GULF COAST CHAMBERS NETWORK

ONE ACADIANA

COMMUNITY LISTENING STUDY REPORT

PREPARED BY STEADFAST CITY ECONOMIC & COMMUNITY PARTNERS

DECEMBER 18, 2024

Steadfast city
Economic & Community Partners

ONEACADIANA

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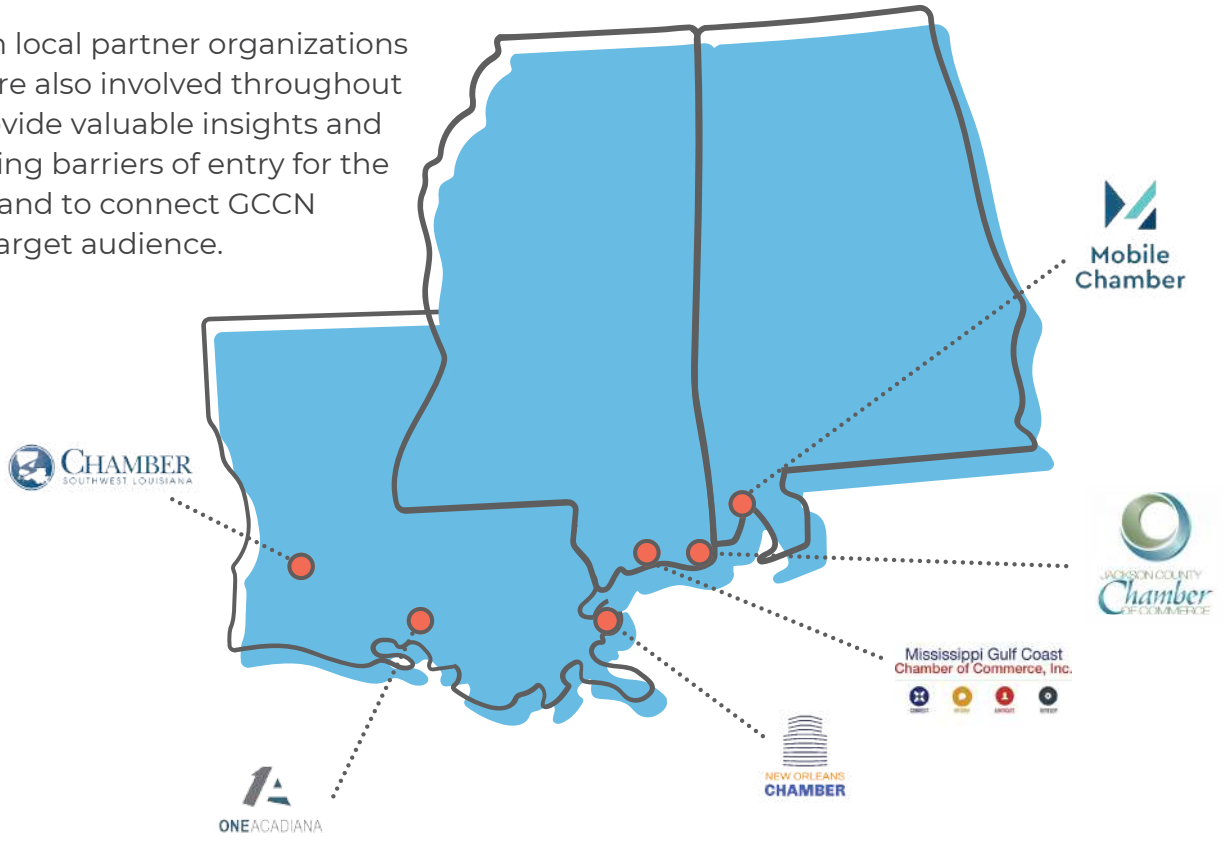
SCOPE OF WORK & METHODS

BACKGROUND & GOALS OF THE STUDY:

In 2023, the Gulf Coast Chambers Network (GCCN) was a finalist in Phase 1 of the U.S. Department of Commerce's EDA Recompete Pilot Program and received a Strategy Development Grant (SDG). The GCCN partners include the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce Foundation, Mississippi Gulf Coast Chamber of Commerce, Jackson County Chamber of Commerce, New Orleans Chamber, Southwest Louisiana Economic Development Alliance, and One Acadiana. Both the Recompete Pilot Program and SDG aim to address economic distress and joblessness by investing in distressed communities to create employment opportunities and reduce the prime-age employment gap.

This report outlines the data collection, analysis, and strategic recommendations for addressing the Prime Age Employment Gap (PAEG) across the five partner regions within the Gulf Coast Chamber Network (GCCN). The According to the Economic Innovation Group, the PAEG is “a measure that identifies communities where employment for people ages 25–54 is lower than the national average.” The cause for the local PAEG is not a matter of job availability, as many of the local employers report that they are hiring for numerous positions. However, much of the prime age population is still unemployed or underemployed, especially along the Gulf Coast. In order to better understand what barriers of entry exist for prime-age residents who may be seeking to join the workforce, Listening Sessions were conducted and an online survey was administered in each region with the goal of hearing directly from the PAEG target audience.

Stakeholders from local partner organizations in each region were also involved throughout the process to provide valuable insights and guidance on existing barriers of entry for the PAEG population and to connect GCCN members to the target audience.



ENGAGEMENT METHODS:

Steadfast City worked with each regions' GCCN partner organizations and local stakeholders from August through December 2024 to organize in-person Listening Sessions and distributed an online survey using social media and marketing techniques. While efforts were made to engage as many participants as possible, the survey results reflect the perspectives of those who chose to respond and may not fully represent the broader population.

