



THIRD
SECTOR

CHANGING SYSTEMS, CHANGES LIVES

Good for Workers, Good for Business:

Exploring the Impact of the
REINVEST Initiative in Rural
Central Texas

February 2025



"Changing Systems, Changes Lives" is a series of case studies that explore the impact of a broad range of projects supported by the national nonprofit organization **Third Sector**. The case studies highlight the work of the forward-thinking government agencies and nonprofit organizations that partner with Third Sector to design, implement, and continuously improve initiatives aimed at dismantling historical inequities and advancing outcomes-focused public systems. **These initiatives are transforming local systems and catalyzing positive change for local communities—reducing homelessness and reincarceration, increasing health equity and access to care, and expanding access to education and work that lead to economic mobility.** They provide a valuable lens into the processes and people that drive systems change and offer lessons for changemakers hoping to do similar transformation work to address complex social issues in their own communities.



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Introduction

Access to high-quality jobs that pay a life-sustaining wage is critical to ensuring that all individuals—regardless of their race, background, or where they live—can thrive and reach their fullest potential. Because more than 1 in 10 Americans reside in rural communities and poverty rates are higher in rural areas compared to urban ones, it is especially important to invest in efforts to improve job quality in rural areas.¹ This case study explores the impact of the innovative rural workforce development effort, **Rural Employers Infuse Vital Economic Success in Texas initiative (REINVEST)**, on the local workforce system, jobseekers, and employers in rural central Texas. **Specifically, the study examines the initiative's role in driving systems- and community-level change in the region.**

The REINVEST initiative launched in 2022 through a \$12 million grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Agency (EDA) Good Jobs Challenge. It is led by the local workforce development board, **(WSRCA)** and two nonprofit workforce providers, **Workforce Network, Inc. (WNI)**, and **Smithville Workforce Training Center (SWTC)**, with technical assistance and advising support from **Third Sector**. The initiative seeks to reshape the economic future of Texas' Rural Capital Area² and its residents by changing how local employers, training providers, and the public workforce system collaborate to support residents' access to "good jobs"—high-wage jobs that provide benefits and opportunities for career advancement, leading to long-term economic mobility.³ REINVEST also seeks to accelerate regional economic growth by creating a pipeline of skilled talent for local employers, motivating employers to stay in the community and grow their businesses.

The initiative achieves these aims by focusing on developing formal sector partnerships in three high-growth, high-demand industries: health care, the skilled trades, and finance/IT. REINVEST has a unique and explicit focus on equity and inclusion, working to expand access to job training and wraparound-support services for historically underserved groups, including women, people of color, low-income individuals, and other focus populations known to face compounding barriers to economic advancement.



Launched in September 2022, the **REINVEST initiative** addresses critical workforce challenges in rural central Texas through:

1. **Formal sector partnerships** with employers in three high-growth industries: health care, the skilled trades, and finance/IT.
2. **Inclusive job-training programs** that intentionally recruit and serve people from historically underserved backgrounds.

While the REINVEST grant period ends on August 31, 2026, this case study captures key insights and lessons learned as of August 2024 and highlights promising signs of change. This case study is significant in that it emphasizes the value of strong cross-sector partnerships (i.e., between public workforce development agencies, nonprofit organizations, education and training providers, and local employers) in driving economic development and social change for local communities. It also details the transformative power that historic federal investments can have on rural areas, providing evidence for why such investments should continue in the future.

The case study begins with a description of the Rural Capital Area and the key workforce challenges facing the region. It then provides a brief project overview before presenting key findings on systems- and community-level impacts. The study concludes with reflections on drivers that contributed to the initiative's impact, as well as the challenges and barriers that may have hindered progress, offering valuable insights that can inform future efforts to advance economic mobility, regional growth, and prosperity for communities across the nation.



Methodology

This case study presents key findings from an evaluation process carried out by Cause IMPACTS Consulting, led by Anum Ali Mohammed, Director of Research and Data Analytics, and Sophia Jiminez, Senior Consultant, between March and August 2024. The evaluation was initiated by Third Sector in order to understand better the long-term impact of its work on the government systems it serves and on the communities those systems serve. The evaluation leverages best practices from the emerging field of systems-change evaluation and takes an equity-centered, participatory approach to examine the systems- and community-level impacts of Third Sector-client projects like the REINVEST initiative. The ultimate goals of this impact evaluation are: (1) to understand if Third Sector is making measurable progress toward its mission of "transforming public systems to advance improved and equitable outcomes"⁴ and (2) to contribute to collective learning for the broader field on what factors enable lasting systems change. The evaluation and the resulting case study signal Third Sector's first attempts at measuring and sharing the long-term impacts of its work while demonstrating the organization's deep commitment to continuous learning and improvement.

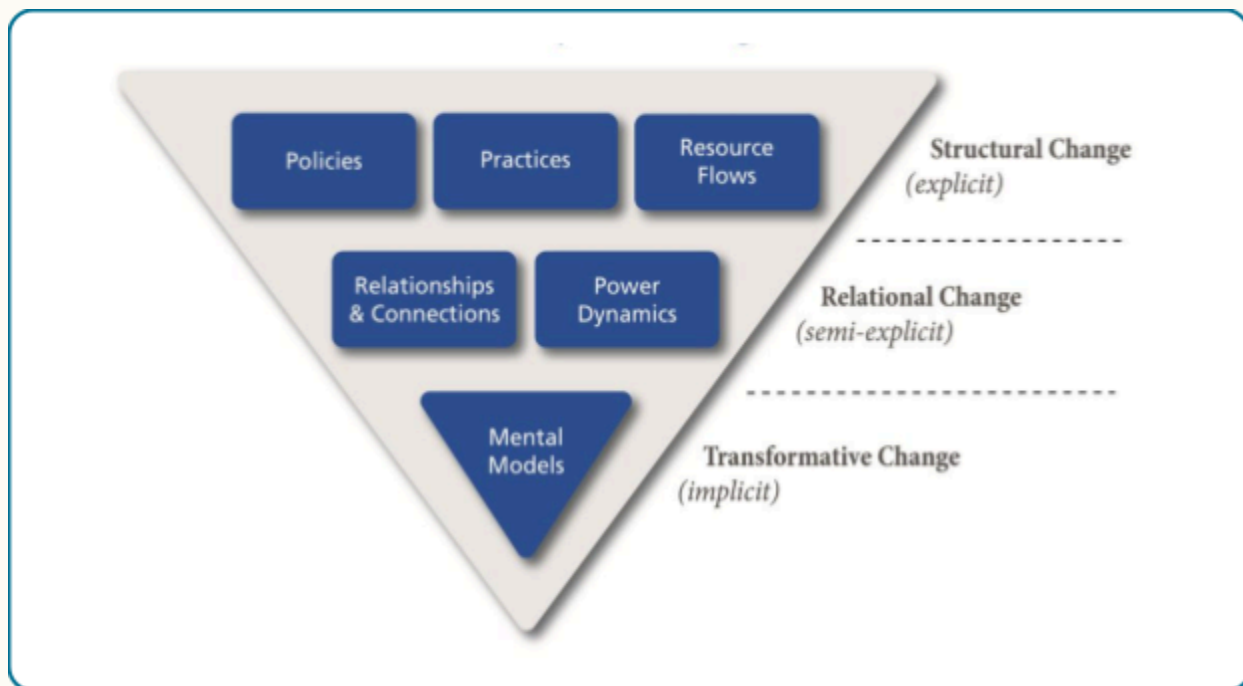
GUIDING FRAMEWORK

The evaluation leverages FSG's **"Water of Systems Change" framework** to conceptualize systems change and describe systems-level impacts.⁵ This framework defines six conditions that hold complex social problems in place and have the potential to drive progress and change. These conditions include policy, practices, resource flows, relationships, power dynamics, and mental models. The six conditions exist at three separate levels of visibility, from the explicit to the implicit: structural, relational, and transformative (Figure 1).

To understand systems-change impacts, the evaluation looks for signs of change that may have come about at each of these three levels as a result of the REINVEST initiative and, where possible, as a direct result of Third Sector's involvement in the initiative.

The ultimate goal of any Third Sector project is to transform systems to become more focused and aligned to the needs of communities that are most impacted by a specific issue, referred to as an "outcomes-focused" approach. **Positive systems change occurs when public systems evolve toward a more equitable, outcomes-focused approach.** Any changes that center or are responsive to the voices, perspectives, power, or needs of community members, especially those from historically underserved and oppressed groups, indicate positive momentum toward becoming outcomes-focused.

Figure 1. 6 Conditions of Systems Change



CONTRIBUTION VS. ATTRIBUTION

It should be noted that true social change cannot happen in a silo or through the efforts of one organization or even one initiative alone. **As one actor in complex systems, Third Sector cannot reasonably prove or claim *attribution* for most systems- and community-level impacts described in this report.** Recognizing this, the current evaluation does not attempt to prove causation or attribution. Instead, it focuses on exploring the ways in which Third Sector and the client projects supported by Third Sector may have *contributed* to wider change and impact. **This represents a unique and emerging approach to nonprofit impact evaluation that acknowledges the true nature of systems transformation and systems-change work.**

AN EQUITY-DRIVEN, PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

The evaluation process and the final case study also aim to embody the core values of equity, inclusion, accountability, and shared learning. **The evaluation centers authentic stakeholder engagement and emphasizes lived experiences and storytelling over quantitative data and metrics alone.** Given the complex and intangible nature of systems-change work, the

evaluation relies heavily on qualitative stakeholder feedback to assess and understand systems-change impacts. It also centers direct, qualitative feedback from individual program participants in order to explore and understand community-level impacts.

