coordination with secondary and post-secondary educational institutions to align strategies, enhance services, and avoid duplication of services:

Our region actively partners with K-12 schools, community colleges, universities, and career and technical centers to align workforce and education strategies. Through initiatives like PartnerUp, collaboration with Perkins postsecondary partners, and expanded apprenticeship opportunities, our region is creating career exploration experiences for youth and building accessible entry points into career pathways for individuals entering the labor market, while aligning programs with employer needs. (See **Section 1.3**)

**1.5. Describe the development and implementation of sector initiatives for in-demand industry sectors or occupations for the region.**

Industry partnerships and sector strategies play a key role in fostering effective business engagement across the Southwest Planning Region. Each local board in our region manages industry partnerships, which help to provide a direct line of communication with employers, enabling our local boards to gather valuable insights into current and emerging workforce demands. By collaborating closely with industry leaders, we can identify critical skill gaps, prioritize in-demand occupations, and shape our investments in workforce development accordingly. This collaboration ensures that training programs are designed to meet the precise requirements of local industries, equipping job seekers with the skills and credentials needed for high-demand roles. Additionally, these partnerships help foster a dynamic and responsive workforce system that supports economic growth, addresses labor shortages, and enhances career opportunities for individuals in the region. A table listing the specific industry partnerships managed by the local boards within our planning region can be found in the table in **Section 1.3**.

To identify priority industries and sectors, our regional local workforce boards regularly analyze labor market data (e.g. data from the Center for Workforce Information & Analysis), engage with employers, and consult our partner economic development organizations. Through these efforts, we assess trends in job growth, wage potential, and demand for specific skills to pinpoint sectors critical to the region's economy. Additionally, the local boards in our region collaborate with industry leaders to understand current and emerging workforce needs, including identifying occupations with high vacancy rates or significant skill gaps. Input from community stakeholders, such as education and training providers, also helps ensure that selected industries align with the region's economic priorities and workforce capabilities. This data-driven and collaborative approach enables our region to focus efforts on industries with the greatest potential for sustainable growth and workforce impact.

Industry partnerships (IP) have led to the development of several promising and successful training initiatives in our region. For example, in Allegheny County, TRWB's Construction IP (also known as *4Construction*) has led to the creation of the *PIT2Work* pre-apprenticeship program. *PIT2Work* is a no-cost, five-week pre-apprenticeship training program in Allegheny County, hosted by Pittsburgh International Airport in partnership with Partner4Work and Pittsburgh Gateways Corporation. The program provides hands-on construction trade experience at the new airport terminal site, along with certifications such as OSHA 10-Hour and PennDOT Flagger. Graduates receive a daily stipend, transportation support, and connections to local trade unions, helping them secure careers in the construction industry. SCWDB has also been a strong supporter of the program, helping to enroll individuals from their LWDA in the pre-apprenticeship.

The local boards in the Southwest Planning Region have collaborated on other region-wide sector-based initiatives. This includes our participation in the Southwestern Pennsylvania (SWPA) New Economy Collaborative, discussed earlier in **Section 1.3**. The Collaborative was awarded \$62.7 million from the US Economic Development Administration's *Build Back Better* Challenge to fund five regional projects focused on robotics adoption, commercialization, and workforce development. Our role within this Collaborative will be to support training and upskilling of workers to connect them to "new economy careers" becoming available as a result of the Pittsburgh Region's growing robotics sector. WFWDB has led regional workforce partners in services to new employer Re:Build Manufacturing, coordinating on ensuring that jobs are posted within the PA CareerLink<sup>®</sup> system, OJT and other agreements are signed, and communication is clear. TCWDB, TRWDB, and WFWDB have identified flexible sources of funding to create an aligned system for job seekers looking to work at Re:Build and other employers.

As an example of a sector-focused apprenticeship initiative, our regional local workforce boards are collaborating on a project funded by a US Department of Labor *Building Pathways to Infrastructure Jobs Grant*, which will expand technology and advanced manufacturing registered apprenticeship programs (RAPs) that support high-demand career pathways that will support Southwestern PA's growing clean energy and broadband sectors. Our regional local boards will be partnering with the German American Chamber of Commerce, Pittsburgh Chapter, and Fortyx80 to deliver the registered apprenticeship programming.