8 LISTENING SESSIONS

24 MARKETING GRAPHICS CREATED

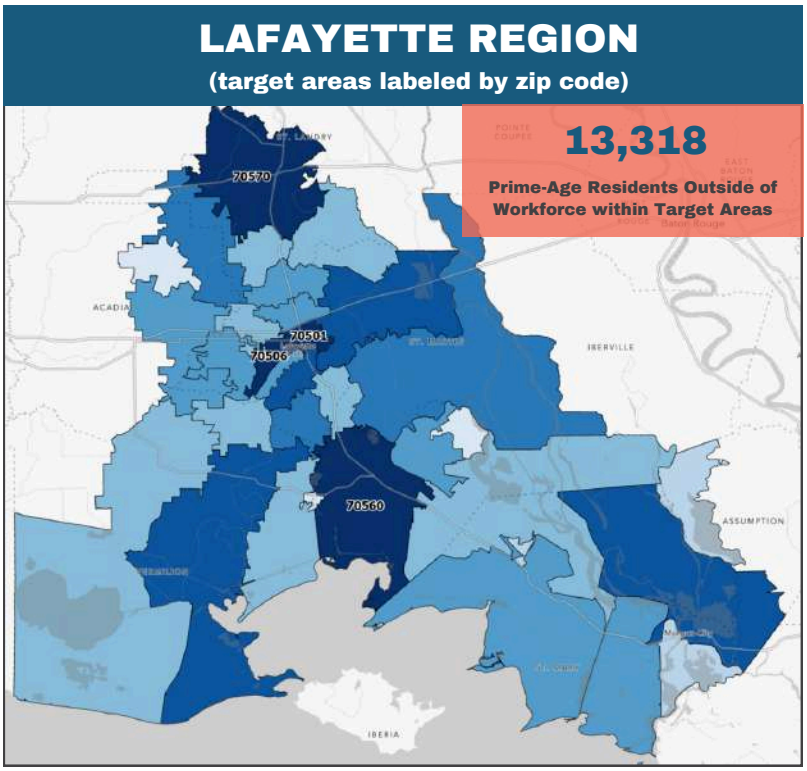
53 OVERALL SURVEY RESULTS

68 STAKEHOLDERS CONTACTED

LAFAYETTE, LA CONTEXT:

The Lafayette, LA MSA has a prime-age employment rate of 75.35%, with about 46,778 out of 188,733 prime-age residents outside the workforce. Although job creation has been steady, employers struggle to fill new roles. The region has lost about 20,000 jobs in the Oil and Gas sector over the past decade but has seen growth in Advanced Manufacturing, Healthcare, and IT. Proposed programs aim to connect local leaders with new talent pipelines to address workforce gaps and improve access to reskilling opportunities in these emerging sectors.

Based on past research, local partners identified the West End district of New Iberia in the 70560 ZIP code as a key focus area for the Listening Study.



COMMON BARRIERS ACROSS REGIONS

Listed below are the most common barriers experienced by most, if not all, of the PEAG target population in each of the Gulf Coast regions. They are not listed in any particular order.

CHILDCARE & MULTI-GENERATIONAL HOUSEHOLDS

Childcare that is affordable and accessible, as well as care for elderly parents, is a challenge. Jobs are often not flexible enough to accommodate caregivers. In some cases, there is a shortage of available slots at childcare centers, despite high demand.

TRANSPORTATION ACCESS

Transportation is the #1 barrier in most cases to getting a new job and scaling up. Bus routes have limited hours and don't run on weekends or holidays, a flexibility that workers with odd hours need. Public transportation is also expensive and it is costly and difficult to advocate for new bus routes.

MENTAL & PHYSICAL HEALTHCARE

Health resources are also a significant barrier. This includes resources for individuals with substance abuse issues, mental health concerns, and disabilities. There are still many stigmas related to mental health and addiction, especially in the Black community. Healthcare in general is unaffordable for many. Health insurance is connected to employment status, which perpetuates a difficult cycle for those out of work with health concerns.

INTERNET ACCESS

Most job applications are now online, but internet access is limited in many cases because of the high cost. Many job seekers need to find a way to travel to community resources such as libraries to access the internet.

HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS

Some individuals are in unstable living situations, affecting their ability to commit to work or job trainings. Housing costs, and cost of living in general, often exceed what local employers are willing to pay.

THE BENEFITS CLIFF

The Benefits Cliff - defined as "the sudden loss of eligibility for public safety-net programs and the benefits they provide as income rises above eligibility limits"- is a hurdle because in many cases, employment leads to a reduction or loss of social benefits, discouraging some from entering or advancing in the workforce. Many people are reluctant to leave social programs, leading to dependency cycles.

TECHNOLOGY SKILLS GAP

Many older individuals lack digital skills for job searches. Younger individuals are often competent with smart phones, but those skills do not transfer to navigating computers. There is also limited or no access to job boards and digital applications, especially for seniors or the disadvantaged.

SOFT SKILLS GAP

Soft skills, such as time management, communication (both verbal and nonverbal), punctuality, multitasking, collaboration, reliability, conflict resolution, interview etiquette, and professional presentation, need improvement as they affect people's ability and confidence in navigating job applications and the hiring process.

COMMON BARRIERS ACROSS REGIONS

RE-ENTRY BARRIERS

Re-entry barriers such as criminal records and substance abuse issues prevent individuals from applying to positions and employers from looking at otherwise qualified candidates. Many local businesses are national chains and big-box stores that have policies at the corporate level against hiring individuals who have previous felony convictions or were previously incarcerated. Felony convictions also preclude individuals from getting government jobs at the state and local level. Similar corporate policies such as employment contingent on negative drug tests are also significant barriers for those struggling with substance abuse.

