

2009 Virginia Community Economic Development Awards Nomination

Category: Community Involvement Population Over 100,000

Project: A Master Plan for 21st Century Workforce Transitions in the Shenandoah Valley

Community: Rockingham County, Augusta County, Harrisonburg, Staunton and Waynesboro

Background

Is this just another workforce meeting? I couldn't help but wonder if the outcome would be the same as our previous two attempts to bring the stakeholders of workforce development in the central Shenandoah Valley to the table to discuss aligning education with business and industry needs. After numerous rounds of meetings and discussions over the past seven years, the message was the same. The K-12 resources were spent on teaching to the Standards of Learning and the desires of the parents who, for the most part, want their children to attend a four-year college. Higher education seemed somewhat unconscious of the concept that education needs to support economic development, job creation and retention, while the employers in the Shenandoah Valley expressed a need for a skilled workforce to support technological advances in business and industry that are critical to the Valley remaining globally competitive.

The facts were clear: our discussions revealed that a large number of Valley youth are leaving high school without basic work readiness skills, the region lacks resources to support worker advancement and many that pursue undergraduate degrees must leave the area to find employment in their field of study. The reality was, the Shenandoah Valley Partnership and the region's Workforce Investment Board had limited ability and resources to evoke the change necessary to align the region's workforce system to the changing needs of its economy.

My hopes were high that this round of workforce discussions would be different. The Shenandoah Valley had recently gained a new ally with a stake in seeing the region's present and future workforce aligned to the 21st century workplace.

In 2006, the Commonwealth of Virginia and SRI International established a research and economic development partnership in the Shenandoah Valley. SRI's Center for Advanced Drug Research (CADRE) was seen as a catalyst for progress in the region and the Commonwealth, conducting cutting-edge drug research and development and spurring new private sector investments and jobs. Recognizing an increasing presence in the region of firms specializing in research and development, technology and technical services, SRI Policy Division researchers saw a need to prepare the present and future workforce in the Valley to support this new type of economic growth. As a result of this need, the 21st Century Workforce Transitions Project began in March 2007.

Challenge

The central Shenandoah Valley's strong, diverse economy and low unemployment rates reveal few weaknesses on the surface. It has been easy to rely on the incredible work ethic of the region's existing workforce for the productivity that has driven industry growth in the Valley. However, complacency cannot be afforded as agriculture and manufacturing industries change and leave the area and as technology driven industries seek locations with workers with advanced skills and technology know-how. The challenge facing the central Shenandoah Valley region was how to mobilize regional workforce stakeholders and resources to develop and implement proactive strategies to transition the region's workforce to maximize economic strengths and to take advantage of new economic opportunities.

Assessment

Focusing on global and regional economic change, SRI's Center for Education Policy conducted an assessment of the Shenandoah Valley's education and training opportunities. Working with the Shenandoah Valley Partnership, SRI's Policy Division targeted key individuals and organizations representing a cross section of the community in Augusta County, Rockingham County and the cities of Harrisonburg, Staunton and Waynesboro (the pilot study area). To gain a variety of stakeholder perspectives, more than 160 individuals were interviewed, including elected officials, social services providers, law enforcement, community-based organizations, faith-based service providers, schools, universities, employers and career and economic development specialists. The goal of the initiative was to prepare a Master Plan for 21st Century Workforce Transitions* that can meet the workforce demands of today's changing economy.

Phase I of the 21st Century Transitions initiative included research of education and training resources in the region and a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis examining the education and workforce systems. Based on the SWOT results, seven areas of need were identified to improve education and skill development for youth and adults in the Shenandoah Valley. Key SWOT criteria included:

- Clear willingness among individuals and organizations to collaborate in the process of identifying problems and creating solutions. However, despite regional willingness to collaborate, there is little regional action or communication.
- The region's diversifying economy is complemented by a strong work ethic, strong public school, community college and higher education infrastructure, many technical training programs and a high quality of life.
- Employers in the region are willing to invest time and resources in the development of human capital.
- Students, parents, counselors, teachers and administrators are often unaware of post-secondary training and employment opportunities.
- Many youth graduate high school without basic work readiness skills.
- Counselors and schools lack capacity to provide effective career guidance.
- Minority populations are increasing, yet their enrollment in regional higher education institutions remains low.
- Funding for programs to support youth, incumbent and transitioning workers is scarce, competitive and decreasing.

SRI developed a series of recommendations to address the seven areas of need identified in the SWOT analysis. The findings suggested continued improvement of regional systems will be a challenging endeavor in the Shenandoah Valley. It will require commitment from and close collaboration between all stakeholders to implement advanced support systems for the development of youth and adults into 21st century workers. The recommendations are by no means exhaustive and are viewed as a starting point for an extended community-wide effort to address the key gaps and meet the challenges involved in preparing 21st century workers. The region's leaders will undoubtedly add to and modify the initial list of recommendations to specifically meet the perceived needs of the central Shenandoah Valley.

*The complete *Master Plan for 21st Century Workforce Transitions in the Shenandoah Valley* can be viewed online at http://policyweb.sri.com/cep/publications/downloads/MasterPlan21stCenturyWorkforceTransitions_final.pdf

Community Commitment:

In December 2007, Phase 2 of the 21st Century Transitions initiative began with the establishment of regional infrastructure to support the implementation of sustained workforce development efforts in the Shenandoah Valley. Regional infrastructure included an all-volunteer Board of Directors, an Executive Committee to the Board and Implementation Task Forces. During the first quarter of 2008, the Directors and Task Forces convened and prepared action plans for the initial phase of implementation. This included the definition of initiatives and their related components, the identification of resources and the development of financial and implementation plans for the remainder of 2008.

