



# Launching and Maintaining Rural Sector Partnerships

Six Lessons Learned  
from Implementing  
Rural Sector  
Partnerships

March 2024



## Foreword

All of us who work in workforce and economic development know the importance of building relationships and working across disciplines to solve problems. Sector partnerships have existed for a long time, but as the landscape of jobs and employment opportunities shifts, we must also shift how we work together. By being creative and engaging with employers and workers, we can use sector partnerships to solve our most pressing challenges and capitalize on our biggest opportunities. Sector partnerships, with employers leading the discussion, help us find solutions to address our urgent workforce needs and help prepare for the workforce we need in the future. Sector partnerships are a smart strategy to propel rural employers, workers, and communities towards economic prosperity.

In our rural communities, the business sector looks different than it might in urban areas. We have many more small businesses. Our business leaders are both the deliverers of services and the ones making operational decisions. They don't have a lot of time to devote to discussing system-level challenges, but they are committed individuals who want to engage in big-picture thinking and partner on solutions. By tapping into the power of sector partnerships and reimagining what those partnerships might look like, we can create the necessary space to engage rural employers more effectively in being change agents within the workforce and economic development sectors. We are thoughtful in these spaces about how employers and training partners connect with and engage jobseekers and workers.

At Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area, we are forging sector partnerships and have already seen the benefits to employers, jobseekers, and the community. Individuals who complete training find employment quicker due to sector partnerships. We can demonstrate that despite perceptions of limited resources in our communities, there is plenty of human capital between partners to bridge those gaps and build new training programs. Our local community colleges are renewing efforts to talk to businesses first and be employer-led in developing their programs. We even apply the sector partnership model to our engagement with child care providers and stabilize the early learning workforce.

This is why I am excited about this brief. Understanding the lessons we can draw from others who have built successful partnerships in rural communities is so important as we create new partnerships. We continue to develop our partnerships and learn a lot from other workforce leaders. We also encourage other communities to build their own sector partnerships because a network of partnerships across the country has immense potential to help solve the persistent challenges we all face. We invite others to learn with us!



**Diane Tackett**

Chief Operating Officer

Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area

## Acknowledgments

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- Pamela Streich of Workforce Solutions for North Central PA;
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- Cynthia Picht of South Central PA Works;
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- Jennifer Wilch of the Wyoming Workforce Development Council;
- Mark Durand of Workforce Solutions Deep East Texas;
- Jim Flock of the North Carolina Association of Workforce Development Boards;
- Ami Gatts and Arlene Nicollela of the Washington Greene County Job Training Agency;
- John Tkach of the Keystone Development Partnership;
- Janice Bruno of the Smithville Workforce Training Center;
- Gail Davalos of Workforce Network Inc.; and
- Diane Tackett of Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area.

## Introduction

Most of us believe everyone deserves the opportunity to build the life of their dreams, whether you're an entrepreneurial business owner or an employee of a company. And most of us believe that businesses thrive when employees thrive and vice versa. But today, we live in a contradictory reality where our astounding worker shortage (9.5 million job openings) is so severe that even if we employed every unemployed person – some 6.5 million people<sup>1</sup> – employers would still need more workers. Furthermore, due to the increasing pace of technological advancement and its impact on workforce needs, filling today's roles is at odds with the need to prepare for the jobs of the future. Government agencies committed to equitable workforce development have made many programs that help address these problems. But despite our best efforts, we've created a complex, disconnected system that fails to deliver long-term outcomes that benefit everyone, no matter their race, background, or circumstance, and achieve greater economic mobility.

That is particularly true in rural communities. Rural communities across the country continue to experience unique challenges of remote services and programs, "brain drain" which widens prime-age employment gaps, and competition with large corporations in big cities for top talent. Despite these challenges, rural workforce boards and employers are coming together to create a skilled, resilient workforce. They are leading the way for their rural communities to become economic development engines for their states. Sector partnerships are one strategy that can bridge the disconnected economic mobility system and foster new and sustained leadership from local employers to change how people are connected to jobs and how businesses are connected to their communities. Through research and interviews with Rural Sector Partnership Leaders from coast to coast, Third Sector created this implementation-focused brief to help you make sector partnerships in your rural community more effective.

### What is a Sector Partnership?

Sector partnerships are regionally-based collaboratives of employers in an industry that connect with education, training, labor, and community-based organizations to facilitate the growth of the given sectors. These partnerships are often, but not always, convened by local workforce development boards or educational institutions in an effort to ensure that the region acts strategically to foster high-growth industries.