DISCONNECT BETWEEN EMPLOYERS & CANDIDATES

There is a notable disconnect between employers and candidates, including low understanding of workplace and social media conduct as well as a lack of literacy (technological and verbal), leads to jobs going unfilled. On the employer side of the hiring process, companies need to be more straightforward about processes and timelines. Candidates get discouraged when they do not get feedback, whether positive or negative, from employers during the process.

GENERATIONAL & CULTURAL MINDSETS

Negative attitudes and stigmas regarding certain jobs can be a deterrent for some individuals. These mindsets are perpetuated at a generational and systemic level. Many people are also struggling to operate day-to-day which leads to a lack of long-term perspective or ability to build a career.

LITERACY & LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Literacy levels are low in many GCCN regions; reading comprehension is at the 6th grade level for most adults which affects their ability to understand and complete job applications. Language barriers, particularly with Spanish, are also a major challenge for those for whom English is not their first language. Uncertainties with language leads to insecurity and hesitancy during the application and interview process.

LOW WAGE RATES

A universal barrier is local wage rates; job seekers feel that pay does not reflect the current cost of living. In some cases, job seekers need to have two or three jobs to have enough income to meet their basic needs. Even when candidates are attempting to upskill, they feel that mid-level jobs do not pay much more than lower level jobs and are not worth investing in.

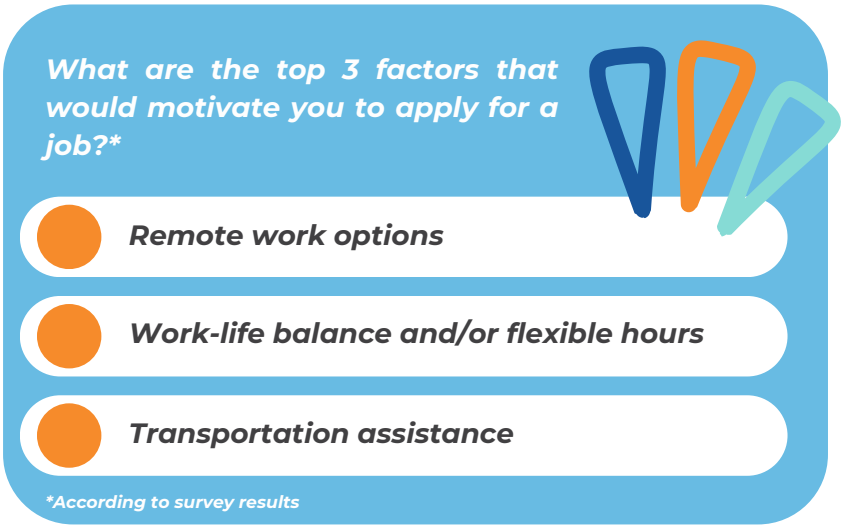
ONEACADIANA

NEW IBERIA, LA

SURVEY & LISTENING SESSION SUMMARY

SURVEY RESULTS

An anonymous, 10-minute survey of workers and jobseekers of the Acadiana region in south-central Louisiana produced insights into respondents' unique experiences with the process of finding, getting, and keeping jobs in the region. In addition to the survey, an in-person listening session was offered at a local church in the community to invite direct feedback and open a conversation around challenges and barriers that residents face in the local job market. The combination of quantitative data from the survey results and qualitative data from discussion during the listening session can help local partners get a better understanding of the obstacles that workforce participants face in the local landscape.



The link to the online survey was live for six weeks, and two responses were recorded in One Acadiana's service area. Responses showed that the top three challenges for those trying to find and keep a job in the local market were local wage rates, low education levels with lack of opportunities for training, and childcare needs.

The survey results also showed that responding workers are aligned in having similar experiences in other key areas:

100% of survey respondents said that a personal vehicle was their main mode of transportation, 100% are looking for mid-level or associate-level jobs rather than entry-level, and 100% do not believe that local employers understand their challenges and barriers. The top three biggest frustrations during the job application process were long and complicated applications, lack of response from employers, and feeling unqualified.

The survey responses point to several major themes in terms of challenges and barriers they face, as well as the elements that respondents would like to see addressed by employers and local partners. Childcare, transportation, and continuing education were the three main themes that resonated with respondents.

One survey respondent said:

"Childcare for many jobs after school or until after shifts at places like fast food or retail stores is almost nonexistent, making it much more difficult to find a job since I have to have a particular schedule. Childcare costs are also unattainable for many people. Local wage rates often do not allow people to support themselves even with a two-household income, much less a single parent. Public assistance such as food stamps and Medicaid are getting harder to qualify for, yet people do not make enough money for basic needs beyond their monthly bills."