Key evaluation methods included:

- **A detailed review** of existing program documents, research, and data related to the REINVEST initiative;
- **One-on-one or small group interviews** with 18 project stakeholders, including staff and leaders from WSRCA, WNI, SWTC, Third Sector, and local employers; and
- **A community survey** of 110 past and present REINVEST program participants.

The case study went through a participatory review process, with stakeholders engaging in collaborative sessions and focus groups to review, refine, and co-create portions of the case study. They also provided feedback on draft versions of the report. **The final case study represents a culmination of this collective work, capturing the diverse perspectives of those involved in and impacted by the REINVEST initiative.**

About the Rural Capital Area

The Rural Capital Area is a nine-county region in central Texas that surrounds the state capital of Austin. The region includes Bastrop, Blanco, Burnet, Caldwell, Fayette, Hays, Lee, Llano, and Williamson counties and has a working-age population of 894,091.⁶ Over the past decade, the region's population has grown 36 percent, compared to 8 percent in the rest of the U.S. Two of the nine counties in the Rural Capital Area—Hays and Williamson counties—are in the top five fastest-growing counties in Texas.⁷ Domestic migration from across the U.S. drives 73 percent of the region's new population.⁸

Texas is also home to more than 433,000 small employers and has seen an influx of large employers, including Tesla, Samsung, and Amazon, that are relocating operations to counties that neighbor the Rural Capital Area. With a growing population and a strong business community, total employment in the region has grown 18.6 percent in the last five years.⁹ The steady population growth and a strong business community present great opportunities to address local workforce challenges and drive economic growth.

The Challenge: The Struggle to Access Good Jobs

The Rural Capital Area faces several critical challenges that hinder economic development in the region and economic mobility for residents. **Workers have challenges accessing the high-quality training and support necessary to obtain high-wage, upwardly mobile jobs, while employers have difficulty finding skilled labor to fill vacancies.**

EMPLOYER CHALLENGES: Despite recent population growth and an influx of businesses to the region, employers are having difficulties finding skilled labor to fill vacancies. This mirrors national trends, as employers in nearly every state are facing an unprecedented challenge filling open jobs. According to a recent analysis from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, there are about 80 workers for every 100 unfilled jobs in Texas.¹⁰

JOBSEEKER CHALLENGES: Despite the presence of vacant jobs, many jobseekers struggle to access high-quality, high-wage work due to a lack of relevant skills or credentials and insufficient access to training opportunities to obtain them. According to the National Skills Coalition, a majority of jobs in Texas (54 percent) require skills training beyond a high school education but not a four-year degree. Unfortunately, only 45 percent of Texas workers have access to the necessary skills training to fill these in-demand careers.¹¹

A significant skills gap exists, and it is compounded by a shortage of middle-skill jobs that are essential for economic stability and growth. Good jobs that offer livable wages, opportunities for advancement, and job security have the potential to bridge this gap. These jobs enable workers to support their families, invest in education, and contribute to the local economy. In the absence of good jobs, communities face higher poverty rates, economic insecurity, and inequality. Furthermore, when businesses cannot fill key positions, productivity suffers, innovation stalls, and economic growth is constrained. Addressing this shortage is crucial not only for the well-being of workers but also for the long-term sustainability of local economies and overall national competitiveness.

Rural Areas Have Unique Needs

Compared to other parts of the country, individuals and employers in rural areas face unique challenges to economic growth and mobility that compound the challenges described above. Rural residents often have limited access to essential resources such as broadband internet and reliable and affordable public transportation.¹² Further, rural areas often lack adequate local training infrastructure to keep up with workforce demands. For example, rural central Texas does not have any main community college campuses and only has satellite locations available for residents. The lack of campuses in these rural counties forces residents to travel outside of their communities for necessary education and skills training.

Limited access to local opportunities leaves rural communities to contend with brain drain as younger workers move out of the area in pursuit of training and jobs, resulting in a loss of human capital while leaving behind an older workforce that is close to retirement. Recent data from the U.S. Census shows that individuals aged 25 to 54, considered the prime working-age population, make up 33 percent of the total population in the Rural Capital Area. Over the past decade, this age group's share of the population has decreased by 12 percent. By comparison, in the nearby metro area of Austin, the prime working-age group comprises 49 percent of the total population and has increased by 3 percent in the last decade. Rural areas have historically presented opportunities for people with lower levels of educational attainment to gain access to high-wage work, but current trends point to gaps in access to critical resources jobseekers need to thrive truly.

Project History, Overview, and Goals

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic magnified existing disparities in access to high-quality jobs for people across the nation, including those in rural communities. Individuals from historically underserved and marginalized backgrounds, including Hispanic women, immigrants, young adults, and those with less education, were hit the hardest by pandemic-related job losses.¹³ More than ever, people needed access to good jobs that could help them achieve economic stability, self-sufficiency, and true long-term upward mobility.

As part of pandemic-relief efforts under the historic American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) the EDA announced the **Good Jobs Challenge**, a \$500 million grant program designed to bolster local economies and workforce development systems and accelerate the pandemic recovery.

Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area (WSRCA), a public workforce development board serving the rural nine-county region surrounding Austin, was eager to address workforce challenges in its service area in new and innovative ways. WSRCA believed the goals of the

grant spoke directly to the region's workforce needs, and they reached out to **Third Sector** for support in developing a competitive grant application. While the two entities had never worked together, WSRCA had recently participated in Results for America's Good Jobs & Equity cohort where they learned about Third Sector's technical assistance services. WSRCA also called on two existing nonprofit workforce service partners, **Workforce Network, Inc. (WNI)** and **Smithville Workforce Training Center (SWTC)**, to support the grant program's implementation at scale across the region.



We knew that we wouldn't be able to do all of this ourselves and we didn't want to do it all ourselves. We wanted to bring in partners that had a passion to do the work and would be able to support it....With the Good Jobs Challenge grant, we thought this is our time to be really intentional and not only provide support to small community-based organizations (WNI, SWTC) that are serving our rural communities but through those organizations be able to increase the impact of workforce development services in those communities."

– *Diane Cook, Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area*

In the fall of 2021, the partners collaborated to complete the rigorous Good Jobs Challenge grant application. Third Sector facilitated this process by convening stakeholders to identify needs, synthesize learnings, and develop specific program goals. Together, the partners aligned on a shared vision for a new initiative called REINVEST.

A SHARED VISION FOR REINVEST

The REINVEST initiative aims to transform local workforce recruitment, training, and job placement practices by focusing on **establishing and growing sector partnerships** in three key high-growth, high-demand industry sectors: health care, the skilled trades, and finance/IT. The sector partnership model fosters close partnerships with industry and employers to create high-quality jobs for workers while simultaneously developing a robust pipeline of skilled talent for employers. REINVEST represents a significant expansion of the sector partnership model in the rural central Texas region, building on key learnings and successes from existing employer partnerships such as the health care sector partnership established by WSRCA under a previous U.S. Department of Labor H1-B Rural Healthcare grant.¹⁴

In addition to strengthening and creating industry sector partnerships, a core aspect of REINVEST is its **explicit commitment to equity and inclusion**. The program specifically aims to expand economic opportunities for people in rural communities who have historically been underserved by economic development projects and business investments. The program prioritizes increasing access to training and apprenticeships for key populations, including people of color, immigrants, women, individuals with convictions or substance use histories, and low-income individuals. The initiative formalized this commitment to equity as one of its central goals.

Goals of the REINVEST initiative:¹⁵

1. **Establish or grow sector partnerships** in three key industry sectors: health care, the skilled trades, and finance/IT.
-

2. **Place 777 workers into good jobs** in the key industry sectors. REINVEST defines a good job as one that:
 - Exceeds the local prevailing **wage** for an industry in the region,
 - Includes **basic benefits** (paid leave, health insurance, retirement/savings plan, or union membership), and
 - Helps employees **develop the skills and experiences** necessary to advance along a career path.
-

3. **Prioritize training programs and apprenticeships for people in rural communities who have historically been underserved.**
 - At least 50 percent of recruitment, completion, and placements will be people with low incomes.
 - At least 33 percent of recruitment, completion, and placements will be people in focus populations who face compounding barriers to access and are more likely to be underserved. These populations include people of color, women entering the skilled trades or finance/IT, immigrants, individuals with a conviction history, or individuals with a history of substance use disorder.
-

GRANT IMPLEMENTATION

In August 2022, the EDA notified WSRCA that they were selected as one of only 32 Good Jobs Challenge grant recipients chosen from more than 500 applicants nationwide. They were awarded \$12,087,373 to implement the REINVEST initiative, bringing the partners' shared vision for an innovative new workforce program to life. By September 2022, REINVEST partners had begun implementing key actions on the ground.

The REINVEST grant implementation period is divided into three key phases:

- 1. System Development:** This phase focused on securing employer commitments, confirming target occupations and training partners, and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of all partners involved.

- 2. Program Design:** This phase included developing training program plans, signing memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and funding subcontracts with training providers, and creating participant assessments and wraparound support plans to support more robust case management.

- 3. Program Implementation:** Currently underway, this phase involves recruiting, training, and placing program participants into jobs with local employers. A continuous-improvement plan and sustainability plan are also in development to ensure the program's long-term success and longevity.