This brief highlights lessons learned from the individuals who openly shared what worked well and not so well for them in their regions to establish and sustain their sector partnerships. We at Third Sector and the Rural Sector Partnership Leaders interviewed invite you to hone in and try on any of the six implementation lessons to see what will work for your partners in your region. We created this brief to fill an information gap in the field about how sector partnerships are created in rural communities specifically, and what implementation lessons successful partnerships can offer to similar communities interested in forming their own partnerships.

Rural and ex-urban workforce systems operate differently from their urban and suburban counterparts, facing unique challenges such as having fewer employers spread across a larger geographic area and fewer resources than their urban and suburban counterparts. In this brief, you will see tangible and applicable examples of how sector partnerships transform sectors and affect broader economic mobility systems, such as changes in policies and talent recruitment practices.

At Third Sector, we are excited about and honored to help communities across the country implement the next evolution of sector partnerships that model how to center workers while remaining employer-led. Worker-centric

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Chamber of Commerce, "Understanding America's Labor Shortage," <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/understanding-americas-labor-shortage>

engagement was not consistently identified and elevated through the research and interviews we conducted. That is not to suggest worker engagement didn't occur; rather, it was not as heavily emphasized as employer engagement. Barriers to quality jobs faced by workers are at the root of many of the workforce challenges that businesses face and should be addressed when assessing their needs as a company. If workers can access quality jobs, then businesses will also flourish. At the end of each lesson learned, we share a few takeaways that you can apply as you think about how to shape your new sector partnership in your rural or ex-urban community.

The lessons in this brief come from 14 Rural Sector Partnership Leaders across 12 organizations in six states. These leaders represent more than 26 individual rural sector partnerships. These sector partnerships share key similarities, including their rural location, population size, and proximity to urban areas.

Rural Sector Partnerships Interviewed	
<p><b>Yvonne Myers</b> (Vice President of Strategic Initiatives, Fort Collins Chamber of Commerce)</p> <p><b>Region: Northern Colorado</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Partnership sectors:</b> Health care, Manufacturing, Construction, Hospitality, and Nonprofit</li> <li>● <b>Counties:</b> Larimer and Weld</li> <li>● <b>Regional population:</b> 702,000</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Pamela Streich</b> (Executive Director, Workforce Solutions for North Central PA)</p> <p><b>Region: North Central Pennsylvania</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Partnership sectors:</b> Health care and Manufacturing</li> <li>● <b>County:</b> Clearfield</li> <li>● <b>Regional population:</b> 200,000</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Cynthia Picht</b> (Senior Industry Specialist, SCPa Works)</p> <p><b>Region: South Central Pennsylvania</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Partnership sectors:</b> Agriculture, Manufacturing, Construction, and Information Technology (IT)</li> <li>● <b>Counties:</b> Wright, Texas, Reynolds, Wayne, Shannon, Douglas, Ozark, Howell, Oregon, Carter, Ripley, and Butler</li> <li>● <b>Regional population:</b> 1.5 million</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Ami Gatts</b> (President, Washington Greene County Job Training Agency, Inc.),  <b>John Tkach</b> (Executive Director, Keystone Development Partnerships), and  <b>Arlene Nicolella</b> (Strategic Workforce Outreach Coordinator, Washington Greene County Job Training Agency, Inc.)</p> <p><b>Region: Southwest Corner Pennsylvania</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Partnership sectors:</b> Agriculture, Manufacturing, Construction, and IT</li> <li>● <b>Counties:</b> Beaver, Greene, and Washington</li> <li>● <b>Regional population:</b> 423,000</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Jennifer Wilch</b> (Director, Wyoming Workforce Development Council)</p> <p><b>Region: Wyoming</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Partnership sector:</b> Three separate health care partnerships (different regions)</li> <li>● <b>Counties:</b> Fremont, Natrona, and Tri-County (Goshen, Platte, Niobrara)</li> <li>● <b>Populations:</b> Fremont 39,000, Natrona 80,000, and Tri-county 24,000</li> </ul>	

## Rural Sector Partnerships Interviewed

**Diane Tackett** (Chief Operating Officer, Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area),  
**Janice Bruno** (Executive Director, Smithville Workforce Training Center), and  
**Gail Davalos** (Stakeholder Relations, Workforce Network Inc.)



