



Annual Report for Calendar Year 2023

This year's report highlights activities undertaken and lessons learned by the Berks County Workforce Development Board during and in response to a rapidly changing labor market environment as we emerged from the lingering effects of the pandemic throughout calendar year 2023.

Top Three Accomplishments for 2023

- A. DEI Employer Symposium Focused on Employing Adults with Disabilities** – The Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) has established a strategic priority to address the employment challenges faced by more than 28,000 adult residents (ages 25-64) with a disability. Unfortunately, these talented residents experience an unemployment rate more than twice the rate for individuals in the labor force with no disability. At the same time, employers in our region increasingly report to the WDB that they would benefit from increased access to trainings and resources around supporting the employment of individuals with disabilities. To help address this need, the WDB's attention in 2023 focused on the actions that we could take to assist local employers improve their recruitment, retention, and advancement of persons with disabilities in the workforce.

Accordingly, in March of 2023, the Berks County WDB sponsored an open *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Symposium for Employers*, highlighting and promoting resources and best practices of hiring individuals with disabilities. This virtual webinar was conceived and designed by the WDB's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee and delivery of the program was presented by the PA Career-Link® Berks County's Business Services Team. The event was a huge success with 59 Berks County distinct employers represented. In total, 176 employer participants from Berks and surrounding counties viewed short videos and presentations highlighting practical and proven employer "best practices." Employer feedback following the symposium was overwhelmingly positive, underscoring the opportunities acknowledged as proven best practices they could adopt in their own organizations. This resounding success led the WDB's DEI Committee to initiate an important next step in the development of an *Employer Resource Guide* for hiring and retaining adults with disabilities. Steady progress on development of this project has been realized in calendar year 2023 with a finalized guide to be made available to interested employers for review by June 2024.

- B. Greater Reading Healthcare Connections Industry Partnership** – As stated in our PY2021-2024 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Multi-Year Local Area Plan, the Berks County Workforce Development Board (WDB) has identified the Healthcare sector as one of our highest priority industry sectors in Berks County. Healthcare is Berks County's second largest industry sector in terms of employment with currently nearly 25,000 workers (13.3% of local employment). Throughout the past two decades this sector has proven to be our most popular sector for residents seeking attractive family sustaining careers.

In April 2023, the WDB received a timely grant award from the PA Department of Labor & Industry to support the creation of a new Healthcare Industry Partnership (IP). To launch our new Healthcare IP, the Berks WDB partnered with the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) and Reading Area Community College (RACC) in the *Greater Reading Healthcare Connections Industry Partnership*. The IP's focus is to create strategies for employers to develop career pathways, industry credentials, and

articulation to education partner(s) programs, including the design and implementation of a Registered Apprentice (RA) healthcare career pathway under the group sponsorship of RACC.

On June 30, 2023, the inaugural IP kickoff meeting was attended by a broad representation of local healthcare organizations, including our 2 local major hospital networks as well as County of Berks administrators involved in the management of one of the largest nursing and rehabilitation facilities in the region. The launch successfully solicited first-hand feedback from the participating healthcare providers regarding their critical workforce needs, talent retention strategies, and other top issues facing their organizations. Since the June 2023 launch, IP membership has grown, and the partnership continues to meet quarterly to engage in dialogue with key leadership from area colleges/universities and community partners focused on healthcare career education services and occupational training programs available within Berks County.

- C. Successful Achievement of Challenging PY2022 WIOA Title I Negotiated Performance Goals** – In September 2022, the Berks County WDB negotiated our PY2022 and PY2023 WIOA Title I performance goals with the PA Department of Labor & Industry (L&I). At the time of these negotiations, the WDB recognized that achieving these goals would be especially challenging given the disruptions to local labor supply and demand resulting from the devastating COVID-19 pandemic which was then just showing signs of sustained easing. Specifically, permanent exits from key sectors in our local labor force combined with noteworthy employer strategies to retain their existing workforce(s) resulted in a dramatic local decline in the number of dislocated workers with good work histories available for new employment. At the same time, the pandemic’s dramatic impact on local jobseekers (and their families) accompanied the expiration of expanded unemployment compensation and other federally funded financial supports. This led to an adult and young adult population of jobseekers with many more barriers to employment than we served prior to the pandemic’s arrival in March 2020. Underemployment continues to be a significant issue for many low-income Berks County residents with barriers to employment.