As of August 2024, REINVEST partners have successfully completed the first two phases of the grant cycle and are currently in the final phase, Program Implementation. The official grant period is scheduled to conclude on August 31, 2026, and partners seek to accomplish each of the program goals by that date. Partners hope that, with access to additional sustainable funding, the REINVEST initiative will continue to have a transformative impact in the region beyond the grant term.

PARTNER	ROLE
Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area (WSRCA) <i>Public workforce development board</i>	System Lead: WSRCA oversees project management, program development, and fiscal and contract oversight. They are the primary point of contact for the EDA and manage reporting for the Good Jobs Challenge grant. They provide guidance and support to the two nonprofit workforce services providers and ensure they are connected to other workforce initiatives across the region.
Smithville Workforce Training Center (SWTC) <i>Nonprofit workforce services provider</i>	Backbone Organizations: Nonprofit service providers lead sector partnerships in their respective regions and are responsible for employer engagement; developing occupation-specific training programs; conducting equity-focused recruitment, case management, and placement of jobseekers; and managing program data collection and reporting. The region is divided as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SWTC serves the eastern counties (Bastrop, Caldwell, Fayette, and Lee) • WNI serves the western counties (Llano, Burnet, and Blanco)
Workforce Network, Inc. (WNI) <i>Nonprofit workforce services provider</i>	
Third Sector <i>Technical assistance provider</i>	Technical Advisor: Third Sector provides technical assistance to REINVEST partners throughout the Good Jobs Challenge grant period, focusing on project design, equity, continuous improvement, and sustainability.



SPOTLIGHT ON: Third Sector

Third Sector is a nonprofit technical assistance organization that advises government agencies on effective ways to reshape their policies, systems, and services to achieve better outcomes for all people, no matter their race, background, or circumstances. Third Sector helps unlock possibility, confront inequity, and catalyze change to the benefit of the people and places governments, community-based, and philanthropic partners serve.

All Third Sector client projects focus on six key levers within public systems: policies, services, data, funding, external relationships, and internal culture. These levers have the potential to be critical drivers for change in public systems and also reflect the key areas in which Third Sector provides support.

While REINVEST is a collaborative initiative with partners working collectively to advance shared goals for the region, Third Sector has made noteworthy contributions to the project as a dedicated technical assistance provider for WSRCA, WNI, and SWTC (referred to as "REINVEST partners" in the table below).

Third Sector carried out the following key activities for the REINVEST initiative:

FUNDING	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Facilitated the development of a successful federal grant application, helping to secure a \$12 million Good Jobs Challenge grant award for the region(Upcoming) Will support the development of sustainability plans to identify additional funding opportunities for the REINVEST initiative once federal grant dollars are expended
SERVICES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Supported workforce partners in expanding their services to include case management by developing case-management tools, community resource inventories per county, and conducting research on occupational licensure barriersSupported workforce partners in expanding training program offerings by providing program management structures and detailed workplans for each industry sector
DATA	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Guided partners to develop clear definitions for focus populationsRecommended equity-based goals and outcome measuresFacilitated continuous improvement meetings, guiding partners on how to analyze program/participant data to track progress over time and make data-driven decisions

EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS

Supported the development of employer-led, worker-centered **sector partnerships**, complemented by tangible tools like facilitation guides, agendas, presentation decks, reports, memos, and partnership agreements. Examples include:

- Organized employer **listening sessions** to surface key needs and challenges
- Provided **training on sector partnership frameworks**, such as the Next Gen model¹⁶
- Developed a **report on best practices for implementing sector partnerships** in rural communities, based on interviews with workforce agencies across the country¹⁷
- Provided training and resources on **strategies to support employers' outreach**, including researching local employers, providing outreach templates and discussion guides, and providing specific language/elevator pitches
- Developed the **"Employer Commitment Letter"** that formalizes partnerships

INTERNAL CULTURE

- Conducted two internal training sessions with REINVEST partners, addressing why and how to advance quality jobs and equity goals (**diversity, equity, and inclusion training**)

Systems-Change Impacts

While the REINVEST initiative is still active and it is too soon to know the work's enduring impacts, early signs of change make it clear that the program has already contributed to transformation in the structures, relationships, and mental models of the individuals and organizations involved in the project. This signals change and transformation in the broader workforce development system across Texas' Rural Capital Area. Key findings on systems-level impacts are summarized below and described in more detail on the pages that follow.



STRUCTURAL CHANGE

1. Expanding local job-training programs
2. Increasing the public workforce system's internal capacity
3. Providing individualized case management with access to critical wraparound supports
4. Formalizing and strengthening employer engagement
5. Adopting equity-centered goals and data-review processes
6. Expanding local job-training programs
7. Increasing the public workforce system's internal capacity
8. Providing individualized case management with access to critical wraparound supports
9. Formalizing and strengthening employer engagement
10. Adopting equity-centered goals and data-review processes

RELATIONAL CHANGE

1. Strengthening relationships within the public workforce system
2. Transforming the relationship between the workforce system and employers
3. Increasing collaboration with education and training providers
4. Deepening connections with other community organizations serving similar populations
5. Strengthening ties with elected officials and other local champions
6. Strengthening relationships within the public workforce system
7. Transforming the relationship between the workforce system and employers
8. Increasing collaboration with education and training providers
9. Deepening connections with other community organizations serving similar populations
10. Strengthening ties with elected officials and other local champions

TRANSFORMATIVE

1. Employers recognizing the value of the public workforce system
2. Embracing the sector partnership model (and collaboration, in general)
3. Recognizing the importance of collective buy-in and support
4. Adopting a learning mindset
5. Increasing confidence in talking about equity and equity-based hiring
6. Employers recognizing the value of the public workforce system
7. Embracing the sector partnership model (and collaboration, in general)
8. Recognizing the importance of collective buy-in and support
9. Adopting a learning mindset
10. Increasing confidence in talking about equity and equity-based hiring



STRUCTURAL CHANGE

Policies, practices, and resource flows

The significant influx of funding from the Good Jobs Challenge grant, coupled with dedicated technical support and assistance from Third Sector, enabled REINVEST partners to significantly expand operational capacity and services to more effectively and equitably meet the needs of jobseekers and employers.

1. Expanding Local Job-Training Programs

Under the REINVEST initiative, WNI and SWTC have significantly expanded workforce training options in the region, adding more participants and classes to existing offerings and introducing new training programs for additional in-demand occupations. Specifically, they launched new training programs for HVAC technicians, commercial drivers, registered nurses, and allied health positions, and they expanded existing training programs for plumbers, electricians, welders, and licensed vocational nurses. Third Sector contributed to this expansion by providing detailed workplans for each sector and project management support.

One of the main hurdles REINVEST partners confronted in expanding program offerings was the region's absence of training infrastructure. "Everything that we do has to be built," shared one WNI employee. "We have to work really hard to make any class happen. Nothing is easy in the rural area where none of this exists." Thus, launching a single training program required considerable resource and time investment. WNI and SWTC actively recruited new education and training providers, including Texas Tech University, Cybertex Institute of Technology, and American Truck Driving School, to the region by making the business case for them to invest their resources in rural communities. WNI and SWTC also supported hiring instructors, co-designing course curricula based on employer needs, and renting out facilities to host classes.

Thanks to these dedicated expansion efforts, the Rural Capital Area's local workforce system now has a stronger training infrastructure and is able to serve more jobseekers through a wider range of training options. The system will more effectively meet the interests and needs of individuals and address the skills needs of local employers in the target industries during and beyond the REINVEST grant period.

2. Increasing the Public Workforce System's Internal Capacity

To ensure strong program implementation, REINVEST partners have leveraged Good Jobs Challenge funds to expand their internal teams. WSRCA boosted its operational capacity by adding two new staff positions to oversee the administration of the Good Jobs Challenge grant: **director of contracts and contract specialist**. WNI and SWTC also added additional staff positions to engage with employers on sector partnerships and provide dedicated case-management support to jobseekers. To date, partners have added **six case managers** (three per organization) and **five county coordinators** (three at SWTC and two at WNI). Case managers work directly with jobseekers, while county coordinators act as liaisons with local employers.

The addition of new staff members has enabled each REINVEST partner to serve a larger population of employers and jobseekers, expanding the overall capacity and reach of the local workforce system. This expansion has been especially impactful for nonprofit workforce services providers, which saw their small teams grow significantly in size. WNI shared, "With just the two of us, we couldn't get any bigger. We couldn't make any bigger impact. We couldn't grow capacity because it was just us. We had to take this on in order to scale up our organization and bring other people's skill sets together." Without Third Sector's assistance in securing the Good Jobs Challenge grant, it would have been impossible for partners to add these staff roles and capacity.

3. Providing Individualized Case Management with Access to Critical Wraparound Supports

In addition to expanding their program offerings and operational capacity, WNI and SWTC have incorporated **case management and wraparound support** as core components of their service model for the first time, signaling a growing understanding of the unique needs of jobseekers from diverse backgrounds. "In the beginning, there wasn't any established case management, and we hadn't defined what that was going to look like," reflected one SWTC employee. "Looking back, I realize that was the missing piece."

Staff members now provide personalized case management services that cater to participants' individual needs, meeting people where they are to ensure the best possible outcomes. To support this effort, Third Sector developed case management tools and protocols as well as community resource inventories that include lists of wraparound support providers for each county.