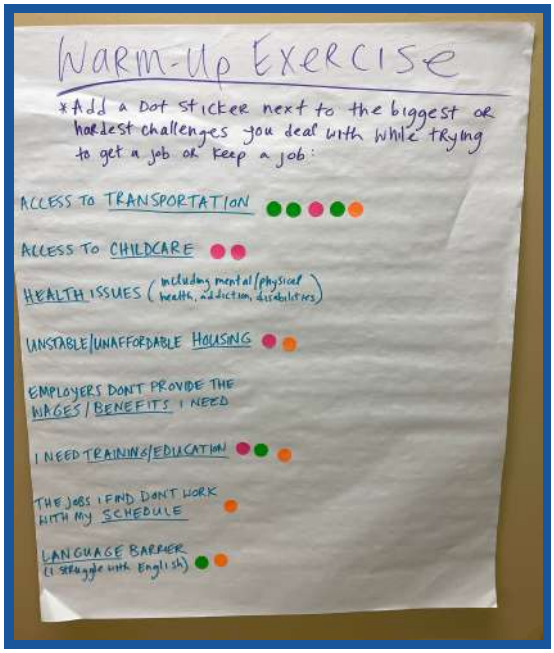
When asked what steps could be taken to improve the job market, jobseekers said that they would like to see work-life balance prioritized (more scheduling flexibility and remote work options), assistance with transportation and childcare, better access to computers and internet, and training and career counseling. In terms of training and coaching opportunities, they said that they would prefer self-paced online courses, in-person workshops, or apprenticeships.

LISTENING SESSION RESULTS

The listening session at Little Zorah Baptist Church in New Iberia, Louisiana, was attended by about 25 community members and local partners that serve the at-risk population. The discussion was wide-ranging and illuminated many interconnected and overlapping issues that echo and give additional substance to what we heard from respondents in the survey.

Transportation

Transportation is a key issue in the barriers that local workers face in getting and keeping their jobs. Many workers walk or hitchhike to work, which could pose serious safety issues. In most of the region, there are no streetlights, sidewalks, or even shoulders to safely walk on. There is public transportation available north of the city in Lafayette, but not in New Iberia. There have been past efforts by local nonprofits and community groups to shuttle workers to their jobs, but maintenance of the small number of vans is too expensive to continue running the community-led service.



Childcare & Multigenerational Households

Many people have young children, special needs family members, or elderly family members who need significant care at home. Local daycare centers do not have the capacity or capability to care for special needs children. Many people could potentially fill some locally available jobs but have disabilities that prevent them from working in roles that do not have flexibility.

Criminal Records

Prior convictions are a barrier to finding a lasting job. Many local businesses are national chains and big-box stores that have policies at the corporate level against hiring individuals who have previous felony convictions or were previously incarcerated. Felony convictions also preclude individuals from getting government jobs at the state and local level.

There is a need for transitional programming for incarcerated individuals in which they are coached to get ready for the workforce and civilian life. These people need mentors to help them see who they could be in the future and prepare for the next chapter of their lives and careers.

Internet Access

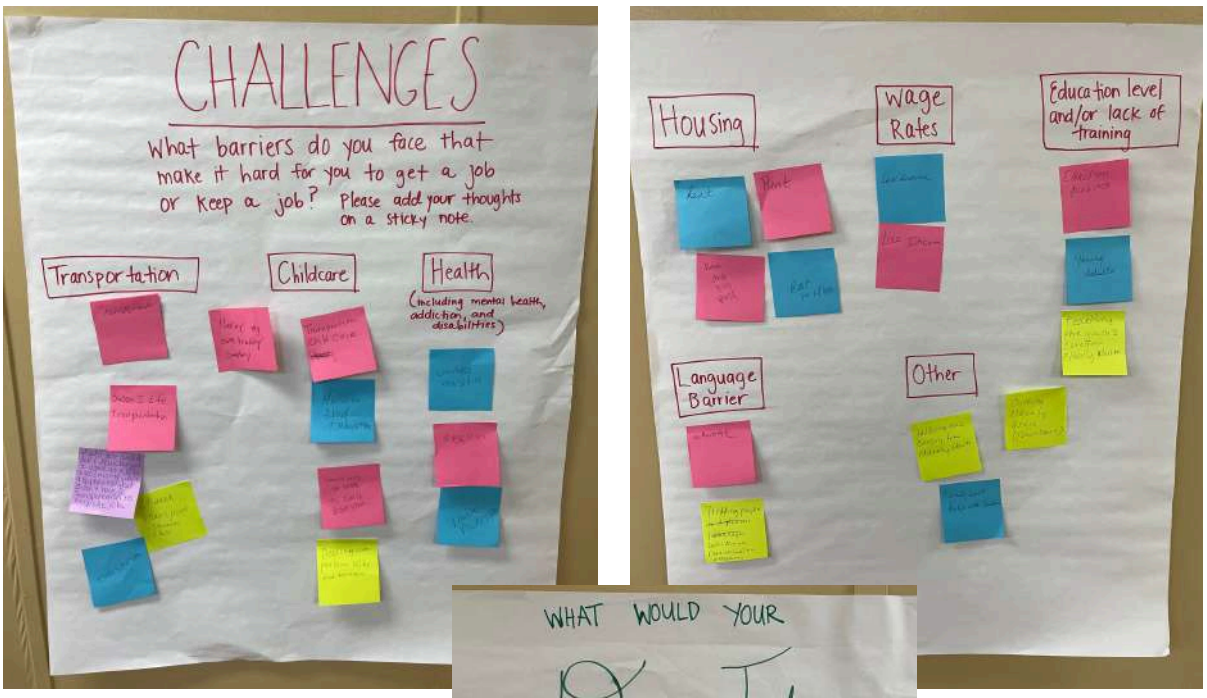
Cheap high-speed internet has recently become available through Cox/AT&T for $38/month. Some people may be unaware or unsure if they can afford that. Some people have government phones which offer limited internet access. There is a stigma against remote jobs.

Mental & Physical Health Care

Lack of a support system leaves people with few options, and some end up struggling with substance abuse. There is a trust breakdown in the Black community that trickles down to the local level, preventing people from getting the help they need.