In addition, through a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) – Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE), our region will partner with workforce development boards across the tri-state region (including Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia) to identify strategies to successfully remove barriers for regional employers to participate in registered apprenticeships. Awarded in December 2024, SCWDB will serve as the project lead for this initiative with the goals of: 1) identifying barriers and opportunities related to apprenticeship in the realms of a) policy, b) industry/employers, and c) jobseeker and worker talent development; and 2) crafting a thorough and evidence-based strategy for developing and supporting a tri-state apprenticeship ecosystem. The project intends to determine the feasibility of incorporating apprenticeship as a key talent development strategy responsive to current and future industry needs in the tri-state region.

TCWDB has partnered with Steamfitters Local 449 on multiple Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) grants to expand workforce training and career advancement opportunities. A \$1.4 million ARC grant is funding no-cost training for workers in 15 coal-impacted counties in Pennsylvania, preparing up to 550 participants with skills in semiconductor manufacturing, HVAC-R, welding, and building information modeling at a state-of-the-art training center. This initiative aims to attract semiconductor employers to the region while helping displaced workers transition into high-demand industries. Additionally, a \$1.12 million ARC grant supports the training of 1,333 workers in advanced skills, providing opportunities for

upward mobility within their fields. Beyond the ARC grants, TCWDB's collaboration with Steamfitters Local 449 has also received support from a Pathways to Innovation Grant from the Commonwealth. As part of this initiative, TCWDB will engage schools to expand career pathways into the Steamfitters apprenticeship program, further expanding access to the skilled trades.

Furthermore, TRWDB collaborated with SCWDB to host the Healthcare Careers & Apprenticeships Expo, which featured over 40 vendors and attracted students from more than 35 schools. The event was sponsored by Dollar Bank and UPMC and was attended by PA Secretary of Labor & Industry Nancy A. Walker and PA Senator Wayne Fontana, highlighting the importance of strengthening the Commonwealth's healthcare workforce. The expo provided students with hands-on activities and insights into various healthcare career paths, fostering meaningful connections between vendors and attendees. The success of the event underscored the power of collaboration in enhancing the region's workforce. Our region will include TCWDB and WFWDB in the planning and execution of future expos, in addition to TRWDB and SCWDB.

Our region will continue to partner with organizations to create and expand apprenticeship opportunities in the region, including through industry partnerships, where appropriate. For example, the National Tooling and Machining Association (NTMA) coordinates registered apprenticeship opportunities focusing on manufacturing throughout the Southwest Region. There are several apprenticeship opportunities that center on construction across the region provided by the Carpenters, Western Pennsylvania Operating Engineers, and others. Our region will also work to build apprenticeship opportunities in non-traditional sectors, such as information technology and healthcare.

**Section 1.3** describes in greater detail strategies for expanding apprenticeship opportunities in the region and for fostering closer connections and alignment between workforce development and education.

#### **1.6. Describe how the region will connect employer labor force requirements and occupational demands with the region's labor force, including individuals with barriers to employment**

Discussed in **Section 1.3**, the Allegheny Conference on Community Development released the report, *2020/2030 Next is Now: A 10 Year Vision of Vitality in the Pittsburgh Region*. The development of the report was led by a 35-member steering committee of regional leaders and was informed by obtaining feedback from 1,000 stakeholders in ACCD's 10-county region, as well as a summit of 1,000 stakeholders during summer 2019. The report notes a key regional challenge is that the economy has experienced slow growth compared to statewide growth in Pennsylvania and growth nationally. The report emphasizes making economic growth a priority and highlights several strategies, including but not limited to scaling talent attraction and retention efforts; removing barriers to opportunity to ensure people are not excluded from the benefits of increased economic growth; and creating a regional investment and growth environment that encourages business investment, job creation, high quality of place and opportunity for all.