Sixty-four volunteers, of whom 14 were on the Transitions Board of Directors, provided leadership, and 50 regional thought leaders participated on three Task Forces. Twenty-six action plan-working sessions were held from June through December 2008. Volunteers were from the private sector, education (K-12, community college, technical centers, and universities), government entities, community based organizations, the region's workforce system, economic development and elected officials.

The Transitions Board of Directors, committed to their purpose "to lead a collaborative regional movement to address human capital development and ensure future economic health of the central Shenandoah Valley," put in motion a regional strategy for initiative implementation by guiding the overall work of the Task Forces and reviewing, improving and acting on Task Force recommendations. Directors also serve as opinion leaders, change agents and advocates for the advancement of regional human capital. Task Forces addressed the primary challenge related to youth, which was high school work readiness and the primary challenge related to adults, which was supporting worker advancement. Action planning efforts of the Board and Task Forces were supported by SRI and guided by the Board's Core Beliefs as defined in their bylaws:

The Board of Directors and task forces are committed to the following Core Beliefs:

- Preparation of emerging, incumbent and transitioning workers for 21st century jobs, which will allow individuals to achieve productive, prosperous lives, the region to maintain a healthy economic environment and society to effectively utilize its resources.
- Further development of the region as an economically attractive and supportive location for existing businesses and a competitive area for business expansion.
- Development of a regional workforce model that is action and results outcome oriented.

Using Innovation in Workforce Development to Leverage Support:

The *21st Century Workforce Transitions Master Plan* attracted the attention of the U.S. Department of Labor Employment Training Administration. A nine member Shenandoah Valley Transitions team was invited to participate in a regional workforce Transformational Forum in Baltimore (October 2008). The purpose of the DOL initiative was to actively develop regional strategies for economic competitiveness that integrate workforce development, education, and economic development resulting in specific action plans for transforming the workforce investment system. This workshop led the Transition team to develop and submit a Regional Innovation Grant (RIG) and a Community Based Job Training Grant (CBJTG) to support the implementation of the Transitions Master Plan. The outcome of the grant submissions are still pending.

The relationship developed between the Shenandoah Valley Transition team and the U.S. DOL also led to an invitation to participate in a *People Inspiring Transformation* (PIT) initiative. The Shenandoah Valley Transitions Team and Workforce Investment Board partnered with the Lehigh Valley Workforce Investment Board, Inc. from Allentown, Pennsylvania. The Lehigh Valley WIB has successfully evolved their regional workforce infrastructure to address much needed workforce system change and leadership development challenges. The PIT initiative

provided the Shenandoah Valley Transitions team with valuable information on successful implementation of workforce system change strategies to develop an expanded strategic regional workforce plan, increase effectiveness of the WIB Board and committee structure and to increase revenue generation through blended funding options.

Funds were provided by SRI International to perform the needs assessment and implementation planning for the pilot in the central Shenandoah Valley. Additional leveraged resources were provided by partner contributions of meeting space and sponsorship, administrative personnel for logistics planning, scheduling and follow up, use of supplies, office space and equipment, and media and graphics expertise for partner, stakeholder and community outreach. The Transitions Board of Directors will continue to seek financial support for implementation of action plans through public and private sector support and grant opportunities.

Measured Objectives:

Within the Valley, 18% have some college and no degree, 5% have an Associate's degree, 12% have a Bachelor's degree and 7% have advanced degrees. Fifty-eight percent of the population in the measured age cohort has not pursued postsecondary education. These statistics will serve as a baseline to gauge improvement.

Outcome and impact measures are expected to be varied due to the diverse nature of the strategic planning process and the unknown results. Tangible and intangible outcomes are expected and include the development of sustained regional partnerships, new and improved methods to communicate and disseminate information, the development of mixed approach solutions for complex regional problems, the breakdown of workforce, economic development, education and employer silos for the development of integrated solutions. The impact will be improved career and job opportunities for emerging, incumbent, transiting and dislocated workers, the utilization of untapped talent pools to build productive economic capacity and a better prepared and more plentiful workforce pipeline.

Transferability and Secondary Benefits:

Virginia's Shenandoah Valley is not unlike other areas of the U.S. faced with preparing a workforce to meet the challenges of global competitiveness and a technological advancing economy. Collaborative partnerships drive the 21st Century Workforce Transitions movement. Cross sector involvement is critical at all levels of initiative planning, development and implementation of any workforce system transformation.

The 21st Century Workforce Transitions initiative has already drawn the attention of other localities and regions in Virginia. Transitions Project Director, Sharon Johnson, has been asked to share information on the project with other workforce investment boards, chambers of commerce, tech prep consortiums, career and technical education advisory councils, community organizations, literacy councils, the Center for Rural Virginia, community colleges and stakeholders associated with the Center for Occupational Research and Development, National Career Pathway Network, American Society for Quality and the Shenandoah Valley and Virginia Society for Human Resource Management. It is the desire of the Shenandoah Valley Transitions Team that the unprecedented collaboration and community involvement taking place in the Shenandoah Valley will become a best practice for developing and implementing workforce system improvements in other regions or localities in Virginia and the nation.