Working Conditions

Conversations during the Listening Session revealed that those who are currently employed are hesitant to invest time and energy in scaling up due to a variety of factors. Wages being offered are low, even for jobs that are at a higher level. Job seekers experience discrimination, feelings of being stuck or inferior, low motivation, and a lack of confidence in the workplace.



REGION-SPECIFIC GAPS

1 Current Methods for Reaching the PAEG Population Are Not Effective

Surveys, social media posts, & listening sessions are not enough. Many of the barriers that preclude the PAEG population from keeping a job are the same barriers that prevent them from attending an in-person Listening Session. Community members often experience survey fatigue and have no incentive to participate via online channels. Therefore, there needs to be more focused, relationship-based, boots-on-the-ground efforts to reach the target audience.

2 Fundamental Disconnect Between Job Availability and the Perception of Job Availability

Although leadership from the Chamber and partner organizations believe there are many available and accessible jobs, unemployed and underemployed members of the community have expressed repeatedly that they feel there are no jobs available in the area. In some cases, job seekers are unqualified for the majority of job postings and need to upskill. However, the primary issue is that job seekers are not seeing the available jobs.

3 Applicants Feel Wages Are Too Low

The majority of the feedback received in this study indicates that applicants feel current wages do not align with the local cost of living. This issue is pervasive and transcends industries, even in areas with a lower cost of living relative to the country as a whole. Without a stable income that is enough to satisfy basic needs such as housing and groceries, individuals in the PAEG population must resort to having two or three low-paying jobs. Even if they do decide to invest in their education or training to upskill and obtain a higher-paying job, that new job will pay them just enough to get by but will also result in the loss of government benefits/assistance.

4 Applicants Experience a Lack of Transparency During the Hiring Process

One of the major frustrations applicants experience while searching for jobs is the lack of transparency from employers during the hiring process. Applicants become very discouraged when they do not hear back from employers with at least a rejection letter or - even more infrequent - receive additional feedback on how they might improve their application or presentation.

5 Lack of Communication Between Leadership & Staff At Partner Organizations

In some cases, communication between the Chambers of Commerce and the Stakeholders was limited to leadership and it became clear that not all information was communicated to staff who work more directly with the target PAEG audience on a daily basis. Although leadership is meeting regularly and communicating effectively, information gets lost in translation to front-line staff. Additionally, staff members become siloed into their specific organizations and do not have many opportunities to communicate and share resources with staff from other organizations who are often working towards similar goals.

REGION-SPECIFIC GAPS

6 Employers Do Not Understand the Barriers That Job Seekers Experience

Survey results from this project indicate that employers do not understand the barriers that some of the PAEG population face or do not offer enough benefits to enhance accessibility such as on-the-job training programs, apprenticeships, childcare assistance, carpool services, flexible schedules, etc. Employers need to be educated about these issues since there may be many qualified individuals they are overlooking.

7 Applicants Feel Underqualified & Need More Opportunities to Upskill

Many job-seekers need additional training to qualify for industry-specific job opportunities, particularly to older, prime-age adults who may not have needed certifications or training years ago, but whose applications are now overlooked because they lack a specific credential. Underemployed individuals want employers to provide more on-the-job training and apprenticeship opportunities. Training programs in general need to have more flexible schedules to accommodate individuals who may be in school, have another job, provide care for family members, or have a long commute.

8 Limited Transportation & Childcare Resources

The challenges related to transportation and childcare are significant barriers for many job seekers, especially when it comes to maintaining long-term employment. After becoming employed, many individuals encounter additional barriers to keeping the job due to limited access to transportation and childcare resources. Individuals who are the main caregiver of elderly family members and/or children struggle to pay for high-cost care. In many cases, it is more affordable to rely on government benefits and stay home to care for family. Feedback from the Listening Session participants confirmed that quality childcare is extremely expensive and unattainable for many in the prime-age population. Many participants at the Listening Session expressed how difficult it is to travel around New Iberia without a vehicle and with no access to public transportation. Since Lafayette and New Iberia are rural areas, there are no bus routes and the majority of individuals use a personal vehicle for transportation. Those who do not have access to a personal vehicle or carpool service are forced to walk or bike on roads that often do not have safe infrastructure.

9 Low Literacy Rates

Written responses in the surveys and during the Listening Session indicate that many individuals struggle with literacy skills. According to U.S. Census data, Louisiana has one of the lowest literacy rates statewide. In Lafayette Parish, 89.9% of residents ages 25 and older have at least a high school diploma. However, this still leaves a nearly 10% gap. Without confidence in reading and writing skills, the job search can be very daunting, especially when encountering long and complicated applications. Addressing adult literacy remains a critical issue for both the local community and the State of Louisiana at large.

RECOMMENDATIONS & STRATEGIES

The following narrative outlines strategic objectives for the Lafayette/New Iberia area based on overarching goals aimed at reducing the PAEG and facilitating employment access for residents in the region. The recommendations and action items listed below correspond directly to the gaps listed above.