To date, **REINVEST has invested more than \$47,000 in wraparound support services for 119 participants.**¹⁸ These supports include transportation, education support, housing assistance, clothing, work supplies, child care, and other services that empower participants to overcome barriers to training completion. Services are delivered in partnership with a network of local nonprofit organizations, including Community Resource Centers of Texas—Marble Falls, Salvation Army, Highland Lakes Crisis Network, Combined Community Action, and others. Unlike other REINVEST program components that receive funding directly through the Good Jobs Challenge grant, WSRCA funds wraparound support through their WIOA allocation. Braiding WSRCA's WIOA funding with the REINVEST grant funds created a way to leverage existing workforce system funding and supportive services structures to support participants' economic mobility.

4. Formalizing and Strengthening Employer Engagement

To better support local employers and foster strong sector partnerships, REINVEST partners updated their operations and outreach strategies to be more responsive to employer needs, while also integrating accountability mechanisms to ensure sustained progress. For example, Third Sector supported partners in creating and implementing a formal contract and commitment process, the **"Employer Commitment Letter."** These letters affirm employers' commitment to REINVEST's mission, document available job positions and pay ranges, and prioritize the hiring of REINVEST graduates for these roles. Other key operational developments that have enabled the initiative to formalize and strengthen employer engagement include establishing **sector partnership meetings** and incorporating **new language for employer outreach** that speaks directly to employers' hiring needs.

Through REINVEST, workforce partners have successfully **grown or launched formal sector partnerships** with employers across the region. This includes expanding the existing health care sector partnership and launching a new sector partnership in the skilled trades. A sector partnership in finance/IT is also currently in development. Third Sector supported this process by providing training to SWTC, WNI, and WSRCA on leading sector partnership frameworks, such as the Next Gen model,¹⁹ and by sharing evidence-based best practices for establishing successful sector partnerships.²⁰ A key process REINVEST partners have introduced to support sector partnerships is hosting **regular sector partnership meetings** that include workforce partners and employers. As one skilled trades employer shared, "The (sector partnership) meetings help us identify what employers are looking for and how to make it better. The main thing is the conversation. These meetings let everyone know where we are at."

During the project, unemployment in the region was low, so employers were having a difficult time recruiting new workers. REINVEST partners encouraged employers to look beyond their traditional methods of filling staffing needs by recruiting individuals facing higher barriers to employment. Partners **updated outreach language to be inclusive of often-overlooked populations, which resulted in more equity-based hiring.** Third Sector developed employer outreach tools and templates, discussion guides, outreach language, and training sessions to equip partner staff to engage employers and secure job placements for participants. Staff learned to talk about equity in a way that resonates with employers, emphasizing how hiring people from diverse backgrounds can benefit their businesses. Program staff can now call attention to the unique talents and strengths each REINVEST graduate brings to the table, making it clear that diversity is an advantage to employers' bottom lines.



One of the things that we really engaged (Third Sector) around was: how do we have discussions with our employers about diversity, equity, and inclusion without calling it diversity, equity, and inclusion? ... (I)t was really being able to come up with strategies that created that communication plan and some of the elevator speeches to engage employers. I think that was really key and also helped staff feel confident in advocacy and in being able to express themselves and answer questions from employers."

— Diane Cook, Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area

These concerted efforts to engage and obtain formal commitments from employers have resulted in **172 employers engaging in the REINVEST initiative since December 2022**, including local small and mid-sized businesses, industry associations, nonprofit organizations, and public agencies across all three key industry sectors. To date, these employer partners have submitted **685 job postings** hoping to recruit and hire REINVEST program graduates, and many are already seeing positive returns.²¹ One health care employer shared, "Before the Good Jobs Challenge grant, I had seven or eight nurse openings. Now I have zero."

5. Adopting Equity-Centered Goals and Data-Review Processes

While serving community members from diverse backgrounds has always been an important part of WSRCA's work, prior to REINVEST, the agency lacked specific definitions and processes to track, measure, and communicate their impact on key groups. **Through REINVEST, the workforce board and nonprofit partners have developed clear definitions for focus populations and refined their approach to equity-based data collection, analysis, and data-driven continuous improvement.**

With Third Sector's guidance, partners have also committed to specific equity-centered goals for the REINVEST initiative. This is significant because it centers equity as a critical factor in program success. To measure progress toward these goals, **the REINVEST intake application includes a specific series of demographic questions.** The application even incorporates demographic items such as history of substance use and justice-system involvement. These items are not readily available in existing state data sources (e.g., unemployment data), but they are known to create significant barriers for people seeking to access job training or employment. This critical demographic data enables REINVEST stakeholders to disaggregate data to perform equity-based analysis.

REINVEST partners also attend **regular continuous-improvement meetings**, facilitated by Third Sector, where they review participant data, identify where to make improvements when they are not reaching targets, and analyze program outcomes with tools such as dashboards in AGS Prime. During these meetings, partners derive insights that help inform decisions on program enhancements, signaling a promising trend toward data-driven decisionmaking to optimize and improve service delivery.

These enhanced data collection and review efforts enable REINVEST partners to track progress toward equity goals more accurately over time. This new focus on equity-based data and outcome measures is a crucial step forward, driving tangible progress in advancing equity for underserved communities. It also signals the local workforce system's progress toward becoming more outcomes-focused.



RELATIONAL CHANGE

Relationships, connections, and power dynamics

The REINVEST initiative contributed to a deeper layer of systems change by significantly transforming relationships between different partners in the region's workforce system, including the public workforce development board, nonprofit workforce services providers, employers, education and training providers, and wraparound-support providers, among others. Processes such as meeting regularly, clarifying roles, and aligning on shared goals have resulted in a general strengthening of partnerships and collaboration and a breaking down of silos between organizations. Not only have partnerships grown stronger but the ways in which partners work together have evolved to embody greater trust and understanding, shifting the usual dynamics of the local workforce system.

1. Strengthening Relationships Within the Public Workforce System

An important, though not surprising, transformation that has emerged through the REINVEST initiative is a deepening of connections between entities operating within the public workforce system. Specifically, the relationships between **WSRCA**—the region's workforce development board—and local nonprofit workforce services providers like **SWTC** and **WNI** have become stronger and more aligned. Prior to REINVEST, these entities had worked together, but the demands of administering a large federal grant program have caused these partnerships to formalize and strengthen. WSRCA, SWTC, and WNI now have formal MOUs in place that define their roles in the partnership and outline data sharing and reporting commitments. The organizations also meet frequently to review program logistics and continuously monitor progress toward outcomes, which has also led to stronger coordination and relationships between leaders and staff.

To ensure the partners sustain and strengthen their relationships, Third Sector facilitates continuous improvement meetings, which provide a forum for partners to convene regularly. To further sustain the momentum once their contract ends, Third Sector trained WSRCA to facilitate meetings. Third Sector also trained the nonprofits and WSRCA on continuous improvement tools and has used them actively during continuous improvement meetings.

2. Transforming the Relationship Between the Workforce System and Employers



We've always talked about how important the business community is, and we want to hear from the business community and meet their needs. But we weren't having those conversations with employers until the very end....That was different with the Good Jobs Challenge."

— *Diane Cook, Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area*

With its strong focus on sector partnerships, the REINVEST initiative has strengthened relationships between **local employers and workforce partners**. WSRCA, WNI, and SWTC have evolved their approach to employer engagement by proactively seeking to understand and center employer needs rather than addressing challenges retroactively. This has resulted in a shift in power dynamics in how workforce partners think about and engage employers. Diane Cook of WSRCA shared, "REINVEST really challenged us to think about the

workforce development system as a whole a little bit differently. It's really allowed us to put employers at the core of the creation of the service delivery process. We listen first and then create solutions to meet the needs of employers rather than anticipating a solution based on acquired knowledge."

Third Sector played an important role in transforming the power dynamics between the workforce system and employers by providing specific tools and processes for employer outreach and engagement. In addition to developing the "Employer Commitment Letter," helping to establish regular sector partnership meetings, and providing new outreach tools and language to REINVEST partners (as described in Structural Change under "4. Formalizing and Strengthening Employer Engagement"), Third Sector helped the nonprofit service providers host a series of **employer listening sessions** at the outset of the REINVEST effort. These sessions let partners hear directly from employers to inform the development of local programs.

WNI leader Gail Davalos reflected on this process, "Third Sector gave us all the talking points on what we need to do when we go out and talk to employers to get them to join the partnership. They gave us the deliverables for each stage.... They gave us all the structure for (the employer listening sessions). 'This is how you hold a listening session. And here's your script.' I think in the early stages especially, they made a huge contribution." These listening sessions helped lay the groundwork for ongoing collaboration and provided a dedicated space and structure for nonprofit service providers to cultivate relationships with local employers.

These efforts have also resulted in employers being more receptive to partnering with REINVEST workforce partners and recognizing the value of these partnerships. Through employer listening sessions, sector partnership meetings, and a stronger culture of collaboration in general, employers have a more positive perception of the workforce system. Employers see organizations like WSRCA, WNI, and SWTC as valuable partners for addressing regional workforce issues in a collaborative way. One local health care employer reflected on this change, "When it was just me, I didn't have the ability to do it all by myself. Now I have a partner that I can delegate some of the work to."

By more actively engaging employers and centering their needs, the dynamic between the workforce system and employers is becoming more collaborative and symbiotic. This relationship directly benefits jobseekers and the regional economy by ensuring the training programs address the real skills needs of local industry and that employers are in line to hire local program graduates.