**Region: Rural Capital Area Texas**

- **Partnership sectors:** Health Care, Finance, and Skilled Trades
- **Counties:** Bastrop, Burnet, Blanco, Llano, Lee, Fayette, and Caldwell
- **Regional population:** 1,043,000

**Mark Durand** (Executive Director, Workforce Solutions Deep East Texas)

**Region: Deep East Texas**

- **Partnership sectors:** Health care and Manufacturing
- **Counties:** Shelby, Nacogdoches, Polk, Houston, Jasper, and Angelina
- **Regional Population:** 370,000



**Terri Mitchell** (Executive Director), and

**Shay Cheatham** (Director of Industry and Community Relations, Workforce Investment Board SDA-83)

**Region: Northeastern Louisiana**

- **Partnership sector:** Health care
- **Parishes:** Ouachita, Caldwell, East Carroll, Franklin, Jackson, Madison, Morehouse, Richland, Tensas, Union, and West Carroll
- **Regional population:** 300,000



**Jim Flock** (Vice President, North Carolina Association of Workforce Development Boards)

**Region: Cape Fear, North Carolina**

- **Partnership sector:** Manufacturing
- **Counties:** Brunswick, New Hanover, and Pender
- **Regional population:** 275,000



## Six Lessons Learned for Implementing Sector Partnerships

This document outlines six key lessons learned for rural sector partnerships to support the implementation of sector partnerships in similar rural communities. Third Sector provides pathways forward for you to consider as you build and maintain your respective sector partnerships. Successfully implementing these lessons learned will require a shared commitment to employer-led partnerships, while keeping in mind the importance of worker needs, all while having the patience to build partner relationships over time.

→ **Lessons Learned 1:** Training Is Just the Beginning

- ◆ Creating and planning training programs is just one part of the work of sector partnerships. Successful partnerships tackle a variety of issues, including recruitment and retention, sector marketing, and workforce policies.

→ **Lesson Learned 2:** Employer Leadership Is Necessary (and it's OK to start small)

- ◆ A sector partnership can start with a few dedicated employers who are interested in engaging others and discovering how they can help their sector advance.

→ **Lesson Learned 3:** One Size Does Not Fit All

- ◆ There is no wrong way to form a sector partnership. Sector partnerships can vary in how they are governed, when and how they meet, what models they use for inspiration, and how they are funded. Do what works for your sector and your community.

→ **Lesson Learned 4:** Building Trust Is Critical to a Sustained Partnership

- ◆ Build trust through active listening, frequent communication, clear action steps, and strong follow-through.

→ **Lesson Learned 5:** Funding and Additional Resources

- ◆ There are a lot of ways to create and sustain a sector partnership, and many of them do not require new funding to get started. Once your partnership has started, there are many creative ways to fund and implement activities, including grants, employer contributions, in-kind donations, and the use of third-party contractors.

→ **Lesson Learned 6:** Deepening and Scaling Sector Partnerships

- ◆ Successful sector partnerships can be expanded through creating new partnerships in other high-demand or emerging industries or scaling your partnerships to new geographies.

# Lesson Learned 1: Training Is Just the Beginning



While the desire to create more workforce training opportunities is often the impetus for creating sector partnerships, everyone in the partnership must understand that training is not the entirety of the work employers should undertake to maximize their partnership. Workforce training to meet urgent and short-term hiring demands is a common and expected priority for many sector partnerships. That said, Rural Sector Partnership Leaders noted that some of their biggest successes came when they addressed other needs and critical challenges of the sector, such as local and state-level policy and advocacy, sector marketing, or recruitment strategies. By asking employers, "What keeps you up at night?", these successful partnerships uncovered many important issues that their partnerships could address in addition to training opportunities.

Successful sector partnerships focus on issues that individual business leaders cannot solve independently. While there may be both real and perceived fears about industry competition within the sector partnership, aligning around goals that benefit the broader sector makes it easier to navigate those dynamics and build a partnership that benefits everyone. Lean into issues employers face that extend beyond the walls of their own business, such as stigmas and stereotypes about the industry or lack of awareness of job opportunities among key jobseekers.

## Case Example: Manufacturing Sector Partnership in North Carolina

**The Challenge:** In Cape Fear, North Carolina, manufacturing employers raised concerns about young people not being interested in careers in this particular industry. This was an issue that affected all manufacturers and one that no individual manufacturer could solve alone.

**Before the Sector Partnership:** Whether the company was making planes or guitars, employers struggled with the perception that manufacturing as a whole is a declining industry and that these jobs do not have opportunities for advancement. Parents and students expressed doubt about manufacturing as a viable career path.

**After the Sector Partnership:** The sector partnership worked together to offer career fairs that changed students' and parents' perceptions of the manufacturing industry by showcasing the diversity of opportunities in the manufacturing sector. The first career fair attracted about 100 students. The most recent attendance was more than 700 students, an indication of manufacturers' collective impact in promoting their field. The sector partnership leadership has since noticed a change in the perception of manufacturing due to the career fair. By focusing on opportunities for the broader sector, successful partnerships avoided the pitfalls of competition and harnessed employer momentum to solve challenges that require collaboration.



Sector partnerships can also expand their focus by coming together as employers to assess what workers in their sector value and desire most in their jobs, such as career advancement pathways, benefits, and company culture. This information gathering will help employers identify opportunities to support workers better and compete with other sectors for skilled talent. Establishing a successful sector partnership with similarly situated employers has the potential to solve problems and revolutionize the possibilities for an entire industry in that community.