Addressing barriers to employment and connecting individuals to quality career opportunities is core to the work of the Southwest Planning Region. Local boards within the region seek to serve special populations, such as veterans, and individuals with barriers to employment, including low-income individuals, recipients of public assistance, individuals who are basic skills deficient, out-of-school youth, and the re-entry population. Through the PA CareerLink® offices, the Southwest Planning Region aligns programming to meet the state and federal requirements for priority of service; more than 51% of those served will be priority of service populations under WIOA. The following are examples of how the Southwest Planning Region will continue to implement strategies for serving individuals with barriers to

employment:

## Examples of Priority Populations

### ***Veterans***

Veterans receive priority of service at PA CareerLink® offices, meaning that a veteran or qualified spouse receives priority access to services and training opportunities. Additionally, Title I staff within the PA CareerLink® system work closely with Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVER) in each local area. The LVER provide services geared specifically towards veterans, including intensive job development activities, the initiation of referrals to social services, and regular follow-up to ensure that the veteran receives the support needed. Additionally, the LVER coordinates with local veteran service providers, provides information about and referral to veterans programs, and reviews and analyzes the veterans program to ensure compliance with veteran standards. Our region will consider possibilities for future regional collaboration to effectively serve veterans.

### ***Low Income Individuals***

The WIOA Title I program is designed to support low-income individuals by providing comprehensive services that address their barriers to employment and help them achieve sustainable careers. Low-income individuals and recipients of public assistance are identified at the point of entry at local PA CareerLink® offices and informed of their entitlement to priority of service for WIOA Adult programming. Participants can access services such as career counseling, skills assessments, job placement assistance, and access to training programs tailored to in-demand industries. To address common barriers, the WIOA program offers supportive services such as childcare, transportation assistance, and funding for necessary tools, uniforms, or certification fees. Additionally, our regional PA CareerLink® offices collaborate with local human services agencies and community-based organizations to connect participants with other critical resources such as housing. By taking a holistic approach, the WIOA program empowers individuals to overcome challenges, gain marketable skills, and secure meaningful employment, ultimately fostering self-sufficiency and reducing economic disparities in the community.

Additionally, WIOA out-of-school youth (OSY), in-school youth (ISY), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Youth Development Fund (YDF) programs each set income eligibility requirements to ensure services are reaching individuals who are low income and/or individuals with other barriers to employment. Further, each local workforce area sets a self-sufficiency wage standard, as a target entry-level wage for participants served. This standard serves as a guide for service delivery and job placement, to help focus on training and jobs that lead to economic self-sufficiency for the participant.

Our regional local boards also oversee Temporary Assistance for Employment Advancement and Retention Network (EARN) and Work Ready programming, which delivers employment and training services to individuals receiving TANF cash assistance. Our region will continue to identify alignment opportunities between TANF and WIOA employment programs to ensure participants are referred to programming best fit for their unique service needs. Opportunities include co-location of PA CareerLink® and TANF EARN/Work Ready programming.

### ***Individuals with Disabilities***

Eligible individuals who self-identify as having a disability are referred to the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) staff at PA CareerLink® for tailored services. These services include diagnostic evaluations, vocational counseling and guidance, vocational education, training, job placement, and individualized supportive services. OVR also provides pre-employment transition services (PETS) to

eligible and potentially eligible in-school youth with disabilities, helping them prepare for life after high school. Additionally, OVR supports businesses by assisting with onboarding pre-screened, qualified employees with disabilities.

Collaboration between OVR and Title I staff at PA CareerLink® ensures that job seekers with disabilities receive dual enrollment and access to a wide range of services. The Southwest Planning Region will continue to work with OVR to identify further opportunities for coordination and partnership, ensuring comprehensive and effective support for individuals with disabilities across the workforce system. Enhanced data sharing between these partners would be one potential opportunity for closer alignment.