1 HIRE WORKFORCE INFLUENCERS & ORGANIZE COMMUNITY-BASED MOBILE OUTREACH

Workforce Influencer Position:
Chambers of Commerce staff often lack the time to directly engage with unemployed and underemployed individuals. A dedicated Workforce Influencer" can fill this gap by focusing on outreach and support. The Workforce Influencer would: connect with people at local events and community spaces to understand their needs; help guide job seekers to job training, fairs, and additional services while addressing challenges like childcare or transportation; collaborate locally by partnering with nonprofits and organizations to link individuals with additional support; gather input from the community and share feedback to improve workforce programs; and spread awareness by promoting job opportunities through workshops, social media, and events. This role would ensure the community gets the help they need while supporting the Chamber's goals.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Pursue funding to hire Workforce Influencers.
- Hire Workforce Influencers who can relate to the target PAEG audience, preferably through personal experience. Include language in the job description that highlights the importance of experience and shared understanding while ensuring that the language remains welcoming to all candidates who may possess these qualities, regardless of their background. Optional draft language: "We are committed to building a diverse and inclusive team that reflects the communities we serve. We encourage applicants who have lived experiences similar to those of the underrepresented groups we aim to engage, as we believe this perspective is crucial for fostering authentic connections and understanding. Candidates who come from or have a deep familiarity with these communities will be highly valued for their ability to relate, communicate, and build trust effectively."
- **Key Objectives of the Workforce Influencer:**
  - "Meet people where they are" and where they spend the most time such as at community centers, libraries, grocery stores, bus stops, laundromats, churches, parks, and schools.
  - Host pop-up events and workshops at high-traffic locations.
  - Conduct targeted outreach campaigns and leverage local success stories by sharing "Community Spotlights" on a social media page dedicated to the Mobile Job Center (see below).
  - Foster direct, personal engagement in the community on a regular basis to build relationships.
  - Establish Neighborhood Ambassadors or informal, peer support networks within the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS & STRATEGIES

Mobile Job Center:
A Mobile Job Center, organized and run by the Workforce Influencer(s), could be very effective for "meeting people where they are" and avoiding barriers such as limited transportation access. This mobile job unit would be a branded vehicle that can travel to high-traffic areas and community hubs to offer services such as resume building assistance, interview preparation, and soft skills workshops. The Mobile Job Center could also convene employers to host small pop-up job fairs. If the Workforce Influencer has established relationships with front-line staff at workforce development centers, they could also coordinate to have trained career coaches at the Mobile Job Center and provide one-on-one assistance to the target audience.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Pursue funding to purchase the vehicle for the Mobile Job Center.
- Research and compile materials that will be provided as resources through the Mobile Job Center.
- Encourage Workforce Influencers to attend professional development and training to enhance engagement methods and maintain best practices.

2 SHARE JOB POSTINGS IN MORE INNOVATIVE WAYS

Since job seekers are not fully aware of available jobs in the area, job postings need to be shared through a variety of channels on a consistent basis and in more innovative ways. Survey results also indicate that job seekers primarily lean on social media and friends and family as sources while searching for jobs. Employers, the Chamber, and partner organizations should harness social media such as Instagram and Facebook to share job postings and applications. Jobs need to be marketed in such a way that they are eye-catching and relatable. Additionally, job seekers are not necessarily well-versed in jobs boards such as LinkedIn. There is a need for more education about how to search for jobs on these platforms.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Pursue funding for targeted marketing campaigns through social media and local news channels.
- Once the Workforce Influencer as been hired, task them with posting regularly through social media channels about available jobs and spotlights about local employers.
- Host workshops for job seekers to learn about platforms such as LinkedIn and how best to market and advocate for themselves during the job search.
- Utilize the Job Portal strategy (see Recommendation #4) to assist with sharing job postings.

RECOMMENDATIONS & STRATEGIES

3 LEVERAGE INCENTIVES & SUBSIDIES FOR EMPLOYERS

Employers often need incentives and assistance for bridging the wage gap for their employees. The Chamber and partner organizations need to continue conversations with local government entities to explore potential tax breaks or subsidies for employers who offer higher wages to low-income populations, the long-term unemployed population, and non-traditional employment models.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Conduct a study of the current wages being offered for specific industries and employers across the region and compare to the current cost of living.
- Share this data with local partners in economic and community development (e.g. City of New Iberia, Iberia Economic Development Authority, Iberia Industrial Development Foundation, etc.) to continue to advocate for incentives for employers to increase wages.
- Act as an intermediary between employers and government bodies to help facilitate access to available subsidies or tax relief for local businesses.
- Share success stories on social media and in newsletters of employers who have implemented these changes and experienced a return on their investment.

4 FACILITATE INTERACTION BETWEEN EMPLOYERS & APPLICANTS

Job Portal:

Job seekers could benefit from a job portal. Employers in the area who are members of the Chamber of Commerce can post job openings on the portal, and through partner organizations such as Acadiana Workforce Solutions or Iberia Parish Career Center, members of the PAEG population will be encouraged to post their resumes or apply for jobs listed on the portal. However, this job portal would differ from job boards such as Indeed or LinkedIn – employers must provide feedback if they do not feel that an applicant is the right fit for the job posting. The portal will prompt the employer with a drop-down menu of feedback options to select to create an efficient process for the employer. The Workforce Influencer and/or front-line staff at other partner organizations can review feedback from the employers with the applicants and recommend strategies and resources for their next application or interview.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Gather input from employers, job seekers, and community members to understand their accessibility needs and design preferences.
- Define how the portal will be sustained long-term such as with subscription fees for employers or premium features for job seekers.
- Research funding sources such as grants, investors, or corporate sponsorships.
- Hire web development consultants and select a platform. Conduct beta testing to ensure the platform is user-friendly for the intended audience.