Another key benefit to thinking beyond just training is that a broader set of issues will likely be more engaging for employers. Lack of engagement is often one of the factors that derails these kinds of partnerships, so broadening the scope at the beginning to tackle multiple challenges increases the likelihood of building and sustaining your partnership. In our work with folks in the Rural Capital Area, there is a lot of excitement around engaging K-12 partners to improve both the mindset around what professions have “good jobs” and to help young people explore options that they might enjoy. Our partners are using that excitement to get new partnerships moving on action items that speak to the folks who have been engaged so far. Partnerships can keep employers engaged by finding those exciting issues, which could include recruitment, policy, marketing, or funding.

### Issues sector partnerships have tackled:

- **911 Response Times:** The Northeast Louisiana Healthcare Partnership uncovered that a huge concern for hospitals in their partnership was 911 response times. They advocated successfully to get hospital representation on the local emergency response board.
- **Restaurant Patio Dog Policies:** The Hospitality Partnership in Northern Colorado found that understanding the rules and regulations governing dogs on patios was a big concern for restaurants in the area because restaurants were interpreting these policies differently and creating confusion for consumers. They came together to understand the laws and then consistently communicated about restaurant policies to patrons who brought their dogs to restaurants.
- **Resource Guide:** Sector partnerships in North Central Pennsylvania discovered that employers were unaware of the funding and resources available to them to upskill workers or connect with newly trained individuals. They created a matrix of available community resources and shared them with employers.

Whether the answer to the challenges raised is a quick win or a long-term project, understanding what keeps employers up at night and using the partnership to address more than just workforce issues is key to keeping employers continually engaged in the partnership.

*“If you only have two partners, listen to those two and get actionable items from them.”* - **Terri Mitchell, Northeastern LA Healthcare Partnership**

## The Pathway Forward...

Always remember that when you begin a sector partnership, creating and planning training programs is just a portion of the work. Plan to create space for employers and other stakeholders to:

- Discuss issues related to the workforce and what tools they believe they need to recruit and retain skilled workers for their companies successfully;
- Brainstorm recruitment activities and retention practices that enable the sector to be competitive; and
- Solicit input from workers and partners who can share what workers and jobseekers need most and how they can be supported.

Find out what excites employers and other stakeholders within the sector so that you can create opportunities for these individuals to engage with the partnership. The work, in the beginning, may seem messy and frustrating when trying to gather all of the information for your respective regions, but with committed sector partnership members, a plan of action, and a learning mindset, it can be done successfully!

## Lesson Learned 2: Employer Leadership Is Necessary (and it's ok to start small)



“Small” and “slow” can feel like negative words when you want to build a partnership with all of your local employers in the sector, but rural sector partnerships can and do start with small numbers and with groups that only meet a few times a year at the beginning. These sector partnerships will gradually grow to engage dozens of employers who meet regularly and connect on action steps between meetings. The Cape Fear, NC Manufacturing Partnership started with just six people across four counties and now has more than 50 members. Those six employers manufactured very different types of equipment. However, they had a lot of similar needs, and committed employers reached out to their networks and attracted more employers over time. Terri Mitchell from Northeast LA shared that they learned early not to get caught up in numbers and to move forward with momentum.

All Rural Sector Partnership Leaders emphasized the importance of having strong sector champions to support the partnership and provide the consistency needed to grow. Mark Durand from the Deep East TX Manufacturing Partnership mentioned that it was beneficial to have the invitation for their first sector partnership meeting come from the sector champion - or individual or employer that takes interest and responsibility for the success of the partnership - they recruited.

While some partnerships are successful with one sector champion, there is a risk that if that person leaves their position or chooses to step back from the partnership, they will lose momentum or even stop meeting together. Sector partnerships have had different ways of managing sector champion engagement.

- **Taking a break:** The Deep East Texas Manufacturing Partnership paused meetings when they did not have an active sector champion. This commitment shows the importance of the sector champion in leading the partnership.
- **Co-champion requirement:** Southwest Corner PA is one of many successful sector partnerships that intentionally require two sector champions who co-chair the partnership.
- **Build off of a single champion:** One of the sector partnerships in the Rural Capital Area, TX identified a sector champion in their Healthcare Sector Partnership who was already very familiar with the workforce needs in their area. The sector champion identified additional key partners they knew would be interested in collaborating and then met with a small group to create a plan for the overall sector partnership.

Recruiting sector champions and having them take on responsibility within the partnership can take time, but continued engagement with employers will help build those champions over time.

