



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – WASHINGTON & AROOSTOOK COUNTIES

### Workforce Development

#### Introductory Section

Workforce development in the Aroostook-Washington region varies from place to place depending on the level of engagement of the private sector and educational providers. In some locations, strong regional committees have engaged both business interests and service providers in meaningful dialogue to best deliver training and educational opportunities to job-seekers and those interested in obtaining higher skill-sets. Customized training options have also been developed and delivered locally through public-private partnerships. These relationships have developed over the past 24 months in the Aroostook-Washington region primarily due to public investment in activities from a variety of sources including Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding; Adult and Community Education; Higher Education; and the K-12 public school system among others. The Local Workforce Investment Board is federally mandated to ensure a business-led majority of its members. The Aroostook-Washington Workforce Investment Board is in compliance with that requirement. With a combined population of just over 100,000 these two counties are home to three of Maine's seven public universities and two of the state's seven community colleges.



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#### Findings

The areas within the region that have the best examples of activity and engagement are those that have strong private sector involvement in workforce development programs. The region has strong educational opportunities. Aroostook County is strong on adult education programs; whereas in Washington County, adult education is barely existent. Recent conversations in Washington County have led to a better understanding by policymakers and public officials that more is needed in the way of basic adult education programs. Both counties are rich in higher educational institutions. The region has high unemployment rates that far above the state and national averages.

#### Areas of special note:

- Aging workforce – Older workers have varying needs and like part or flex-time options.
- There is a lack of support in many workplaces for treatment of addiction issues.
- There are a large number of veterans returning to civilian life and looking for work.
- There is a high demand for specialized professionals in the healthcare sector in various technical occupations.
- Many younger workers and those that are returning to the workforce lack basic soft skills; such as, timely work attendance, personal appearance and dress, co-worker relations, not using cell phones during work time, etc. There is a program called “Workready” that has been developed through the Maine Department of Education which addresses these gaps and is delivered regionally by approved Workready host locations.
- There are currently too many assessment tools being utilized by public agencies with job-seekers and clients.
- The region lacks effective referral systems. Partner agencies need to collaborate and align resources more effectively.



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#### Analysis and Basic Conclusions

Several meetings have been held over the past two years with business leaders; education providers and service providers to discuss the workforce development needs in the region and the gaps that currently exist. The common area that stakeholders consistently agreed on was the lack of basic understanding about punctuality, dress, work behavior and other soft skills with today's incoming workforce.

There needs to be a regional systematic framework for achieving workforce development goals. This framework would:

- Create a strategic alignment and connection between the three key parts of workforce development -- people, education & training, and employers
  - Communicates to the workforce marketplace
  - Enables delivery of a full spectrum of training and education curriculum
  - Creates a closed-loop system with direct employment with local business
- Builds collaborative relationships to prioritize, implement and monitor the performance of the Workforce Center of Excellence (WCOE)
- Provides a system model to address short and long-term workforce quantity and skill factors for a regional economy
- Focuses attention and resources on targeted industry sector workforce requirements while addressing workforce needs of the entire regional economy
- Creates a single place to evaluate and apply innovative and best-practice workforce development models

**Education & Training:** Education, training and other workforce development providers collectively need to be flexible and responsive to employer and workforce needs. In a WCOE model, Maine's universities, community colleges, the K-12 educational system, and training and service providers work collaboratively collaborate to build industry-specific skills and a more flexible workforce.

**People:** Human capital is the “must have” ingredient for a regional economy to function. Citizens in the primary workforce age (20-54) plus seniors 65+ **must** be engaged in the workforce. WCOE models actively communicate with these folks to maintain high levels of awareness of education, training, and employment opportunities.

**Employers:** Business and industry leaders **must** be fully and continuously engaged in the building of overall workforce supply. In the WCOE system model, employers provide front-end core skill requirements, on-going technical needs, and hiring of certified completers.



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#### Suggested Actions

- More public funding/investment in “career pathway” approaches to workforce development are needed. More private sector involvement in local career pathway committees and action teams is imperative.
- The region should consider investing more in adult education programs as a foundation to education and training opportunities for the workforce.
- Public meetings and forums on the topics of workforce education are necessary to engage a better understanding and dialogue among diverse interests. Institutions of higher education should be the catalyst for these discussions and conversations.
- The region should develop a Workforce Center of Excellence. The components of building this new paradigm and framework are:



#### **Step 1. Leadership**

Convene workforce development, education, economic development, and business stakeholders. The core leadership should set forth clearly stated objectives which are consistent with the regional S.M.A.R.T Goals (link to Smart Goals here)

#### **Step 2. Organizational Design, Ownership and Governance**

The new workforce paradigm that is emerging represents a pattern of convergence of outcomes, practices, and policies among practitioners of the fields of employment and training, alleviating poverty, and regional economic development.

Note that this approach is about outcomes, not programs. While it has been assumed that the LWIB is the convener, each stakeholder and program provider must be part of the solution or system for such a collaborative consortium to transform the regional workforce to a 21<sup>st</sup> Century center of excellence.

#### **Step 3. Training and Education Design & Delivery**

#### **Step 4. Implementation**

#### **Step 5. Measuring Outcomes and Successes**



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#### Implementation Already Occurring

A regional group has been formed and is meeting in the northern part of the region since late 2011. The St. John Valley Career Pathways Committee is led by local adult education leaders and representatives of that area's higher education institution (University of Maine Fort Kent) Other partners include the K-12 public school systems and private businesses.

Another group in central Aroostook County formed in early 2013. This group has met 3-4 times and includes many service providers and educational institutions. However, the group lacks business leaders and is working to recruit more private sector involvement, which the committee understands is essential to the success of the group.

Washington County has held small action-team meetings to discuss workforce and education issues in the region, and held one forum where several businesses and education providers attended. More forums and better leadership needs to occur. The group is interested in establishing a career pathways initiative; however, the University of Maine at Machias is currently the leader in career pathways in Washington County as there is a prevalent lack of adult education providers throughout the region.

Regional teams are meeting more regularly and building better collaborative relationships. Adult education plays a strong role in not only delivery of service, but also facilitation and convener of stakeholder groups in Aroostook County.

Northern Maine Development Commission has engaged Vital Economy to assist with the preparation of a five-year Workforce Development Strategic Plan and the development of a Workforce Center of Excellence for the Aroostook-Washington Workforce Region. Maine's demographic and workforce trends are unsustainable; Aroostook and Washington counties are even more so. Silo approaches and traditional workforce development funding policies cannot influence the trend. A performing WCOE in the region will create an attractive climate for current and new employers and workforce prospects from inside and outside the region. Our economy and Maine way of life is dependent upon successful business and a productive growing workforce.



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#### Additional Resource Needs

- Workforce partners need to adopt a regional workforce development vision, measurable goals and action plans that will guide investments over the next five years;
- Agreements need to be developed between the organizations working on workforce, education, and training activities that outline roles and responsibilities;
- Agreements must be created between workforce system providers and business groups (i.e. Chambers of Commerce);
- Funding to support the implementation of the Workforce Center of Excellence initiative;
- Funding to support specific actions outlined in the Workforce Development Strategic Plan document;
- A benchmark system needs to be developed to track current and future workforce system clients;
- System redundancies need to be determined and new applications of resources deployed;
- Health and wellness programs need to be part of the fabric of the workforce system;
- Career lattices for each identified industry-sector need to be developed.