RECOMMENDATIONS & STRATEGIES

5 ENHANCE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

PAEG Task Force:

Form a PAEG Task Force with representatives who are front-line staff from each partner organization. Front-line staff members need to have regular access to staff from other local partner organizations to effectively coordinate efforts to reach the PAEG population. These task force meetings are also a regular opportunity to share resources and make others aware of specific services provided by the partner organizations.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Compile a list of front-line staff members across relevant organizations and schedule a regular bi-weekly meeting at a central location or through a virtual channel.
- Include representatives from the PAEG target population, if possible. The Workforce Influencer could help facilitate their involvement.
- **Key Objectives of the PAEG Task Force:**
  - Assist in securing funding for the Workforce Influencer position.
  - Share resources in order to better serve the unemployed and/or underemployed population.
  - Communicate about gaps in services being offered and feedback results from the Job Portal.
  - Keep an activation mindset; although it can be useful at times to share and vent about common struggles, keeping action items at the forefront of the conversation is important for maintaining momentum towards goals.

Representative Leadership Board:

Although leadership from many partner organizations may already be communicating and coordinating strategic efforts, there may still be some missing representatives from organizations who could help address the major barriers identified in this study, such as childcare access.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Compile a list of leadership across relevant organizations and schedule a regular bi-weekly meeting at a central location or through a virtual channel.
- If leadership are already meeting regularly, assess whether there is anyone missing from the conversation such as local childcare providers (e.g. Prime Time/Head Start), school administrative staff, United Way of Iberia, Economic Development staff from the City of New Iberia, religious leaders from additional local churches, etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS & STRATEGIES

6 PROVIDE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR EMPLOYERS

The Chamber of Commerce and its partner organizations should place an emphasis on communicating with local employers and/or Chamber members about the results of this study and any ongoing work related to the PAEG population. The Chamber could include an article in a newsletter or weekly mailer which would contain data and feedback from job seekers about the barriers they face. Additionally, staff could provide workshops or webinars geared toward educating employers about the perks of non-traditional positions with more flexibility such as remote and hybrid workers or gig, temporary, and 1099 workers. Employers should leave the workshop with an actionable guide outlining how to transition a company to a remote or hybrid model, and how to set up 1099 paperwork.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Share feedback from job-seekers in a Chamber newsletter or to the member email list. Communicate the feedback and barriers of job-seekers by explaining how bridging these gaps could benefit employers in the long-term.
- Define clear goals for the workshops or seminars such as: “Help employers understand key barriers to employment and provide them with actionable strategies for hiring and retaining a diverse workforce.”
- Identify and recruit expert speakers or panelists with expertise in HR, diversity equity and inclusion (DEI), employment law, remote work, flexible employment models, etc.
- Design the curriculum with support materials and toolkits.
- Provide ongoing resources and check-ins to support employers and their needs. Advocate for policy changes and tax incentives at state or local levels to support non-traditional workers and provide more flexibility for potential employees.
- Share success stories on social media and in newsletters of employers who have implemented these changes and experienced a return on their investment.

7 ENCOURAGE COLLABORATION BETWEEN EMPLOYERS & LOCAL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The Chamber of Commerce can facilitate stronger relationships between local employers and educational institutions such as community colleges, workforce development centers, and vocational schools with the ultimate goal of developing additional on-the-job training programs. The Chamber should continue to act as a liaison to co-develop customized training programs with educational institutions and employers. Emphasize direct contact with front-line staff or instructors at educational institutions. Collaboration among employers is also important and can be accomplished by encouraging employer collaboration through a Consortium of Employers from the same industry who can pool resources and share costs while providing training opportunities to a larger number of employees. Similar to Recommendation 6, it is also important to communicate to employers the need for more flexible, low-cost, or on-the-job training options while demonstrating how such programs can directly benefit companies through reduced turnover, enhanced skills in the workforce, and increased employee loyalty.

RECOMMENDATIONS & STRATEGIES

ACTION ITEMS:

- Continue to coordinate with local community colleges and businesses to allow students to earn academic credit while participating in work-based learning, internship, or apprenticeship programs. Employers will benefit by recruiting future talent while students gain relevant skills.
- Organize networking events where local employers can meet directly with training providers and representatives from educational institutions to facilitate partnerships.
- Identify groups of employers from the same or similar industries who could form a Consortium and streamline their efforts to provide additional training opportunities.
- Research and distribute information about tax credits, grants, or wage subsidies that are available to employers who provide on-the-job training or apprenticeships.
- Contact staff at government agencies to discuss the possibility of using public funds such as Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) to subsidize additional training programs. CDBG funds are typically used for infrastructure projects but are often underutilized in a programmatic capacity.

8 SERVE AS A CATALYST FOR PROVIDING TRANSPORTATION & CHILDCARE ASSISTANCE

Many front-line staff at partner organizations are at full capacity and need assistance advocating for change. The Chambers can serve as liaisons to coordinate efforts for reducing physical barriers, facilitate public-private partnerships or corporate sponsorships, and get the right people in the room to discuss solutions.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Create a resource directory for potential workers, providing information on transportation, childcare, and other community services. Organize emergency funds with partner organizations for individuals who are at risk of losing their jobs due to transportation or childcare barriers.
- Work with the Lafayette Transit System (LTS) to discuss gaps in the public transportation system and possibilities to expand into New Iberia. Ensure that transit routes align with the hours that workers need.
- Coordinate with employers and discuss the possibility of discounted or subsidized transit passes for employees. Include LTS staff in the Representative Leadership Board.
- Contact staff at government agencies to discuss the possibility of using public funds such as Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) to subsidize additional childcare facilities or bus routes. Other sources of funding or partnerships could include: Louisiana Childcare Assistance Program, Louisiana Department of Transportation & Development (LADOTD), Early Childhood Education Grants, United Way of Acadiana, Louisiana Association of Community Action Partnerships (LACAP), the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) through the Department of Health and Human Services, New Markets Tax Credits (NMTC), Regional Revolving Loan Funds, University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL), etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS & STRATEGIES