**Sector champions are necessary for partnerships** - not only because they encourage attendance and play an active role in identifying priorities for the partnership to pursue - but also because they can model for and support other employers in being more willing to change practices. For sectors to grow, employers may need employee-centered changes that remove barriers to employment and advancement in the industry, invest in competitive compensation and other employee benefits, and strengthen employee retention efforts. Sector champions who are the most committed to exploring ways to improve the competitiveness of their sector are

leaders in making these changes. Skilled trade employers in the Rural Capital Area of TX are modeling how they provide employees with quality jobs, including a small bonus pay for exceptional attendance and safety and predictable schedules and pay. When employers share what their successes and challenges have been with various employee retention efforts, they create a peer-learning and sharing environment for other employers to feel comfortable experimenting within their own companies to advance the overall sector.

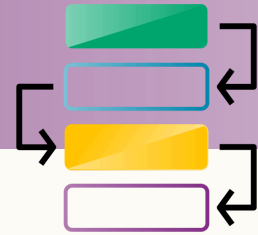
**Sector champions are creators of local talent;** they do not just hire people for jobs. Sector champions can help others within their sector partnership shift their mindsets from just needing to find people for open jobs to how they can engage with workers and other partners to build talent in the region. This work requires sector partnerships to be willing to push employers towards new ways of thinking. Southwest Corner PA, for example, encourages its sector champions and other employers to think differently about how they train and who they train. They encourage investment in apprenticeship programs and other on-the-job training to help workers really understand the requirements of the position. They also push employers to think differently about work requirements in order to engage members of different populations such as re-entry. These types of discussions open the door for shifts that connect the needs of employers to the needs of the workforce.

**The partnership's goals should be achievable by the individuals within the partnership or by building connections with new partners.** Partnerships should set both short- and long-term goals. Short-term goals that are achievable within a few months of starting the partnership will help to solidify the partnership as a space where employers can see action on their priorities. Cynthia Picht from South Central PA suggests keeping initial goals to no more than three. The partnerships she supports have found that focusing on the top three employer priorities keeps their five sector partnerships manageable while providing enough momentum to consistently engage partners. Consistent employer engagement will help them take more ownership of the partnership priorities by setting meeting agendas, fulfilling action items without prompting from a convening organization, and bringing necessary partners into the conversation. Over time, consistent partnerships that keep their focus on key employer priorities and build on small successes will lead to employers taking full ownership of the sector partnership.

### The Pathway Forward...

Remember that starting a sector partnership does not require large-scale participation but requires a few dedicated employers who want to see their sectors advance. Find two or three partners willing to recruit others and begin to navigate common issues. This will help you start your sector partnership and it will begin to flourish. Once the starting members have been identified, determine who among them will become the sector champions and support them to be successful in their leadership. The champions will help organize the partnership's ideas and become a driving force in carrying out action items. The work that the partnership is doing will speak for itself and different employers will want to be a part of what is happening.

## Lesson Learned 3: One Size Does Not Fit All



Conveners of sector partnerships should be thoughtful and creative by taking into account the various needs and traditions of their community to help design the best possible partnerships. All partnerships will look slightly different. Even when following a specific model or framework, it is important to adapt it to fit the needs of your particular region, sector, and stakeholders.

### Considerations for partnership development:

- **Governance:** Partnerships have varying needs for formality in how they may need to set up governance structures. Some sector partnerships find that they need a formal set of bylaws; others can accomplish their tasks with a few simple rules for how their partnership will function. What should you consider when deciding on whether to set formal bylaws?
  - ◆ **The maturity of your sector partnership:** Newly formed groups may not be ready for bylaws yet. It helps to set bylaws together with as many of your key partners as possible. If your partnership is still growing and you do not feel you have the right voices in the room yet, you may want more time for your partnership to develop and mature before you develop the bylaws.
  - ◆ **The size of your sector partnership:** Larger groups will need more formality to stay organized. Everyone needs to be clear on the purpose of the partnership, the organizational structure, and the roles and responsibilities of partners. Larger organizations also may be more likely to send different representatives to participate in the partnership due to turnover or restructuring. If there is a revolving door of participation from several businesses, bylaws and clear governance can help to onboard new individuals. Small partnerships may feel more burdened by formal bylaws because they can take time to develop and make interactions more formal than necessary. If a small group can easily work together and are eager to get things done, sticking with a simple governance structure without formal bylaws could make sense.
  - ◆ **The customs of typical groups in your sector:** Some sector partners will be more comfortable and, therefore, more likely to participate in a sector partnership when the space is more informal and less time is spent focusing on rules. For example, the Northern CO Health Care Partnership found that nurses and medical professionals who deal with many rules and regulations at work preferred a simpler governance structure for their partnership. On the other hand, the manufacturers in the same region found that as a growing partnership, it was important to set out the structure and rules clearly, and therefore, they wrote a complete set of bylaws. While having bylaws is a preference for some groups, it is not a necessary tool for all and should be based on the needs of the specific sector partnership.