### ***Reentry Population***

Workforce development programming for the reentry population, both pre- and post-release, can assist individuals in successfully transitioning from incarceration to employment, lead to a reduction in recidivism for these individuals, and promote economic self-sufficiency. The PA CareerLink® system in our region is available to provide a range of services tailored to meet the unique needs of this population, including career counseling, job search assistance, and access to training programs for in-demand occupations. Additionally, supportive services such as transportation, childcare, and help obtaining necessary identification or work-related tools can address common barriers to employment. Each local board has also developed specialized strategies and programming for serving individuals returning from incarceration in our local areas. Examples include:

- TCWDB oversees the Youth Reentry Program, which serves individuals ages 18-24 who were incarcerated or were subjected to the justice system. The program engages youth in a career pathway leading to postsecondary education, advanced training, and/or meaningful employment through secondary dropout reengagement and aligning individuals' skill sets and training gaps to pursue the relevant education and employment.
- TRWDB oversees multiple programs focused on serving individual impacted by the justice system. These include the *Pittsburgh Reentry Career Services (PRCS)* program, funded by a federal Department of Justice grant. PRCS partners with the PA CareerLink®, Center for Employment Opportunities, Action Housing, and Operation Better Block to provide employment and training supports for clients pre- and post-release at the ACJ and Renewal Centers. Through this initiative, TRWDB is also working directly with the Allegheny County Jail and employers to create a second chance fair hiring directory. TRWDB also oversees the *Young Adult Reentry Project (YARP)*. YARP provides employment, training, mentorship, and supportive services to justice involved youth ages 18-24.
- WFWDB coordinates the Westmoreland-Fayette Youth Re-Entry Program that aims to enhance reentry strategies for young adults ages 18 to 24 who have been involved in the juvenile justice system. Comprehensive case management and supportive services are delivered in tandem with mentoring support including facilitating access to vocational training, education, post-secondary information, soft-skills training, and transitional employment to increase job skills and readiness. If the returning youth does not have a high school diploma, youth will be worked back into the school system or connected to a local GED/remediation program. A primary goal of the program is to help participants gain unsubsidized, career-track employment that affords self-sustaining income.
- SCWDB oversees Youth Reentry Programming that connects justice-impacted young adults to workforce development resources, including employment and training services, work experience, case management and supportive services, and other resources.

### ***Substance Use Disorder (SUD)***

Workforce development programs can provide vital support to individuals experiencing substance use disorder (SUD), particularly in regions like Southwestern Pennsylvania that have been deeply affected by the opioid epidemic. These programs help to provide a pathway to recovery by addressing barriers to employment and offering opportunities for stability and long-term success. Programming may include skills training, career counseling, and supportive services tailored to the unique challenges faced by individuals with SUD, such as navigating gaps in employment. Collaboration with employers and industries is essential to create inclusive, recovery-friendly workplace policies. By equipping individuals with marketable skills and access to meaningful jobs, these interventions not only promote individual recovery but also contribute to the economic and social revitalization of communities hardest hit by the opioid crisis.

The Southwest Planning Region, with TRWDB as the lead applicant, has been awarded funding through the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) Investments Supporting Partnerships in Recovery Ecosystems (INSPIRE) Initiative. Through this initiative, the local boards in the Southwest Planning Region and our regional partners, are working to build and expand programs, partnerships, and efforts across the region to address the impacts of SUD. This project will engage adults in recovery from SUD in training (including Certified Recovery Specialist training), job placement, supportive services, and retention activities. The project will also partner with employers to establish and improve upon recovery friendly employment practices.

### ***Adult Education***

Individuals with basic skills deficiencies who enroll in Title I services through PA CareerLink® will be co-enrolled with Title II Adult Basic Education where appropriate. PA CareerLink® staff identify individuals who are basic skills deficient through an intake process, then refer these customers to appropriate literacy programs, including GED review classes, ESL, and math and English remediation courses. **Section 1.3** of this plan describe coordination with WIOA Title II – Adult Education in more detail.