Fortunately, the Berks County WDB proactively put in place effective plans and contracts to respond to this challenge, resulting in our much sought after “green checkmark” signifying achievement of our negotiated goals when PY2022 ended on June 30, 2023. In helping the WDB meet these challenging PY2022 goals, our dedicated professionals at the PA CareerLink® Berks County successfully engaged local adult customers and matched them with employers eager to bring them onboard. Notably, the PA CareerLink® Berks County expanded outreach initiatives funded by the WDB in PY2022 allowed us to enroll 72% of adult Title I customers who met “adult priority” eligibility, well above the required 60% minimum target.

One especially successful outreach strategy in 2023 was our proven past practice of sponsoring two regional in person Career Fairs which resulted in measurably greater attendance than many other workforce development areas have seen. Our May 2023 Career Fair at Alvernia University was visited by 967 jobseekers to meet with 102 local employers culminating in many employment offers. Likewise, our November 2023 Career Fair at the Abraham Lincoln Hotel in downtown Reading showcased 110 local employers and attracted 937 jobseekers – a 70 % increase from the Career Fair held a year earlier at the same venue.

Top Three Stories/Testimonials

- D. Yolanda** - Yolanda first enrolled in career services offered at the PA CareerLink® Berks County in December 2022. After completing her application for services, Yolanda’s individual education plan was

reviewed during her case management appointment. During these discussions, our team explored Yolanda's life story with her and the obstacles she has faced. Through this structured process, Yolanda clarified her interest in attending Reading Area Community College (RACC) to earn a certification as a Certified Recovery Specialist, with the program scheduled to begin in March 2023. Yolanda's plan was to then pursue a related degree after completing RACCs' certification program.

Yolanda completed our "Success Starts Here" course and successfully enrolled in the WIOA Title I Adult program. At the same time, Yolanda was "dual enrolled" in the Employment, Advancement, and Retention Network (EARN) program which provided comprehensive supports to manage the multiple challenges in her life. During her time with the Adult Program, WIOA staff frequently collaborated with the EARN program staff to assist Yolanda with eliminating barriers through supportive services such as bus passes and counseling from our program's Behavioral Therapist.

Despite initial challenges with the WIN learning assessment, Yolanda worked tirelessly to improve her skills until she successfully completed the assessment, thereby qualifying her to test for and ultimately obtain the ACT® WorkKeys® National Career Readiness Certificate. Upon achieving the WorkKeys® certification, Yolanda met with her Title I case manager to discuss the next steps in applying for funding assistance to attend her desired training. She completed all required forms and was approved for training to begin in March 2023. While attending her Recovery Specialist training, Yolanda applied for several jobs related to her training program, eventually being offered a position as a Behavioral Specialist Technician by the Caron Foundation starting in April 2023, with a starting wage of \$18.00 per hour for full-time work.

In August 2023, Yolanda successfully completed her training and attained her highly valued Recovery Specialist certification. She remains committed to her dream of obtaining a degree to provide further support and mentoring to others. Yolanda's story is inspiring and serves as a testament that one's past does not define one's future.

- E. **Tatiana** – Tatiana enrolled in the Employment, Advancement, and Retention Network (EARN) program in May 2023. A single mother of three children, this was Tatiana's second EARN enrollment and this time she was determined to obtain her High School Equivalency (HSE) Diploma as a first step along a career pathway that would provide for her and her family. During orientation, EARN staff initially referred Tatiana to the PA CareerLink® Berks County Young Adult Program for participation in their HSE Preparatory Classes. However, upon a comprehensive review of her circumstances during orientation, it was further determined that Tatiana would need significant assistance eliminating several barriers to her employment plans. For example, as Tatiana had recently moved from New Jersey to Pennsylvania she clearly needed transportation support in order to be successful.