→ **Meeting Cadence:**

- ◆ **All Partners Meetings:** Most of the partnerships we spoke to have quarterly all-partner sector meetings. All partner meetings include employers, education and training providers, workforce boards, and other community partners.
- ◆ **Steering Committee or Action Teams:** In addition to quarterly all-partner meetings, most partnerships also have monthly meetings of action teams or the steering committee. Action teams are small groups led by one or two employers that meet to address a specific priority and they engage relevant employers or other partners as needed. A steering committee is a small group of employers who have agreed to take on the leadership of the partnership and meet more frequently to coordinate agendas and action items. A few sector partnerships found that action teams did not work for them, so they met more frequently via all-partner sector meetings. North Central PA shared an experience of over-tasking a small number of individuals to different action teams, which caused the same people to keep volunteering, leading to scheduling conflicts. By reducing their meetings to just the all-partner quarterly meetings, partners were more engaged and could still meet the partnership goals.
- ◆ **Asynchronous Meetings:** Rural employers often play many roles within their business – owner, hiring manager, service provider – and may not have time for regular meetings. This does not mean they are any less committed. Rural Capital Area TX is experimenting with an asynchronous format to engage and get feedback from employers. By allowing employers to engage via email on their own time, this option may help get engagement from harder-to-reach employers.

*“When sector partnerships are done well, they’re creative and flexible and there’s no wrong way to approach it.”*

**- Diane Tackett, Rural Capital Area TX Sector Partnerships**

All meetings should have a purpose, and partnerships should meet as frequently as they deem necessary to ensure they use employers' time well. Partnerships with action teams or committees should ensure that those individuals meet frequently enough to progress on their action items and follow through on commitments to the sector partnership.

- **Follow Specific Models:** All Rural Sector Partnership Leaders interviewed had some engagement with the [Next Gen model of sector partnerships](#), which is a framework for setting up a partnership, identifying sector champions, and keeping an employer focus. The degree to which they remained faithful to the Next Gen model over time has varied. Following a specific model, such as Next Gen, has a few key benefits:
- ◆ It makes expectations of sector partnership participation clear and explicit with shared language;
  - ◆ It provides resources such as agendas, facilitation guides, and suggested practices; and
  - ◆ It connects those who use the model in a community of practice.

However, all sector partnerships are different, and there are benefits to deviating from a given model to tailor a partnership to your local needs. North Central PA embraced the Next Gen model and found that changing from a community partner-centric focus to an employer focus improved their sector partnerships. However, they do not have action teams, as prescribed by the Next Gen model, as it led to too many meetings with many of the same people. They host quarterly all-partner meetings, which work well for

their region and sectors. Many of the partnerships have a steering committee, which is not prescribed by the Next Gen model but has worked well to provide leadership to their sector partnerships. Each partnership must adapt to what works well for them in their sector and region.

- **Funding:** The Rural Sector Partnership Leaders had a wide range of funding for the operation of their sector partnerships, from state grants of \$250,000 a year to no funding at all. Sector partnerships can operate on a purely volunteer basis, with donated space and time from employers, or they can be staffed through the convening partner or a third-party coordinator. All partnerships will need some amount of funding to execute action items. Partnerships that run on a purely volunteer basis often fundraise for their events, websites, and training. Sector partnerships with more resources have hired facilitators for their meetings, contractors to put out surveys, and paid for workforce training.

### The Pathway Forward...

Rural communities and the industries that support them have their own ways of doing business. As you form your sector partnerships, do what works best for your community and your partnerships. The specific activities and governance structure of the partnerships highlighted here may or may not work for your region. Do not force structure for structure's sake. Instead, be open to trying a few different ways of operating to find what works and lean into local and industry norms that will help partners feel connected and supported.

## Lesson Learned 4: Building Trust Is Critical to a Sustained Partnership



For sector partnerships to be successful, the participating partners must trust one another, and the convener must develop trust with the employer partners. Trust is built by listening closely to partner needs and responding with action.

Rural Sector Partnership Leaders emphasize the importance of employer needs to build sector partnerships. When the partnership starts, it is important to allow employers to talk and for both the convener and any other partners present to listen actively. In rural communities, it is common for individuals to have multiple roles; for example, a local business leader might be on the Board of Directors for a workforce board and be an instructor at a local community college. In these cases, the convener should encourage the individual to participate in early partnership meetings with their “employer hat” on.