### ***Opportunity Youth***

Our regional local boards invest in a diverse network of workforce development programs that connect opportunity youth—young people aged 16 to 24 who are not in school or working—with pathways to education and career opportunities. Our WIOA Youth programs prioritize services to out-of-school youth. These programs provide critical support, including job training, paid work experience, career counseling, and high school diploma recovery and GED attainment opportunities, to help young people overcome barriers to success and build a foundation for stable, meaningful employment. Where possible, our region will work to strengthen partnerships between our network of youth programs and other federally-funded programming. Coordination with established initiatives like Job Corps, YouthBuild, AmeriCorps, and the Pennsylvania Outdoor Corps enhances the effectiveness of workforce development efforts by combining resources and expertise. Job Corps offers residential education and job training, YouthBuild provides hands-on construction and leadership experience, and AmeriCorps emphasizes community service and skill development. The Pennsylvania Outdoor Corps further complements these efforts by providing young people with opportunities to gain valuable work experience in conservation, environmental stewardship, and public land maintenance, helping to develop skills in forestry, park management, and natural resource conservation. By aligning these programs with local workforce initiatives, communities can create a robust network of opportunities that equips opportunity youth with the tools they need to thrive while also addressing local workforce needs and strengthening the economy.

## Employer Engagement and Apprenticeships

Our region will also leverage our industry partnerships, employer engagement capacity, and registered apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships (where appropriate) to connect special populations and individuals with barriers to career opportunities. This may include educating employers on the benefits of hiring individuals with certain barriers to employment and incentives, such as Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) and Federal Bonding programs that are available. This may also include working with our industry partners to develop specialized training to connect individuals to employment along career pathways within their respective industries. Industry-driven training, coupled with dedicated case management and wraparound services provided through PA CareerLink®, can help individuals mitigate potential barriers to employment, while obtaining the skills and credentials needed to successfully obtain employment at family-sustaining wages.

Registered apprenticeship programs are particularly promising models for helping individuals with employment barriers obtain jobs along a career pathway. By combining classroom instruction with paid, hands-on training, these programs allow participants to gain practical experience and industry-recognized credentials, while earning a wage on-the-job. The ability to “earn-while-you-learn” can help to alleviate the financial burden and opportunity cost of a forgone wage as a barrier to training participation.

**Section 1.3** and **1.5** discuss in greater detail ways in which our region is working to create and expand registered apprenticeship opportunities in our region, including for individuals from underrepresented populations and with other barriers to employment. This includes a discussion of the menu of training options that may be used to support apprenticeship, convening stakeholders to support apprenticeship, facilitating stronger connections between apprenticeship programs and PA CareerLink®, and other information.

### **1.7. Describe the coordination of transportation and other supportive services for the region.**

Supportive services are essential components of workforce development programs, as they address the various barriers participants often face in accessing training and securing employment. These services often include transportation assistance, childcare, housing support, tools/equipment required for training or employment, assistance with licensing/testing fees, and other services. By providing comprehensive services tailored to individual needs, workforce programs help participants stay engaged, complete training, and transition successfully into the workforce. Each local board in our region has an established supportive services policy outlining the supportive services resources available to participants. PA CareerLink® and other provider-level staff are also able to coordinate referrals to other service agencies as needed and available.

#### Transportation

Reliable transportation is a critical factor in obtaining and retaining employment, yet it remains a significant barrier for many job seekers in Southwest Pennsylvania. Without dependable transportation, individuals may struggle to reach job interviews, training programs, or workplaces on time, hindering their ability to secure or sustain employment. This challenge is especially acute in rural or suburban parts of the region where public transit options are sparse or non-existent. However, even in urban areas like Pittsburgh, gaps in transit coverage or unpredictable schedules can pose obstacles for workers with nontraditional hours or jobs located outside of central transit hubs.

The Southwest Planning Region has a diverse geographic landscape, from rural, sparsely populated areas

like Greene and Indiana Counties, to suburban, moderately populated areas like Westmoreland and Butler Counties, to the urban, more densely populated areas in and surrounding Pittsburgh. Each county has unique transportation needs and varying levels of public transportation systems. There are more public transportation agencies than Counties in our region, further complicating any efforts at coordination. **Table 10** provides data on commuters to and from the counties in the region. Other than in Allegheny County and Butler County, there is a larger number of people who are traveling outside of their county of residence than there are people traveling into their county for employment purposes.