3. Increasing Collaboration with Education and Training Providers

The relationship between workforce services providers and contracted education partners has also grown stronger as a result of REINVEST. Specifically, **SWTC and WNI significantly increased their level of direct collaboration with education partners** as they worked together to expand the region's local training infrastructure and training program options. Over the course of the REINVEST initiative, WNI and SWTC had to build trust and buy-in with many new education partners and make the business case for them to invest their resources in rural central Texas. For example, Janice Bruno from SWTC shared the following about a new partnership with **American Truck Driving School**: "The training provider is looking for a spot in Lee County to put an office. They're going to come down, and that's huge because now we've been able to place students. That's been a big accomplishment."

As part of their work for the finance/IT sector, WNI also launched a new partnership with **Texas Tech University at Highland Lakes** to develop a customized nine-month Bank Credit Analyst micro-credential program to address the needs of small community banks in the region. Through this program, community banks could upskill their employees for credit analyst and loan officer roles without mandating that they have a bachelor's degree in finance or accounting. This was the first time these banks had access to industry-recognized credentials that provide employees with a faster path to quality jobs in the finance sector (see Figure 5 in the Appendix for an article describing this partnership). The fact that SWTC and WNI have been able to attract a number of new training providers from larger urban areas to the local region is a testament to these growing relationships.

4. Deepening Connections with Other Community Organizations Serving Similar Populations

REINVEST workforce services providers also strengthened their relationships with various **public and private organizations that provide services to the initiative's focus populations**. These organizations include nonprofits and community-based organizations (e.g., Jail to Jobs and local churches) along with public agencies (e.g., Parole and Probation). As a result of these new relationships, organizations across the Rural Capital Area are more aware of the services available at SWTC and WNI, and they have referred clients to the REINVEST program. Similarly, SWTC and WNI are more aware of available services in the community, and they provide referrals to REINVEST participants who need additional support as part of their individualized case-management process. These new partnerships are also significant because they mean that there are supporters outside of the traditional workforce system who are helping bolster and support REINVEST's success.

5. Strengthening Ties with Elected Officials and Other Local Champions

When applying for the Good Jobs Challenge grant, REINVEST workforce partners (WSRCA, WNI, and SWTC) secured **support from state and local elected officials**, recognizing the crucial role of local buy-in in driving regional change. In total, 12 public officials, including county judges, mayors, and city managers, submitted letters of support for the federal grant application. These influential local leaders now have a vested interest in the success of the REINVEST initiative and serve as advocates for its continued growth and expansion. Strong and widespread local support has also helped boost REINVEST partners' visibility and credibility across the state. One example signifying this change is the Texas Workforce Commission's invitation to WSRCA to present on federal grant success during its recent Workforce Forum.



There's a lot of support in the region for what we're doing. From all the stakeholders in the region...from local churches to city officials. I think that's contributing to our success. Everybody loves the fact that we're doing this for economic development."

— *Janice Bruno, Smithville Workforce Training Center*



TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

Mental models (mindsets, ways of thinking)

"The deepest level of systems change, transformative change, occurs as a result of shifts in one's mental models or ways of thinking. Stakeholders from WSRCA, SWTC, WNI, and local employers all note experiencing shifts in their mental models over the course of the REINVEST initiative. These transformative changes will continue to influence how individuals and organizations develop and deliver programs in the region over time.

1. Employers Recognizing the Value of the Public Workforce System

Due to the concerted employer-engagement efforts launched as part of REINVEST, **local employers are beginning to shift toward a more positive view of the local workforce system.** Employers are recognizing the benefits of collaborating with the workforce system to advance their own workforce goals. Specifically, many local businesses appreciate the availability of a wider range of training options at little to low cost to them. Some are even integrating REINVEST training into their own recruitment and upskilling efforts, advertising free training as an incentive to attract and retain employees. One health care employer shared, "We're on the same page as the big boys in Austin and Houston (saying) there's jobs out here, and we'll pay for your education, too! And it's really affected our open positions in a positive way."

2. Embracing the Sector Partnership Model (and Collaboration, in General)



After seeing a health care sector partnership meeting, I saw how this structure could work. I see the benefit of having employers at the center and partners at the outside listening. It's a unique approach."



— *Fay Crider, Workforce Network, Inc.*

Coming into the REINVEST initiative, workforce partners and employers had different levels of familiarity and exposure to the sector partnership model, which led to varying levels of skepticism and buy-in. However, since the launch of REINVEST, all parties involved have developed a deeper understanding and appreciation of the model, signaling an important mindset shift toward **greater support for collaboration in general and for sector partnerships in particular**.

"After seeing a health care sector partnership meeting, I saw how this structure could work," recalls Fay Crider, the President/CEO of WNI, who questioned the sector partnership model in the beginning. "I see the benefit of having employers at the center and partners at the outside listening. It's a unique approach." **The sector partnership model has enabled employers and the workforce system to come together to develop solutions to key issues collaboratively instead of working alone in silos.** One skilled trades employer reflected, "Our friendships get better, competition gets better, everyone wins, our area wins."

Further emphasizing the positive perception of sector partnerships, some workforce partners even **plan to replicate the sector partnership model** in industries beyond the scope of REINVEST. For example, WSRCA plans to launch sector partnerships in K-12 education and child care, and SWTC is planning a partnership with the local automotive industry.

The expansion and growth of local sector partnerships through REINVEST have also helped many partners to **embrace collaboration in general**, realizing that they do not need to tackle workforce problems alone. For example, during an internal presentation on how to create strong relationships with community partners, local health care employer Wellsential Health showcased its partnership with SWTC as a best-practice example.

3. Recognizing the Importance of Collective Buy-In and Support

Supporting the REINVEST initiative has fundamentally changed how workforce services providers approach planning and developing workforce programs. **They now recognize that collective buy-in from local agencies and leaders is crucial for driving sustained, large-scale change.**

Prior to REINVEST, WNI and SWTC led a number of successful workforce development efforts in their local communities, despite limited resources and staffing. However, these programs were often small in scale, limiting their reach and impact. Participating in a larger, regional initiative like REINVEST has shifted providers' perceptions of what's possible in terms of impact. Having seen firsthand the value REINVEST brought to rural central Texas—and the significant collaborative effort it required to fund and implement—providers now recognize that widespread local support is key to truly changing the status quo and uplifting the region as a whole.

Their mindsets have shifted toward a more collective approach, where they view **employers, local elected officials, economic development agencies, and foundations as essential contributors to strengthening the local workforce system.** As one WNI employee put it, "Grants will always have a beginning and an end. Yes, we can keep applying for grants, but the community has to add and contribute to the resources. Get that skin in the game, or how can this be sustained at this level?" They now believe that it takes a vast network of local, cross-sector partners coming together around a common cause to truly move the needle and create lasting impact for local workers and employers.

4. Adopting a Learning Mindset

Through trial and error, REINVEST partners **have learned that there is value in taking time to reflect when something does not work out as planned, embracing a learning mindset.** Third Sector helped ground WSRCA, WNI, and SWTC in this learning mindset by encouraging partners to discuss, iterate, and improve upon solutions when challenges arose. A Third Sector employee shared, "We helped shift those bad moments when it was really hard and helped them see the possibility of what comes after. This is a first step along the road to serving even more people in their community." A WNI employee echoed this sentiment, sharing, "Third Sector helps keep us on task and focused on not getting bogged down. It helps because I would feel dejected after work if I wasn't told 'Yes, that didn't work but it's still valuable.' I needed to hear that."

5. Increasing Confidence in Talking About Equity and Equity-Based Hiring

Most individuals involved in the REINVEST initiative already believed deeply in the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) prior to working with Third Sector. However, they did not always have the confidence or tools to express these beliefs in a clear and accessible way. Through the REINVEST initiative and the work with Third Sector, individual leaders and staff are now more comfortable leading conversations with employers about the value of hiring diverse populations. The coaching, language, and tools Third Sector provided to conduct outreach to employers, such as sample discussion guides (Figure 2), played an important role in building this confidence. By providing a specific structure for how to approach conversations about diversity and equity-based hiring, Third Sector helped erase some of the tension staff and leaders felt.

For some, this transformation has gone beyond employer outreach. New language on the value of diversity and equity has enabled REINVEST partners to infuse equity into their work with other stakeholders. Diane Cook from WSRCA shared,



What's helped me is hearing how Third Sector has developed those elevator speeches (on DEI) because it's helped me be able to talk with our Board of Directors and solidify some really strong strategies that we're implementing, not just in REINVEST. We're taking what we've learned in REINVEST and using those strategies across all of our projects that we implement and all of our funding sources."

— Diane Cook, Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area.

Figure 2.

Slide from a presentation prepared by Third Sector for REINVEST partners, entitled "Employer Discussion Guide 2"



Community-Level Impacts

TARGET	ACTUAL
33% <i>Of those enrolled, trained, and placed are from 1 or more "Focus" population</i>	61.2% enrolled 56.7% trained 50.8% placed in jobs TARGET ACHIEVED!
50% <i>Of participants identify as low-income at the time of program entry</i>	43.8% low-income TARGET ON TRACK

In addition to a range of systems-level impacts, the REINVEST initiative is also creating positive impacts for individual community members across the Rural Capital Area. The program is increasing individuals' access to quality education and training that enables them to obtain high-quality, high-wage jobs. **As of July 2024, 322 participants have enrolled in the REINVEST initiative, and 187 have successfully completed training. Additionally, 126 participants have obtained employment, receiving job offers from quality employers—the majority of which are REINVEST partners.**

The REINVEST initiative has also made significant progress in serving diverse and historically underserved populations. It has already surpassed its 33 percent equity target for focus populations (people of color, women entering the skilled trades or finance/IT, immigrants, individuals with a conviction history, or individuals with a history of substance use disorder), with **61.2 percent of total participants, 56.7 percent of training completers, and 50.8 percent of individuals placed in jobs coming from one or more focus groups.** Further, 43.8 percent of participants identified as low-income at the time of program entry, approaching the low-income equity target of 50 percent.