**This early focus on employer voice is important for developing trust because trust can only be built when everyone believes they will be heard.** When education and workforce partners are excited to share all the available resources, it can inadvertently overshadow the employer’s voice. This can lead to a lack of understanding of what employers want to discuss and also prevent employers from taking the lead in identifying solutions that will work for them. Employers are encouraged to share what they are hearing from their employees and their needs too. Terri Mitchell from Northeast LA stated that being a good listener is important in gaining employers’ trust and that community partners cannot always assume they have the right answers. When employers talk, and everyone else listens, that ensures employer priorities remain centered and builds employer trust that their concerns and ideas will be heard. Once the space has been created for employers to share and others to listen, sector partnerships must focus on responding to what they have heard from employers.

### Example activities to respond to employer concerns:

- **Standard report-out:** The simplest way to ensure that partners know their concerns and opinions have been heard is to produce a clear report-out from the partnership meeting with notes summarizing the meeting and the next steps for partners. This report-out should identify and assign any action items that must be completed before and reported during the next meeting.
- **Connect with needed community partners:** Once an employer priority has been clearly identified, community partners who have been asked to remain in “listening mode” for early partnership meetings can be called in to discuss, share their resources, and help provide solutions. For example:
  - ◆ Work with community college partners to adapt curriculums to align with the needs of employers.
  - ◆ Work with a local school district to organize a career exploration day or business open house visits.
  - ◆ Work with local community partners to organize career fairs or other awareness events.
- **Bring in speakers:** Employers may raise interest in learning about different topics for which the partnership could bring in speakers, such as offering employee benefits, cybersecurity, and strategies for hiring veterans.



- **Connect employers to existing training programs:** Employers may want to connect directly with individuals participating in training programs and seeking employment upon completion. The partnership can coordinate recruitment and referral pathways with employers.
- **Create a new training program:** In some cases, an entirely new training program may be needed, and the partnership can work towards gathering the right partners and finding resources to make that happen.

### The Pathway Forward...

Your sector partnership must be built on the foundation of trust. To build trust with new and existing partners, it is important to:

- Actively listen to the needs, challenges, and opportunities expressed by partners, specifically employers and their employees;
- Communicate clearly and frequently about the goals and activities of your partnership;
- Be specific about roles and action steps so that partners know how to engage and who else might need to be brought into the conversation; and
- Follow up to ensure that priorities are being achieved

## Lesson Learned 5: Funding & Additional Resources



Every sector partnership will need some funding to execute its priorities, but sector partnerships have a wide range of funding or no funding available. Funding is not necessary to start a sector partnership. Many sector partnerships have started on a volunteer basis, while others relied on grant funding and sponsorships by their members. Once action teams or committees have started and begun identifying priorities and plans to execute action items, the partnership will need to identify ways to fund those efforts.

### Example funding and resources:

- **State investment and grants:** Wyoming, Pennsylvania, and other states have invested in scaling sector partnerships by providing grant funding for their development. In addition to direct financial resources, some states, such as Wyoming, have staff at the state level that participate as the convener for the partnerships. Northern Colorado's sector partnerships do not have grant funding, but the Fort Collins Chamber of Commerce provides convening support and fiscal sponsorship. While grant funding and state or local investment can help launch and sustain a partnership, successful partnerships have been launched and maintained without this level of support. The Northeast LA Healthcare Alliance, the Deep East TX Manufacturing Partnership, and the Cape Fear, NC Manufacturing Partnership all started without funding.
- **Employer contribution:** The Cape Fear, NC Manufacturing Partnership runs on a volunteer basis, which requires the sector to champion employers' commitment to participate and to contribute small amounts of staff time to help manage the administrative coordination of meetings and newsletters. They raised money for partnership priorities, such as the manufacturing summer camp, through large events employers pay to participate in. Now that the partnership is fully formed with a consistent membership, they are considering charging a small membership fee to support partnership activities.

In addition to training and events, additional stakeholder engagement is an important activity of sector partnerships and one that can be time-consuming for employers to undertake on their own. The Wyoming and Southwest Corner PA partnerships indicated that they contracted out for a survey of employers to get more information about local employer needs beyond just those who could participate in meetings.

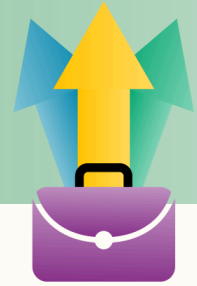
- **Paid contractors:** Some partnerships used funding to pay for a third-party facilitator for their partnership meetings. This was particularly helpful for partnerships still finding their footing with identifying sector champions. The Wyoming Tri-County Health Care Partnership hired a contractor for facilitation and coordination when they re-launched after COVID-19. The contractor assists in recruiting new partnership participants, understanding local employer needs, and conducting meetings. A secondary benefit of a third-party facilitator is that they are neutral to the politics of regional economic development, which helps partners feel that their perspective will be heard and not overshadowed by the perspective of those initiating the convening.

