



FOCUS AREA 2: Support the region's workers and their families **(Draft as of April 2022)**

What and Why. For decades, our region's highly educated and skilled workforce has been a tremendous asset. However, to thrive economically, our region must develop a robust labor market that embraces the power of human services and ensures our workers have the skills and the support systems in place to thrive in the workplace, including access to high-quality internet. In addition, we must ensure there is training and opportunity available to develop skills necessary to get and keep high-quality jobs and ensure that families have the support that they need to balance the demands of caregiving with workforce demands.

Easy and affordable access to career exploration and apprenticeships that are simple to navigate remains a priority for North Jersey. Our region needs to coordinate existing workforce development programs and create a greater variety of progressive pathways to better, livable wages. Educational, training, and workforce systems are often complex and challenging for students, job seekers, and employers to navigate. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, career pathways are designed to help individuals navigate these programs by providing "post-secondary education and training that is organized in a series of manageable steps leading to successively higher credentials and employment opportunities in growing occupations."

The COVID-19 health pandemic has reinforced the critical importance of worker protections, as essential workers carry out key functions of our economy that require face-to-face interactions such as growing and preparing food, providing transportation services and caring for our loved ones. Supporting public policies that strengthen worker protections and raise awareness within and beyond the public sector will safeguard and strengthen our workforce.

How. Our first step as a region is to conduct research that uncovers and identifies common barriers to career advancement from workers directly, particularly those traditionally disadvantaged in the labor market. Access to existing workforce programs may be impacted by a variety of externalities, including lack of transportation, funding, childcare support, and more. Uncovering these needs will improve the development of workforce and training opportunities to be worker-oriented. Furthermore, a region-wide multi-sectoral partnership is critical to launching an effective marketing campaign for career pathways and supporting workers through resource and information distribution.

Strategy 2.1: Expand access to workforce development and training

Workforce development and training opportunities are essential components of a successful regional economy. Employees and employers need information about and access to a variety of training and

development opportunities to ensure that workers' skills match employers' needs and that employees can continue to advance in their careers. To that end, the region should work with partners, including counties, nonprofit partners, and state agencies to expand access to workforce training opportunities and information, especially for those populations that are traditionally disadvantaged in the labor market (such as residents with low-income or low educational attainment, or people with disabilities) and conduct research to understand better what barriers exist to accessing training and workforce development opportunities. In addition, workforce development and training should continue to expand on virtual platforms. Recent progress on virtual opportunities has come due to necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this expansion has afforded additional access to these development and training opportunities for many residents, removing transportation and travel time barriers.

Strategy 2.2: Promote career pathways and career advancement strategies

Career advancement must go beyond entry-level positioning to incorporate opportunities for more advanced steps to help individuals earn a promotion or advance within their industry. To start, we should convene a multi-industry task force to inventory and coordinate the career pathways and career advancement programs that already exist in the region. Our region should pilot and evaluate new pathway initiatives and scale up those that prove the most successful, especially for youth and the region's most vulnerable populations. These programs should be fully accessible to existing workers who may require evening or weekend programs and should be offered in multiple languages beyond English and Spanish. Further, we should conduct new and innovative outreach to ensure that all residents are aware of career pathway initiatives, especially in traditionally overlooked and minority communities.

Strategy 2.3: Address barriers to employment, especially for socially vulnerable and disadvantaged workers.

Barriers to employment exist for many residents of North Jersey, including lack of reliable transportation or internet access, behavioral and physical health challenges, language barriers, lack of adequate education, or challenges with employment screening. Further, many individuals face challenges related to child and dependent care that may limit their ability to enter the workforce or achieve their full potential in the workforce. Our region should expand available programs to address these barriers faced by many workers, including but not limited to low-income adults, people with disabilities, minorities, veterans and justice-involved individuals looking to re-enter the workforce.

2.4 Strengthen protection for workers and provide them with stability and support

New Jersey is stronger when all residents earn enough to afford their basic needs, feel safe in their workplace, and receive support when they are unable to work. To improve the well-being of residents, our region should promote and support public policies that protect workers and provide them with the stability and support they need to succeed. This includes increasing access to paid leave programs and sick days, encouraging predictable and stable scheduling for all workers, expanding unemployment access, and increasing the minimum wage for all job types.

Strategy 2.5: Support the expansion of apprenticeship programs.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) defines an apprenticeship as "a formal relationship between a worker and sponsor," typically an employer or labor organization, and typically a skilled trade. These programs have been traditionally found in construction, manufacturing and healthcare; however, apprenticeships in many other fields, such as human resources, can and should be explored. Apprenticeships offer on-the-job training and technical instruction, providing both practical and theoretical understanding of the occupation. Our region should work collaboratively with the New Jersey Apprenticeship Network (NJAN) to support and promote state programs, such as the Pre-Apprenticeship in Career Education (PACE) and the Growing Apprenticeship in Nontraditional Sectors (GAINS), increase awareness of these programs to private employers and potential participants, especially those that are underserved and overlooked; and provide technical assistance to Counties in establishing local apprenticeship programs.

Strategy 2.6: Expand career exploration opportunities, especially for skilled trades, vocational, and technical programs

Career exploration helps students and job seekers improve their knowledge of career options. While career exploration encompasses a wide range of career and job types, increased exploration of middle-skills jobs is particularly important to the region. Middle-skills jobs require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree, such as construction workers, skilled trades— including plumbers, welders and electricians—drivers, mechanics and technicians. Many of these positions offer higher earning potential than those requiring a four-year degree and are often among those listed by employers as hard to fill. Therefore, our region should work with partners, especially middle and high schools, to ensure that these occupations are included (if not highlighted) in career exploration programming. Further, our region should work with school districts and career services organizations (including One-Stop Centers) to increase the frequency and thoroughness of career exploration programming to ensure that students and job seekers of all ages are aware of the availability of appropriate career and technical education programs. This would help employers meet the demand for these positions and provide residents with viable career options that require less time and money than a four-year degree.

Strategy 2.7 Ensure all North Jersey residents have access to a high-quality, high-speed internet connection.

Access to a reliable, high-speed internet connection is a clear indicator of opportunity in the 21st century. Broadband drives prosperity in communities and supports long-term goals. The COVID-19 health pandemic underscored the critical nature of internet access as residents without quality service struggled to participate in personal and professional functions of life like school, work, shopping and social engagement. To ensure all North Jersey residents have access to a high-quality, high-speed internet connection, New Jersey should create a statewide office dedicated to communication, coordination and funding initiatives to close the digital divide. Together North Jersey will support broadband planning on a regional and local level, engage local broadband champions and increase digital literacy and technical support amongst small-to-medium enterprises, residents, older adults, students and disadvantaged populations. Together North Jersey should monitor the broadband projects deployed and evaluate their ability to be replicated in other areas in North Jersey. Together North Jersey should also collaborate with local partners to build digital literacy amongst our community members. By building a digitally literate

region, we will see increased civic engagement and access to health services, higher workforce participation, innovation in our regional economy and more participation in higher education.