To date, **67.4 percent of REINVEST graduates have been successfully placed in jobs.** These individuals earn an average of **\$20.83 an hour**—surpassing the program's target wage threshold of \$18 per hour.²² This is a significant achievement, showcasing the program's success in raising wages for participants. However, there is still room for improvement. **While the average wage exceeds the program target, it falls slightly below the MIT living wage threshold of \$21.39 for the nine-county Rural Capital Area.**²³ Only about one-third (31.1 percent) of REINVEST job placements pay a living wage, and roughly 1 in 4 (28.0 percent) do not meet the program's own wage threshold for "good" jobs. This highlights an opportunity to further improve wages and job quality as the program continues.

COMMUNITY SURVEY FINDINGS

To learn more about REINVEST participants' experiences and program impact, WNI and SWTC administered a Community Survey in the summer of 2024. Of current and past REINVEST participants, 110 submitted responses, a response rate of 34.2 percent. Low-income individuals are significantly overrepresented, and people of color and women are underrepresented in the survey sample when compared to the overall population in the region (Table 1). Despite these differences, the survey offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of participants in REINVEST job training programs and highlights how systems-level changes may have affected individuals.

Table 1.

SURVEY RESPONDENT GROUP	RURAL CAPITAL AREA (1)		COMMUNITY SURVEY SAMPLE (2)	
	#	%	#	%
Total Population	1,112,947	100%	110	100%
Low-Income	99,245	8.9%	52	47.3%
Person of Color (Black, Latino, Asian, etc.)	496,752	44.6%	36	32.7%
Woman/Woman-Identifying	558,325	50.2%	37	33.6%

Sources: (1) 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Table S1701, (2) Self-reported on Community Survey

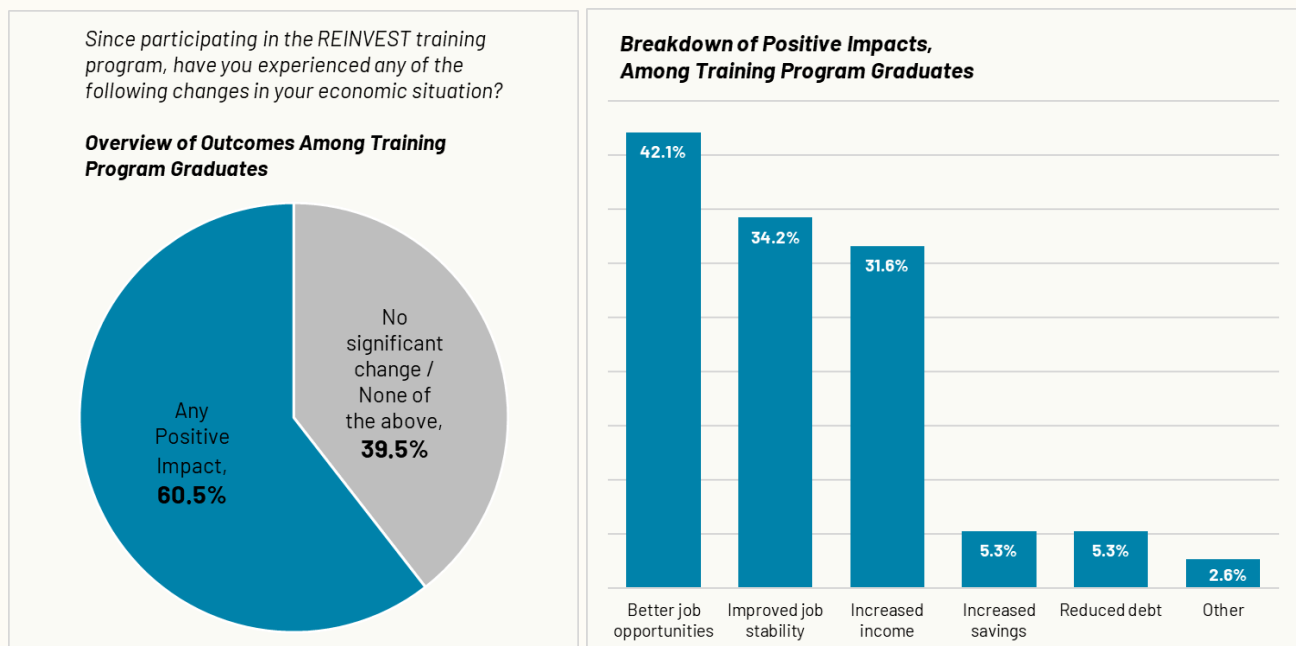
Some key survey insights include:

- **77.3% of respondents** say participating in REINVEST has increased their sense of confidence in finding high-quality, high-wage job opportunities in the region.
- **60.5% of respondents who successfully completed job training through REINVEST report they have already experienced one or more positive changes to their economic situation**, indicating progress toward achieving economic mobility (Figure 3). Key positive changes include access to better job opportunities, improved job stability, and increased income (see graphs below).
- Providing individualized support and case management is a key focus of the REINVEST program. **84.5 percent of respondents said it was easy to get support through the program, while 78.2 percent of respondents believe that the program has done a good job of meeting their specific needs.** Some key program features and supports that participants found helpful include: responsive staff and case managers; high-quality

training and instructors; financial assistance and education stipends; and gas cards and transportation support. One participant shared, "It has been incredibly helpful and has taken a burden off my shoulders. They are always there to help me with any need or question." Another participant said, "I could have not taken a CDL (Commercial Driver's License) class without the grant from the Workforce Network (WNI) and my case manager helping me every step of the process. They have been a tremendous blessing in mine and my family's lives."

- In open-ended responses, **participants provided additional feedback on ways that the program has impacted their lives. Commonly shared impacts include: reaching career goals; achieving job security or career advancement; overcoming financial barriers to access education or training; and achieving a better quality of life for themselves or their families.** For example, one participant shared, "Being a young LVN (licensed vocational nurse), I knew I wanted to eventually go back to become an RN, but I was never sure if I would be able to due to the financial restraints. But since starting this program, it has given me a sense of relief knowing that the financial help I'm getting will make it one step easier to reaching my goals. I want to be able to provide for a family one day, and advancing my education will help make that possible."

Figure 3.



Program outcome numbers and insights from the Community Survey highlight the REINVEST initiative's positive impact on community members. It is clear that the REINVEST initiative is increasing community members' access to job training and employment opportunities in the region and is making significant progress toward its equity targets. However, while there are many stories of individual success, it is unclear whether all job placements will lead to good jobs or whether participation in the program will lead to long-term economic mobility. Still, the data presented here shows promising early signs of change.



COMMUNITY VOICES

Marinna Sifuentes, 25, is a REINVEST program participant pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Nursing through the SWTC. She shares how the REINVEST program has helped her realize a lifelong dream of becoming a registered nurse (RN).

I was born and raised in Lockhart, Texas, and my journey into nursing really started when my grandmother got sick. My mom and I spent a lot of time in the hospital with her, and that's when I saw firsthand what nursing care is all about. I realized, "This is where I need to be." But I had no idea there were programs out there to help me become a nurse until my dad told me about this opportunity. Now, after a year in the program, I'll be graduating in March!

Nursing school is by far the hardest thing I've ever done in my life, but the support has been great. The program covers a portion of my tuition costs. I have two jobs and go to school full-time, so to be able to cut back on work even just a little bit and have that financial stability is such a relief. It's been amazing for my mental health by allowing me to really focus on school. I also like that my representative from SWTC checks in with me each month—it feels really nice to have that human connection.

Seeing firsthand how much nurses actually do, there's always going to be a demand in this field. And with the nursing shortage that's currently going on, I'm excited to step foot into this career. I tell all my friends and family who want to join the workforce, but are scared of that initial step, about this program. I think it's a great pathway to finding the career that you want! I wouldn't have been able to launch myself in this direction without this training program. It's impacted me in such a positive way that I'm now looking for ways to give back to others, to pay it forward.

Discussion and Key Takeaways

Driven by the collective efforts of WSRCA, WNI, SWTC, Third Sector, and other local partners, the REINVEST initiative is already generating significant positive impacts for the workforce development system and individual community members in Texas' Rural Capital Area. REINVEST has made notable advancements in workforce services by proactively engaging with diverse jobseekers, strengthening relationships with local employers, launching sector partnerships, and growing training programs in the region.

It has also expanded how partners collect and analyze data by defining equity outcome measures and introducing processes to review program progress and impact. To date, 172 employers have engaged with the REINVEST program, submitting more than 680 job openings. Additionally, 322 participants have enrolled in training programs, 187 have successfully completed training, and 126 have been placed in jobs with local employer partners. Of program graduates who participated in the Community Survey, more than half already report experiencing positive economic impacts that they attribute to the REINVEST program.²⁴

BY THE NUMBERS:



*Based on Community Survey responses

MOST NOTEWORTHY CHANGES IN THE SYSTEM

The REINVEST initiative has given rise to a broad range of impacts on the local workforce development system. **However, the two most noteworthy changes inspired by the project are: (1) the way employers engage with the public workforce system and (2) the system's emphasis on advancing equity for historically underserved communities.** Both of these impacts cut across multiple levels of systems change and have set a foundation for long-term transformation in the region.