9 ADVOCATE FOR ADDITIONAL ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION

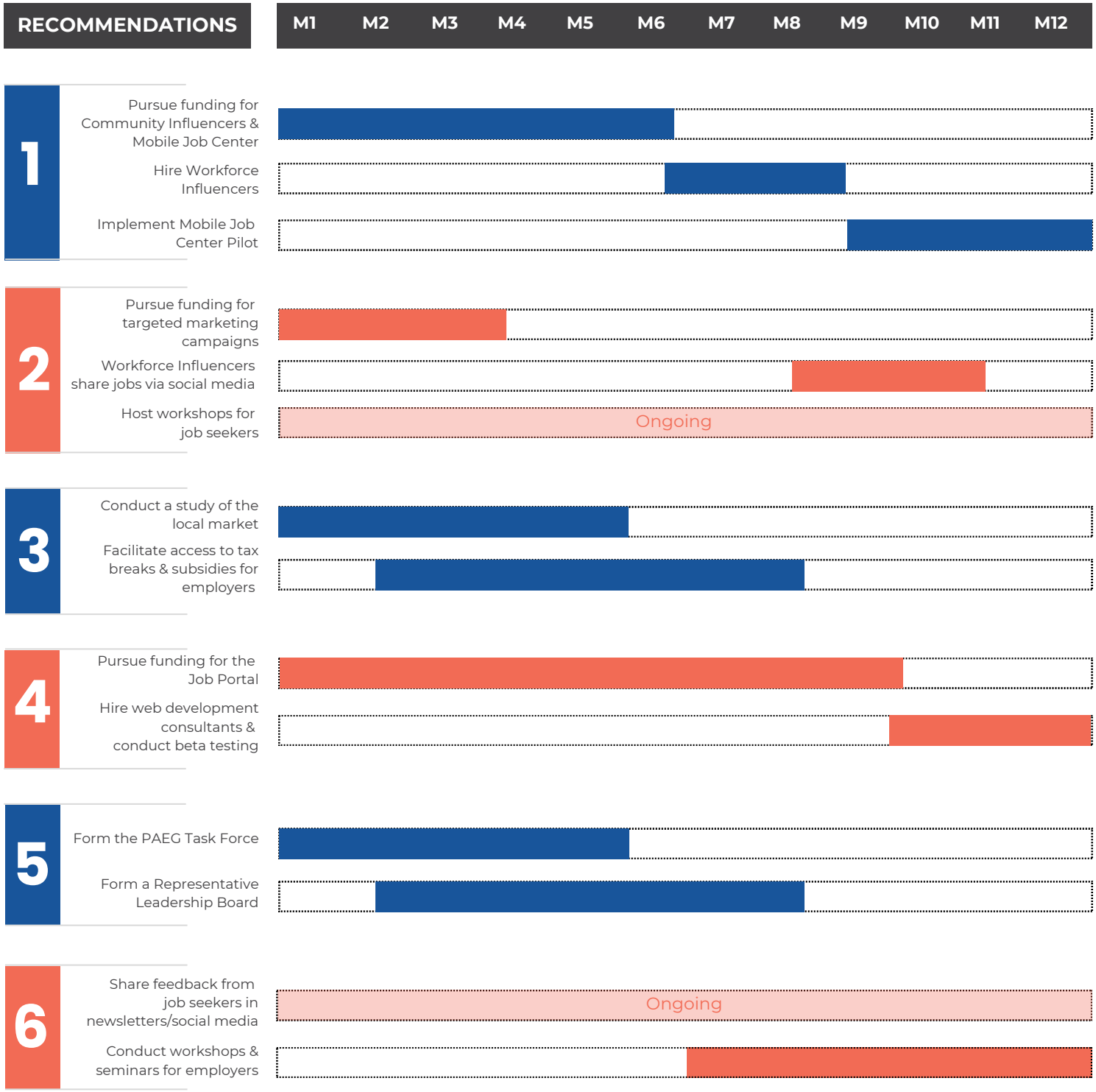
Members of the target population are often hesitant to apply to jobs due to a lack of education and low literacy levels. Individuals with limited reading, writing, or comprehension skills may worry that they will fail in a professional setting or struggle to understand job descriptions and applications. Advocating for additional resources and more accessible adult education courses will fill a significant gap in the system and allow an underserved population to break into the workforce.

ACTION ITEMS:

- Continue partnerships with local educational institutions, community colleges, churches, and nonprofit organizations that offer adult literacy courses and assist in advertising when and where these courses are available.
- Compile a comprehensive list or database of all currently available adult literacy classes and tutors in the area. Include all schedule and location details. Share this list on the Chamber website and distribute to partner organizations.
- Facilitate Peer Learning Circles where individuals can learn together in a collaborative environment, sharing resources, knowledge, and support. Implement a mentorship program to boost confidence and motivation.

RECOMMENDED TIMELINES

The following Gantt chart outlines potential timelines for each recommendation; the numbers correspond directly to the recommendation numbers above. The timelines do not need to occur concurrently.



RECOMMENDATIONS	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12
7 Organize networking events for employers & educational institutions	■	■	■	■	■	■						
7 Form a Consortium of Employers based on industry					■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
8 Meet with local governments to explore CDBG funding options	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■				
8 Create a resource directory					■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
9 Compile a comprehensive database of adult literacy instruction & resources	■	■	■	■	■	■						
9 Continue to advocate for more resources with local partners	Ongoing											
9 Implement mentorship and Peer Learning Circle programs.					■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■