## The Pathway Forward...

While funding may be needed in the future to implement partnership activities, don't let a need for funding hinder you from taking the first steps in building your partnership now. There will be many challenges that the partnership will be able to address and create action plans for that do not require large amounts of funding.

Explore a variety of funding sources - local, state, and federal grants, employer resources, and donations - after your sector partnership activities are established. When employers and other community partners are aligned on the sector partnership's goals and activities, funders will be more compelled to support your initiative.

# Lesson Learned 6: Deepening and Scaling Sector Partnerships



All of the rural partnership leaders we interviewed spoke about a hope for future sustainability that included both independently functioning employer-led partnerships and seeing the partnership model grow and expand. As leaders consider how their partnerships might grow there are two main avenues to consider: developing additional sector partnerships in new industries and expanding successful partnerships into new geographies.

- **New Industries:** Once there is a successful partnership in a particular industry, leaders can use the learnings from that partnership and apply them to other industries. Most of the rural sector partnership leaders we spoke to were supporting the creation of partnerships in multiple industries because they had seen success in partnerships for specific industries such as health care and manufacturing. Data plays a critical role in identifying the industries in which you may want to start sector partnerships. Our partners in the Rural Capital Area TX selected their industries of focus based on labor market data, and since launching their training programs and sector partnerships, have found that conditions are ever-changing. Ongoing data collection, such as securing employer hiring commitments prior to starting new training, is an important step to ensure that their strategies will result in workers being placed into jobs that match their skill sets. Mark Durand with Deep East TX Manufacturing Partnership also highlighted the importance of ensuring that partners do not stay siloed and instead learn what others are planning in economic development, education, and other areas that may overlap with workforce issues. These other partners can also be helpful in providing qualitative data about trends and opportunities in the region. By pairing qualitative and quantitative data, you can ensure that any new partnerships are starting from a solid base and are set up for success.

*“You gotta get out of your siloes and know what each other are planning in economic development, workforce, and education.”*

**- Mark Durand, Deep East Texas  
Manufacturing Partnership**

- **Expanding Geographies:** A sector partnership should be in a specific geographic area, but the size of that area can vary greatly. Once a sector partnership establishes success in one geographic area, that could potentially lead to an expansion of the partnership into new cities, counties, or regions. The partnerships represented in our interviews ranged from single counties to a dozen or more counties or parishes. When leaders learn what works in one county, and what the success and challenges of implementing their process are, they can think about how that might work in other nearby counties. Geographically scaling sector partnerships can make the sector and its partnerships more robust in that region. Additionally, the sector itself and the employers within it will be more competitive for top talent and workers may choose to build their careers in one sector over another. People are further apart in rural areas, but this can be used to your

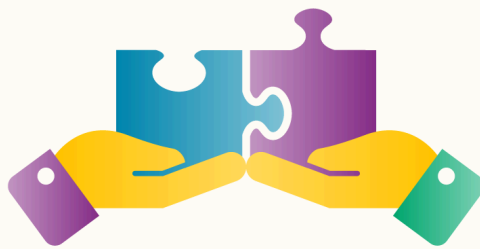
advantage in making a sector appealing for jobseekers. If your three or four-county region is known for its business strength in a particular sector, that can draw top talent and give jobseekers more choice in where they locate.

### The Pathway Forward...

Once you have successfully engaged employers and other stakeholders and begun finding success in achieving your partnership goals, you might consider how to expand your sector partnerships, either through creating new partnerships in other high-demand or emerging industries or opening your partnerships to new geographies. To decide how and when to do this, it is important to examine both your quantitative and qualitative data. What does the quantitative labor market data say about opportunities or gaps in your region and what are you hearing from your partnership? With federal investments through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) focused on infrastructure, broadband, and climate jobs, understanding data will be of critical importance to capitalizing on future opportunities.

# Conclusion

Sector partnerships are a powerful strategy for building and advancing a skilled, resilient workforce, prosperous businesses, and thriving communities. As the name suggests, successful sector partnerships rely on the leadership of employers and the dedication of workforce boards, education, and training providers, and other community partners to collaborate and tackle sector-based and regional challenges together. This brief provides tangible examples, case studies, and lessons learned from 13 Rural Sector Partnership Leaders in six states, across 26 rural sector partnerships, to help guide you as you create and implement partnerships in your region. Take what resonates, experiment with your partners, and share what you learned and experienced back into this community. Let's keep learning together how to evolve sector partnerships so they are more worker-centric while remaining employer-led and how they can continue to improve long-term economic mobility outcomes for all. Rural communities can and are leading transformations in their state's workforce and are proof that when employers, workforce boards, and community partners come together, economic prosperity is accessible to everyone.





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