**Table 10. Commuting Data by County in the Southwest Planning Region**

County	Incoming Commuters	Outgoing Commuters	Net Commuters (Incoming vs. Outcoming)
Allegheny County	216,934	101,986	114,948
Armstrong County	6,282	18,708	-12,426
Beaver County	23,247	43,459	-20,212
Butler County	43,035	42,702	333
Fayette County	12,781	26,348	-13,567
Greene County	6,419	7,774	-1,355
Indiana County	11,948	14,672	-2,724
Washington County	42,318	47,428	-5,110
Westmoreland County	52,073	78,903	-26,830

Commuting patterns and business density vary widely throughout the region. The economic influence of Allegheny County often draws residents of neighboring counties into Allegheny County for work. Allegheny County was home to nearly 60% of the jobs in the Southwest Planning Region in 2023.<sup>29</sup> **Table 11** displays average commute times and modes of transportation for the Southwest Planning Region. The average commute time across the region for workers 16 and older is 27.1 minutes, which is similar to commute times across Pennsylvania (27.1 minutes) and the nation (26.9 minutes). Lack of strong public transportation infrastructure between Allegheny County and some outlying counties and within the outlying counties means that workers frequently must rely on cars to commute to work. The majority (80.2%) of commuters across the region drive to work alone and 1.8% use public transportation. Workers in Allegheny County commuted by public transit at significantly higher rates (8.9%) compared to other counties in the region (0.3% to 2%), Pennsylvania (5.3%), and the U.S. (4.6%).

<sup>29</sup> EMSI, QCEW Employees, Non-QCEW Employees and Self-Employed, 2023.

**Table 11 Regional Commute Times and Transportation Methods<sup>30</sup>**

County	Average Travel Time to Work in Minutes	Drove Alone to Work Percent	Took Public Transportation to Work Percent
Allegheny County	26.9	69.2	8.9
Armstrong County	30.0	82.0	0.3
Beaver County	26.4	81.2	2.0
Butler County	27.4	82.0	0.5
Fayette County	26.7	83.5	1.1
Greene County	29.0	81.9	0.1
Indiana County	24.1	78.7	0.5
Washington County	26.6	80.9	1.3
Westmoreland County	27.0	82.5	1.2
Pennsylvania	27.1	74.4	5.3
United States	26.9	74.9	4.6

The COVID-19 pandemic also influenced commuting patterns for many occupations as employers shifted to remote and hybrid work options for their employees during and following the pandemic. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that 35% of workers in the United States worked from home for some or all their work in 2023.<sup>31</sup> As a result, a greater number of employees also have access to employment outside of their region of residence and employers can source workers from farther outside of their region of business. Data on the extent that this is occurring in the Southwest Planning Region, however, are not readily available.

Due to variations in local transportation options and changing commuting trends, each local board determines the best method to provide transportation assistance. Transportation will continue to be a barrier and a challenge to job seekers being successfully employed in long-term employment. The Southwest Planning Region workforce boards will continue to invest in transportation options to assist job seekers in meeting their education, training, and employment needs.

### Childcare

The high cost of childcare, limited availability, and lack of flexible options often make it difficult for individuals to balance education/training participation or work and caregiving responsibilities. In many cases, the absence of affordable, reliable childcare forces parents to forgo employment opportunities or leave jobs, perpetuating cycles of economic instability. Addressing this barrier through accessible childcare solutions—such as employer-sponsored programs, subsidies, or on-site facilities—can empower caregivers to participate in the workforce, improve family financial stability, and support broader economic growth.

Access to affordable and quality childcare also continues to be a common barrier to employment in the Southwest Planning Region. The US Department of Labor (USDOL) Women’s Bureau released an analysis of childcare care costs in the United States as a percentage of the area’s family median income. **Table 12** displays the median annual costs of childcare in each of the counties in the Southwest Planning Region, displayed as a percentage of the county’s median family income. Costs vary by the age of the child, as well as whether care is provided in a childcare center or at home. With the region, the percentages of family

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2019-2023 ACS 5-Year Data Profile.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *American Time Use Survey 2023* (June 27, 2024)

income being spent on childcare range from 7.4% for home-based care for school-aged children in Butler County to 14.2% for childcare center-based services for infants in Indiana County. Butler County has the highest family median income and pays, on average, the smallest percentage of income (9.0%) toward childcare. Fayette County has the lowest family median income and pays the highest percentage of family income toward childcare (12.2%).