While starting her HSE classes Tatiana worked with EARN staff on all the necessary steps to obtain a driver's license, which she received in August 2023. Tatiana's grandmother has allowed her to live at her home and have use of her vehicle while Tatiana continues her participation toward her HSE and employment goals. During her time working within the Young Adult (YA) Program, Tatiana met with the program's Business Services Consultant (BSC) to explore employment through their paid work experience initiative. After reviewing possible worksites with her consultant, Tatiana chose to interview at Berks Encore. Given Tatiana's prior work experience in an office setting, this proved to be a perfect match. Following a successful interview with her supervisor at Berks Encore, Tatiana was offered a position funded under the YA's paid work experience program and began work on September 6th. In this role, Tatiana helps with the "Meals on Wheels" program in the morning by preparing lunches and dinners for area seniors and accompanying the drivers to deliver the meals. Tatiana works in another area in the afternoon, scheduling appointments and contacting customers for the Berks

Encore grocery program. Tatiana’s supervisor commended her phone skills and ability to interact with the seniors who utilize the agencies programs and services.

With Tatiana’s first paid work placement set to end on December 22nd, the Business Services Consultant met with Tatiana’s supervisor to see if an extension to her paid work experience would be beneficial. Berks Encore was set to take on another participant, so the supervisor asked if she could retain Tatiana to assist in the next participant’s training. Tatiana has demonstrated proficiency in all job responsibilities at Berks Encore. Under our paid work program, participants like Tatiana learn skills and gain confidence as if they were an employee of the company. Tatiana’s professional growth continues as she moves through her second placement.

At the same time, Tatiana continues to strive toward obtaining her High School Equivalency (HSE) Diploma while participating in paid work experience. Tatiana continues to work with EARN staff to eliminate barriers that might prevent her from finding her desired employment once she has earned her HSE. Both EARN and our Title I Young Adult programs will continue to collaborate on assisting Tatiana stay on track in achieving her desired long-term goals, and we are confident that she will be successful.

- F. **Melanie-** Melanie was enrolled in our Young Adult (YA) program on March 23, 2023. She came to us with no work experience and without access to reliable transportation, both significant barriers that Melanie successfully worked through with her YA case manager. Melanie’s positive outlook and upbeat personality, combined with her bilingual skills in English and Spanish are important strengths as Melanie is interested in working in an office setting.

After meeting with our Business Services Consultant and looking through the available paid work jobs, we agreed to have Melanie interview at Reading City Hall in the Human Relations Office. This location is conveniently close to home and provided Melanie with the opportunity to help translate and assist Spanish-speaking resident customers. Her supervisor said that Melanie was nervous during the interview but that she dressed professionally and projected a positive attitude. Melanie was hired and started paid work on March 30, 2023.

Throughout her first placement, Melanie became a real superstar at City Hall. She learned their computer system and became comfortable talking with customers. In the Human Relations office, patrons come in with many different types of issues including housing, family, and utilities. Melanie has learned how to assist in dealing with these situations. She is no longer nervous because she feels more comfortable after gaining experience with all types of customer issues on the job. On her bi-weekly evaluations, Melanie receives "Above Average" ratings in all categories.

After her first placement, Melanie was requested back by her supervisor for another round of paid work. On August 9th, Melanie was approved for a paid work program wage increase and is now making \$14.00 an hour, an increase from her initial rate of \$12.00 per hour. The Human Relations office is currently down two full-time staff and Melanie has been an absolute blessing to them. As a result, it has been a seamless transition as Human Relations office attempts to hire new employees. Our staff is extremely proud of Melanie’s progress, her work ethic, and her unbounded potential for future growth.

Challenges

- A. **Finding Dislocated Workers** – In most ways, the abnormally low numbers of dislocated workers residing in Berks County is a positive development resulting from historically low levels of local

unemployment. Throughout 2023, the number of officially unemployed Berks County residents remained at a very low level of ≈8,000 while the recovery of our local labor force plateaued at 214,500, still 2.0 % below 2019’s pre-pandemic peak of nearly 219,000. This shortfall likely reflects permanent exits from our labor force, primarily due to retirements.

Despite ongoing economic uncertainties, Berks County saw little layoff activity throughout 2023. As a result, there are very few dislocated workers with good work histories available to local employers who remain eager to fill large numbers of attractive job openings.