A significant change to result from the REINVEST initiative **is the way employers think about and interact with the public workforce system.** REINVEST helped local workforce development partners recalibrate their approach to employer engagement, reorienting operations to engage employers as key partners in workforce planning more intentionally. This shift was reinforced through processes such as formal "Employer Commitment Letters" and ongoing sector partnership meetings. The fact that many local employers now recognize the value of the public workforce system, are actively engaged in the system, and are hiring and retaining workers through the system demonstrates the impact of these changes. Employers are now active partners in the local workforce system, a transformation that will greatly benefit local businesses and jobseekers over time.

REINVEST has also transformed the public workforce system by **increasing the focus on equity and inclusion and expanding services and supports for individuals from diverse backgrounds.** Community-level impact findings demonstrate that REINVEST is improving access and outcomes for people from historically underserved groups. It is also a promising sign that the initiative has already exceeded its equity target for engaging focus populations. The presence of new structural elements such as clear equity-based program goals; dedicated data collection, analysis, and continuous-improvement processes to track progress toward these goals; and the incorporation of wraparound-support services for job training participants, are additional positive signs of change. **The numerous equity-focused changes introduced under the REINVEST initiative indicate that the workforce development system in rural central Texas is shifting toward a more outcomes-focused approach,** centering the needs and experiences of community members who face the greatest barriers to opportunity.

With a year remaining in the official grant period, it is clear that the REINVEST initiative is already giving way to meaningful systems- and community-level change in the region. The initiative is transforming how cross-sector stakeholders work together and actively uplifting historically underserved communities. The impacts observed to date emphasize the value and importance of continued investment in local workforce development initiatives—especially in rural areas—in order to drive greater economic mobility and growth for communities across the nation.

DRIVERS OF (AND BARRIERS TO) CHANGE

Several key factors have contributed to REINVEST's success and enabled the initiative to catalyze change and transformation across the region. These drivers of change represent strategic levers that can make future workforce training and sector partnerships programs more inclusive and impactful, while the barriers highlight common challenges efforts may need to overcome.

The key drivers and barriers of the REINVEST initiative include:

- **The Good Jobs Challenge grant.** The \$12 million grant brought a significant influx of resources to the area, which was pivotal in hiring more staff, building training infrastructure, having the capacity to engage with employers, and expanding providers' abilities to recruit, train, and place participants into good jobs. The initiative's broad range of impacts highlights the transformative power that a historic federal investment can have on rural communities.
- **The commitment of experienced, locally rooted leaders and staff.** The contributions, experience, and local connections of WSRCA, WNI, and SWTC were integral to REINVEST's success. WSRCA had past experience managing a large federal grant and designing and implementing a sector partnership in health care, and WNI and SWTC had experience establishing occupation-specific training programs in response to local needs. Additionally, each organization had strong community ties. SWTC, for example, leveraged its involvement with the Rural Whole Health Coalition to recruit employers and expand the health care sector partnership.
- **Third Sector's essential technical expertise and tangible tools.** Third Sector brought to the REINVEST effort a deep understanding of federal grants, strong project management processes, and subject-matter expertise in equity, human-centered design, and sector partnerships. Third Sector applied their expertise to create tangible tools and resources, such as the "Employer Commitment Letter," that REINVEST partners continue to use. Third Sector also played a critical role in securing the prolific Good Jobs Challenge grant. Most partners will agree that without Third Sector's tailored contributions, REINVEST would not have achieved the same level of success it has to date (see the green callout box on pages 16 and 17 for a more detailed overview of Third Sector's contributions).
- **Support and buy-in from local leaders.** Strong local buy-in and support from local leaders, including county judges, other elected officials, and the Texas Workforce Commission, bolstered the visibility of the REINVEST initiative. This helped the initiative reach more jobseekers and employers and has been an important factor in REINVEST's success.

- **Taking the time to build trust among partners.** The REINVEST initiative required cultivating many new partnerships, each of which needed time to develop. Key developments included:
 - Building trust among WSRCA, WNI, and SWTC. This was the workforce partners' first time collaborating on a project of this scale, but as each organization's role became clearer, they were able to lean on each other for ongoing support and collaboration.
 - Building trust between REINVEST partners and employers. Securing employer commitments and adjusting to new ways of working together was a time-consuming process and involved significant listening and learning by the workforce partners. As one SWTC employee shared, "We're getting exactly what these employers want, but think about it. It'll be two years since we started. It takes time."
 - Building trust between REINVEST partners and Third Sector. Though initially seen as an outsider, Third Sector gradually earned the trust and buy-in of WSRCA, WNI, SWTC, and local employers by working closely with the partners and tailoring its approach to meet local needs.
- **Meeting participants where they are.** Another key driver supporting REINVEST's impact was the program's ability to effectively respond to key stakeholders' emergent needs, especially those of participants. For example, many job training participants were not prepared for the rigor of certain training programs and needed remedial support before entering training. Others needed wraparound services, like transportation, to access training. REINVEST partners jumped quickly to action to meet these needs, even when the grant put limitations on the services they could provide. Gail Davalos of WNI shared, "The way we achieve success is to pivot and meet the needs of the workforce where they are."
- **Making DEI accessible.** A key challenge Third Sector navigated as a technical advisor in REINVEST was promoting equity-based practices in a context where DEI is a politically charged term.²⁵ After receiving feedback from REINVEST partners regarding concerns about talking to employers about DEI, Third Sector shifted its approach by focusing on specific tactics and language for addressing equity challenges and embracing diversity. In the end, partners learned how to effectively talk about the value of diversity and equity-based hiring practices in a way that felt authentic to them and engaging to employers.

These drivers and barriers helped to create the systems- and community-level impacts seen to date from the REINVEST initiative. While every context is unique, leveraging these factors can support the replication of similar work in communities across the nation.

TOP THREE LESSONS FOR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS

The REINVEST initiative also highlights a number of best practices technical assistance providers like Third Sector can leverage to drive momentum on cross-cutting social impact projects. The top three lessons include:

- **Expand how to think (and talk) about equity.** Through working on REINVEST, Third Sector learned to move away from DEI buzzwords toward shared, accessible language that appeals to a broader range of stakeholders and emphasizes a common goal. The REINVEST initiative provided Third Sector with an important opportunity to step back and reflect on what equity means and who it should include. Third Sector leader, Jess Praphath, shared, "We used inclusive language to bring others to the table and to show that we all have the same goals, that we all care about economic opportunity for rural communities." She also stated that Third Sector had to do some internal reflection on how to describe and communicate equity and diversity in broad ways to ensure they were not limiting decisions to conventional norms, which is an important equity-based practice. Jess continued, "Even if you look at our target populations, it's not just racial equity; we're talking about people with low-income. We're talking about people, some of whom might be people of color but some of whom might not be." When DEI becomes exclusive or inaccessible, it fails to meet its fundamental purpose.
- **Define clear equity targets and establish processes to measure progress.** For programs focused on serving historically underserved populations, an abstract commitment to equity is often not enough to translate to true impact on the ground. However, defining clear equity targets, such as the REINVEST initiative's focus population and low-income equity targets, formalizes equity commitments and creates a clear benchmark against which to track progress over time. Defining equity targets AND establishing ongoing continuous improvement processes to review equity data are key best practices for any equity-focused program.
- **Provide tangible tools and templates to move the work forward.** Starting from scratch can be a barrier for many client organizations. Providing templates and guides, such as Third Sector's employer discussion guides and outreach templates, can guide clients toward implementation in a quick and easy way. For the REINVEST initiative, most partners did not have the capacity to develop these resources on their own and greatly appreciated having a starting point as they built out the new program. One employee shared their feedback, "Third Sector took everything we were saying and giving them, and they put it into a format that was consistent and professional. It gave me a rubric that I didn't have (before for) when I would go out and speak to stakeholders or employers." Third Sector synthesized key learnings and elevated best practices into a "Launching and Maintaining Rural Sector Partnerships" brief that presents tangible tools and strategies for the field.²⁶



Looking Forward

Thanks to the collective efforts of WSRCA, WNI, SWTC, local employers, education and training providers, and nonprofit partners, along with the dedicated support of Third Sector, the REINVEST initiative has given rise to a range of positive impacts at both the systems- and community-levels across Texas' Rural Capital Area.

By intentionally serving jobseekers from historically underserved groups and forging strong connections between local workforce providers and employers through formal sector partnerships, REINVEST is advancing economic mobility for individual community members and accelerating growth for the local economy. In the coming year, Third Sector will support REINVEST partners through the final phase of the Good Jobs Challenge grant, with a focus on identifying sustainable funding opportunities and building the capacity of project partners for continuous improvement.

It is hoped that the REINVEST initiative will continue to operate and expand access to good jobs, transform the local workforce system, and catalyze impact in the Rural Capital Area for many years to come. ■

Glossary/Key Definitions

Outcomes-focused approach—An approach that centers and is responsive to the voices, perspectives, power, and needs of community members who are directly impacted by an issue area or who are the direct beneficiaries of a specific program or service. The ultimate goal of an outcomes-focused approach is to result in more improved and equitable outcomes for impacted communities. This approach moves public systems away from a traditional compliance-based approach toward one that centers the quality of life and life outcomes of real people and communities.