**Table 12: Childcare Costs as a Percentage of Family Median Income<sup>32</sup>**

County (Family Median Income)	Infant (CB)	Infant (HB)	Toddler (CB)	Toddler (HB)	Pre-School (CB)	Pre-School (HB)	School-Aged (CB)	School-Aged (HB)	Average
Fayette (\$73,849)	13.0%	12.6%	13.0%	11.5%	12.2%	11.8%	11.3%	11.9%	12.2%
Greene (\$84,360)	11.7%	12.5%	11.3%	12.5%	11.0%	12.5%	11.2%	12.5%	11.9%
Washington (\$98,930)	12.2%	11.4%	11.4%	11.6%	11.1%	11.6%	10.0%	11.6%	11.4%
Indiana (\$78,873)	14.2%	10.1%	12.5%	9.7%	12.4%	9.4%	11.5%	9.8%	11.2%
Beaver (\$86,197)	11.8%	12.7%	11.4%	10.2%	11.1%	10.8%	10.1%	11.0%	11.1%
Armstrong (\$79,027)	12.1%	12.1%	11.4%	8.7%	11.4%	8.7%	11.8%	9.1%	10.7%
Westmoreland (\$91,249)	12.3%	10.2%	11.4%	9.9%	10.8%	9.6%	10.8%	8.7%	10.5%
Allegheny (\$102,710)	11.6%	8.8%	11.0%	8.0%	10.3%	8.0%	10.0%	8.5%	9.5%
Butler (\$107,507)	10.9%	7.9%	9.9%	8.2%	9.6%	8.2%	10.1%	7.4%	9.0%

Childcare Center-Based (CB); Home-Based Childcare (HB)

The Southwest Region will work to ensure our programs are able to facilitate the appropriate connections to childcare services for participants in need. Our region will also explore ways of partnering with existing organizations and agencies, such as the United Way of Southwestern PA, state and local human services agencies, community-based organizations, and others to address the challenge of childcare as a barrier to program participation and employment.

### Broadband Access

Fast and reliable internet access is essential for individuals to successfully find and maintain employment. Reliable internet access enables job seekers to search for opportunities, submit applications, and participate in virtual interviews, while also making available online training and professional development resources. For workers, broadband is critical for remote work, communication with employers, and accessing digital tools needed for job performance.

<sup>32</sup> National Database of Childcare Prices (2019-2022). US Department of Labor Women’s Bureau. Updated November 2024. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/topics/childcare/median-family-income-by-age-care-setting-2022>

Residents in the Southwest Planning Region, particularly in rural locations, may still experience limitations to internet and broadband connections. As discussed in **Section 1.2**, the percentage of households with access to the internet ranges from 78.9% in Indiana County to 89.8% in Allegheny County, which can be compared to the national rate of 89.7%. Our region will continue to identify ways of addressing technology and internet access as a barrier for the job seekers and workers our programs serve. This will include strengthening program connections to existing federal and state-level broadband expansion programs, such as the *Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program*. We will also continue to make technology available through PA CareerLink® sites to assist people with their job search and leverage partnerships with public libraries and other community-based organizations providing neighborhood-based technology solutions.

**1.8. Describe the region’s strategy to increase engagement on the statewide eligible training provider list.**

Each local board in the Southwest Planning Region has established processes for review and approval of training providers and programs to the WIOA Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL). Local boards strive to maintain a robust menu of quality training opportunities on the ETPL aligned with High Priority Occupations (HPOs) in the region and each respective local area. Training programs are assessed based on their alignment with an HPO, past performance outcomes (including job placement, median earnings, credential attainment, and program completion) and various other factors. The local boards in the region also regularly engage employers in in-demand industries through industry partnerships and sector strategies to assess employer priorities and hiring needs and develop training programs aligned with labor market demand. The Southwest Planning Region has also previously collaborated in petitioning for occupations to be added to the HPO list on a regional scale based on our knowledge of regional hiring needs and informed by employer engagement. Our region will continue to collaborate on collective outreach efforts to enhance the menu of quality training options in our region, while ensuring alignment with regional demand.