- B. Low Employer Demand for On-the-Job Training (OJT) Reimbursements** – Knowing that employers have relaxed hiring expectations requiring specific experience and educational attainment related to many job openings, it is somewhat puzzling that we see fewer employers interested in On-The-Job (OJT) assistance contracts to help offset their increased training costs for many new hires. Local employers reported in 2023 that the highly competitive job market, particularly for entry-level career positions, has required them to speed up their employment and onboarding processes. At the same time, many of their experienced HR staff have been retiring or moving on to other employers. These two factors, in combination, often leave the employers unwilling to pursue any extra steps in the hiring process that may accompany having a fully executed OJT agreement in place before the eligible candidate is onboarded. However, as 2024 begins, we may be seeing some re-balancing of our local labor market which could facilitate local employers revisitation of the OJT option as a valuable onboarding and retention strategy to reduce new hire turnover, also known as “churn”.

Promising Practices

- G. PA CareerLink® Berks County Employment, Advancement, and Retention Network (EARN) Program Home Health Aide Training** - EARN is a PA Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funded program with referrals for this training coming exclusively from the Berks County Assistance Office. Our local EARN program has developed and now offers an innovative, PA Dept. of Human Services recognized, Home Health Aide (HHA) training in both English and Spanish for those program participants interested in entry into this high-priority occupation. This comprehensive curriculum/practicum provides qualifying clients with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to successfully perform the basic caregiving functions that home healthcare centers require and access a career pathway within the healthcare field as a Home Health Aide (HHA). This training solution helps satisfy current, high-demand, regional job-market needs, while helping trainees with job advancement, and becoming competitive and employable in the open job market.

The training program supplies a potential talent pool targeted to the growing local demand for quality professional, personalized care in hygienic and therapeutic activities of daily living to clients in nursing homes, adult day care and senior centers, assisted living facilities and HHA agencies. Trainees learn what makes a competent HHA, that is, the ability to provide the most efficient and effective service with warmth and kindness.

Trainees invest a total of 80 hours in comprehensive activities, including 45 hours of classroom training with 16 hours of supervised practical training, and 35 hours of supervised internship provided at a prospective employer’s location, per federal and state requirements.

Following completion of this state-sponsored training program, to be awarded the EARN Program’s Home Health Aide Certificate, trainees must successfully meet the requirements of structured assessments of a) knowledge and skills; b) participation and practice evaluations and; c) a competency evaluation provided by a prospective home healthcare employer, after the trainee has completed his/her 35-hour internship.

- H. Micro Job Fairs** – In February of 2023 our Business Services Team (BST) held three industry specific “micro” job fairs at our PA CareerLink® Berks County location. These three targeted events provided an opportunity for employers to meet with individuals who had a specific interest in employment opportunities within their industry.
1. Manufacturing – 13 Employers and 221 Job Seekers in attendance.
 2. Healthcare – 13 Employers and 71 Job Seekers in attendance.
 3. Construction – 13 Employers and 93 Job Seekers in attendance.
- I. Spanish in the Workplace for PA CareerLink® Berks County Leadership** – In the beginning of Program Year 2023, an area of both interest and need was identified by our One-Stop Operator to Provide *Command Spanish* in the Workplace for the PA CareerLink® Berks County leadership team. In addition to PA CareerLink® staff, this highly desirable training was offered to each PA CareerLink® Berks County partner, allowing the partners to have a non-Spanish speaking representative attend. The training is designed to help non-Spanish speaking managers gain a basic understanding of everyday language used in serving the Spanish language-limited speaking customers of our local One-Stop. This opportunity was reviewed during our program year’s second quarter partners meeting as an opportunity for expanded collaboration and improved customer service. As a result, our One-Stop Operator contracted with Reading Area Community College (RACC), to provide a total of eight hours of training, scheduled to commence in January 2024.

Request for Additional State Guidance

- A.** As a best practice for providing technical assistance, the PA Department of Labor & Industry has developed a Financial Management Guide (FMG) and implemented monthly fiscal trainings to review federal and state (L&I) compliance requirements with all local WDBs. We request that the appropriate staff at the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS) develop and implement a financial guide and similar training practices to eliminate any improper use of Employment, Advancement, and Retention Network (EARN) funds and for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) – Youth funds.
- B.** In addition, we request further guidance or training on the expectations of Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs) regarding fiscal monitoring of subcontractors. We would like to have a clearer understanding of:
1. What is required during fiscal monitoring of subcontractors?
 2. What has the State identified as areas for improvement in local fiscal monitoring processes?
 3. What are best practices seen around the Commonwealth that other LWDBs could use as references to improve their local processes?
 4. Are there examples of fiscal monitoring tools that could be referenced or implemented in local processes?