In practice, an outcomes-focused approach may look like:

- Using disaggregated data to drive decisionmaking that continuously improves community outcomes;
- Engaging stakeholders' perspectives and experiences to improve services and programs;
- Breaking down silos between agencies and departments to make services and programs more accessible and/or responsive to the needs of communities; and/or
- Using tools like human-centered design and root-cause analysis to ensure solutions reflect community needs.

Sector partnerships—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.²⁷

Good job—A job that (1) exceeds the local prevailing wage for an industry in the region, (2) includes basic benefits (e.g., paid leave, health insurance, retirement/savings plan, and/or union membership), and (3) helps the employee develop the skills and experiences necessary to advance along a career path.

"System" definition—The workforce development system in the Rural Capital Area of Texas. This includes public workforce agencies, workforce nonprofits, education and training providers, employers, and other partners (e.g., wraparound support providers). *Note: This definition is specific to this particular case study.*

Systems-level impacts—Changes in the way government systems operate. How system stakeholders are working or thinking differently as a direct or indirect result of a project or initiative.

Community-level impacts—Changes individuals experience in accessing the system or services. Meaningful change for communities because of transformations to the system.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Rural Capital Area, Demographic Profile²⁸

	Overall Population	Percent of Population	Below the Poverty Line	Percent Below the Poverty Line (Poverty Rate)
Total Population	1,112,947	—	99,245	8.9%
AGE				
Under 18 years	264,747	23.8%	26,472	10.0%
18 to 64 years	691,285	62.1%	60,672	8.8%
65 years and over	156,915	14.1%	12,101	7.7%
SEX				
Male	554,622	49.8%	44,823	8.1%
Female	558,325	50.2%	54,422	9.7%
RACE AND HISPANIC OR LATINO ORIGIN				
White	772,035	69.4%	61,561	8.0%
Black or African American	60,562	5.4%	9,252	15.3%
American Indian and Alaska Native	6,208	0.6%	642	10.3%
Asian alone	55,440	5.0%	2,832	5.1%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	1,211	0.1%	218	18.0%
Some other race alone	63,136	5.7%	8,557	13.6%
Two or more races	154,355	13.9%	16,183	10.5%
Hispanic or Latino origin (of any race)	338,895	30.5%	41,426	12.2%

White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	616,195	55.4%	40,878	6.6%
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EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Population 25 years and over	742,914	-	51,498	6.9%
Less than high school	62,795	8.5%	10,925	17.4%
High school graduate	165,497	22.3%	16,285	9.8%
Some college, associate degree	218,349	29.4%	15,176	7.0%
Bachelor's degree or higher	296,273	39.9%	9,112	3.1%

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Civilian labor force, 16 years and over	595,823	80.2%	33,742	5.7%
Employed	569,968	95.7%	27,943	4.9%
Unemployed	25,855	4.3%	5,799	22.4%

Table 2. Wraparound Support and Dollars Invested by the REINVEST Initiative

Wraparound Support Type	Number of Participants Receiving Support	Cost/Dollars Invested
Transportation	91	\$27,823.36
Education Services	25	\$14,387.16
Housing Assistance	8	\$4,067.00
Clothing	5	\$547.13
Work Supplies	3	\$25.00
Financial and Budgeting Resources	2	\$300.00
Utility Assistance	2	not available

Adaptive Devices	1	not available
Child Care	1	not available
Health Services	1	\$200.00
Laptops	1	\$112.00
TOTAL	119* (*Unique count)	\$47,461.65

Table 3. REINVEST Participant Demographics²⁹

	OVERALL ENROLLED		COMPLETED TRAINING		OBTAINED EMPLOYMENT/PLACED IN JOBS	
Total Participants	322		187		126	
Demographics	#	%	#	%	#	%
Gender						
Male	217	67.4%	157	84.0%	107	84.9%
Female	105	32.6%	30	16.0%	19	15.1%
Race *Note: Races are not mutually exclusive, % may add up to >100 %						
American Indian or Alaska Native	3	0.9%	2	1.1%	2	1.6%
Asian	1	0.3%	1	0.5%	0	0.0%
Black or African American	50	15.5%	27	14.4%	12	9.5%
Hispanic or Latino	99	30.7%	58	31.0%	39	31.0%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	0.3%	1	0.5%	1	0.8%
White	190	59.0%	110	58.8%	80	63.5%
More than 1 race (multi-racial)	24	7.5%	14	7.5%	9	7.1%

Immigration Status

Does not apply	303	94.1%	172	92.0%	120	95.2%
Can legally work in U.S.	8	2.5%	7	3.7%	3	2.4%
First/second gen citizen	11	3.4%	8	4.3%	3	2.4%

Other Special Populations

Has a disability	22	6.8%	13	7.0%	8	6.3%
English-language learner	27	8.4%	16	8.6%	11	8.7%
Veteran	11	3.4%	8	4.3%	4	3.2%
Ex-offender	24	7.5%	15	8.0%	9	7.1%
Substance use history	9	2.8%	5	2.7%	5	4.0%
Low income at time of program entry	141	43.8%	73	39.0%	43	34.1%
Participant falls into at least 1 focus group*	197	61.2%	106	56.7%	64	50.8%

Figure 5. The Highlander article that highlights the partnership between WNI and the finance sector to upskill employees of their local community banks.

Banking employees accelerate career paths thanks to partnership

Special to The Highlander

In May, eight banking employees throughout Burnet and Llano counties successfully completed an intensive Bank Credit Analyst course series at Texas Tech University Highland Lakes, paving a lucrative career path to Credit Analyst or Loan Officer that can evolve to senior leadership positions. This is the first time that bank workers have had local access to an industry-recognized credential specific to their chosen career.

It came about when leaders of our area community banks, Ken Burgess and Chris Williston, approached Texas Tech Highland Lakes Director, Dr. Celia Merrill and Workforce Network, Inc. Stakeholder Relations Director, Gail Davalos, to help address a primary employment need.

"One of the greatest challenges facing all community banks today is attracting good

Accounting and Loan Operations personnel. Smaller community banks struggle to fund internal training programs to grow their own talent," said Chris Williston, former President and CEO of the Independent Banks Association of Texas (IBAT) for forty years.

"Generally, we have to rely on outside educators," said Ken Burgess, Board Member of Prosperity Bank. "We are thankful that Texas Tech Highland Lakes stepped up."

Davalos provided the news about a recent grant award to Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area (WSRCA) for its skills development initiative, Rural Employers Infuse Vital Economic Success in Texas (REINVEST). Workforce Network, Inc. is WSRCA's implementation partner under REINVEST to train and place 325 adults in high demand, high quality jobs in Burnet, Llano and

Blanco counties over three years.

Merrill, Burgess, and Williston utilized competency-based education to develop students' mastery of skills and competencies specific to loan operations. Other bank presidents weighed in on curricula choices and agreed on the Risk Management Associates (RMA) program. Merrill secured the RMA license to offer the program in Marble Falls and worked with Burgess to craft a 26-week online course combined with weekly in-person classes taught by Burgess along with other volunteer bank presidents as well as Texas Tech's adjunct professor, Todd Dennis. This approach proved essential to expanding students' learning and ensuring their success in the accelerated and rigorous course.

Bank presidents also agreed that individuals who acquired credit analyst competencies through the Texas Tech/RMA Certification Program are eligible to apply for a Credit Analyst position just as an individual with a Bachelor of Science in Accounting or Finance. The result is an accelerated path to a high-quality job offering family-sustaining wages and career advancement.

"This is a key qualifier for REINVEST funding," said Davalos. "The goal is to link employers struggling to fill positions with training providers and local community expertise to transform how an industry sector recruits, trains, and places workers struggling to find quality training for high-quality jobs right here where we live and work."

The Bank Credit Analyst program will be offered again

this fall at Texas Tech University Highland Lakes, 806 Steve Hawkins Parkway, Marble Falls, TX. Interested adults may contact a Texas Tech advisor at 806-834-2580.

Adults interested in job training through the REINVEST grant may contact Workforce Network, Inc., Ashley.Atkison@ruralcapital.net. Applicants must be 18 years or older, a U.S. citizen or authorized to work in the USA, reside or work in Llano, Burnet, and Blanco County and registered with Selective Service (males only).

Committed to teaching and the advancement of knowledge, Texas Tech University, a comprehensive public research university, provides the highest standards of excellence in higher education, fosters intellectual and personal development and stimulates meaningful research and service to humankind.

Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area is a nonprofit community partnership providing no-cost recruitment, employment services, and childcare assistance to businesses, employers, and job seekers in the Rural Capital Area of Central Texas. This nine-county region includes Bastrop, Blanco, Burnet, Caldwell, Fayette, Hays, Lee, Llano, and Williamson counties. For more details on WSRCA and the services it offers, visit www.workforcesolutionsrca.com

Workforce Network, Inc. is a nonprofit dedicated to workforce development in Burnet, Llano and Blanco counties and is a Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area implementation partner for the REINVEST grant.



Contributed photos

Beneficiaries of a grant award to fund an intensive Bank Credit Analyst course to Workforce Solutions and Texas Tech Highland Lakes include Adjunct Professor Todd Dennis, graduate Russell Holler, Texas Tech Highland Lakes Director Celia Merrill and volunteer Charlie Horn, president of Security State bank in Marble Falls.

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