**1.9. Describe how the region established administrative cost arrangements, including the pooling of funds for administrative costs, as appropriate, for the region.**

The local boards in the Southwest Planning Region regularly collaborate on discretionary grant opportunities to deliver workforce development resources to the region. This typically involves a select board serving as the administrative lead for the grant, while establishing agreements with the remaining local boards to implement programs. Recent examples include the previously mentioned USDOL Building Pathways to Infrastructure Jobs and ARC – ARISE grants for which TRWDB and SCWDB serve as the administrative leads, respectively. To promote efficient and effective programming, our region will continue to identify opportunities, as appropriate, to establish agreements among our local boards to deliver services on a regional scale.

**1.10. Describe the agreement between the local boards that describes how the planning region will collectively negotiate and reach agreement with L&I on local levels of performance for, and report on, the performance accountability measures described in section 116(c), for each of the local areas within the planning region.**

Our region is committed to achieving positive employment outcomes for the job seekers, workers, and

employers that our workforce development system serves and, in turn, exceeding the negotiated WIOA performance levels we have set with the Commonwealth. The local boards in our region have agreed to individually negotiate WIOA performance measures with the Commonwealth. Our regional local boards have currently negotiated performance measures with the PA Department of Labor & Industry (L&I) for Program Year (PY) 2024 and PY 2025 for our respective local areas.

Through quarterly WIOA performance reports distributed by L&I, we will track progress toward achieving WIOA performance outcomes across the region and support each other in achieving outcomes as needed and appropriate.

**1.11. Describe the region’s process to ensure the public (including representatives of business, labor organizations, and education) had 30 days to review and comment on the contents of the proposed Regional Plan, and subsequent modification, if applicable, prior to Commonwealth submission.**

To ensure compliance with WIOA requirements, the Southwest Planning Region provided the public, including representatives from business, labor, and education, a 30-day period to review and comment on the draft WIOA Regional Plan before submission to the Commonwealth. Each local board in our region notified stakeholders of the opportunity to provide comments by posting on our respective websites and through other means such as email distribution lists, social media, and local publications. The plan was accessible online in each of our areas for a 30-day period, and comments were accepted through electronic means, such as email or an online form. All feedback was reviewed, summarized, and incorporated as appropriate, with a summary of public input included in the final plan (See Attachment 1).

## **Attachment 1: Public Comments on the WIOA Regional Plan**

### **Public Comment:**

#### **Commenter:**

Neil Ashbaugh

#### **Agency or Business of Affiliation:**

New Century Careers

#### **Comment:**

The need for training that is proven by third-party industry recognized credentialing that also is couple with career placement directly with industry partners is absolutely vital to maintaining and expanding the regional precision manufacturing industry of Southwestern PA. At New Century Careers, we promote tuition-free pre-apprenticeship training, National Institute for Metalworking Skills (NIMS) credentialing and offer free job placement assistance for individuals who have completed our MANUFACTURING 2000 (M2K) pre-apprenticeship program. NCC's network of over 130 manufacturers are always in need of these program completers. To further assist our partners, we are also a third-party sponsor for Registered Apprentices (Machinist, Robotics Technician) as well as a provider of customized incumbent worker upskilling and training.

For these reasons, we are fully supported and committed to working with partners in the region to engage, qualify, training, credential, place, and upskill technicians for the needs of this regions manufacturers and their need for a highly-skilled workforce for today, and into the future.

#### **Southwest Planning Region Response:**

Thank you for your comment. The Southwest Planning Region is steadfast in our commitment to building and maintaining industry partnerships. Feedback from industry leaders and training providers such as yourself is crucial to our strategy of bridging the gap between occupation demands and the region's labor force. Tuition-free pre-apprenticeship programs and accessible credentialing are among the practices necessary to ensuring individuals with barriers are not excluded from the benefits of economic growth, and we therefore commend the work of NCC and look forward to our continued partnership.