

North Country Regional Economic
Development Council

Opportunity Agenda
Work Group

Plan
&
STRATEGIES

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Summary

The Opportunity Agenda Work Group agrees with the NCREDC Vision:

The North Country will lead the economic renaissance of New York State's small cities and rural communities.

As per this vision we are presenting strategies that will:

Create family-sustaining jobs and build an innovative economy.

This allows the North Country to invest new and existing CFA resources in projects that provide the region's impoverished residents with the tools they need to overcome economic barriers and fully participate in the state's economic revitalization.

Statement of Opportunity

The North Country REDC represents a large, geographically diverse and economically disadvantaged seven county area. The NCREDC contains the micropolitan area of Watertown-Fort Drum and along with smaller population centers in Plattsburgh, Potsdam, Ogdensburg, Massena, and Malone. The North Country is primarily an area made up of many and varied small communities that have endured a dramatic population loss due to a lack of meaningful and gainful employment for many young people. This exodus has many long lasting effects and can best be addressed by incorporating strategies to enhance economic opportunities and quality of life for all North Country residents. In addition, six of the seven counties comprising the North Country Regional Economic Development Zone are identified as having the highest unemployment rates in New York; this data reflects the need to address all barriers to create innovative opportunities to economically distressed areas.

The strategies included in this report will help move impoverished people into jobs; promote private-public partnerships in job investments; overcome a particular challenge to economic participation; and/or help revitalize distressed communities throughout the region, while also recognizing the importance of cyclical, generational and cultural factors related to poverty.

In addition to poverty being a region wide concern in the North Country, there are a number of challenges in the North Country that have common barriers preventing poor people from better integrating into the economic life and resurgence of the North Country. These barriers include:

Barrier #1: High School Dropout rates/value placed on education/college completion.

Barrier #2: Insufficient job skills, education and/or training that enable the local labor force to meet an employer's needs, or to transition to new employment opportunities.

Barrier #3: Large travel distances to job training and employment opportunities/Transportation.

Barrier #4: Limited availability of, and/or inadequate quality affordable early care and learning childcare services.

Barrier #5: Housing, Weatherization and Energy Services.

Barrier #6: The digital divide and access to high speed broadband.

To address these common barriers, the North Country Regional Economic Development Council has identified several strategies and implementation proposals to help guide further state and local actions to move impoverished individuals and families into jobs and enhanced economic opportunities. In addition, the Council will work with federal programs and through partnerships with private sector companies and organizations to help implement the region's Opportunity Agenda.

Strategies and Implementation

The Opportunity Agenda work group for the North Country Council has identified a number of strategies and implementation measures to address the barriers identified. The work group and Council have developed these strategies with input from public and private organizations that are engaged with addressing poverty in the region and provided ample opportunity for the public and private sector employers to comment on the proposals.

The Council is placing a priority on those implementation projects and efforts that help to address the barriers on a region wide basis. In some instances, however, there are strategies and projects that address particular community based problems or may serve as a pilot for what could eventually become a region wide solution.

It should also be noted that the Opportunity Agenda includes strategies and implementation that will draw on strategies and projects identified in other focus areas of the North Country Strategic Plan. For example, there are a number of strategies that relate to housing, weatherization and energy efficiency that coincide with the North Country Energy Strategies and the recently released North Country Cleaner Greener Sustainability Plan. Similarly, there are strategies related to the Digital Divide and Broadband that relate to the Council's strategies for region wide technology and broadband improvements.

Barrier #1: High School Dropout rates/value placed on education/college completion;

Approximately 25% of North Country residents do not have a high school diploma. As the challenges of the 21st century marketplace continue to increase, this number must drop significantly in order for all sectors of the North Country Business and industry to flourish. All community members must reinvent in the idea that an education is a thing of value.

Strategies:

#1: Create aspirational learning opportunities to promote career and college readiness.

- Build model STEM Schools throughout the NCREDC.
- Improve high school graduation rates and increase number of graduates attaining A.A.S. Technical degrees
- Improve college completion rates and attainment of degrees
 - Promote community organizing initiatives such as Vision 2 Action, workforce 20/20, Entrepreneurial Day, Gateways and Emerge NY to promote retention of young professionals to build careers in the North Country
 - Create student loan forgiveness incentives for local young professionals working in STEM careers in the NCREDC.
 - Promote initiatives that target the attraction of new companies using traditional economic development tool of tax incentives, complemented by the use of SUNY program expertise.
 - Promote additional academic and professional development opportunities for students high demand occupations
 - Partnership with SUNY/Clarkson with the Master of Science Teaching 4 year program.
 - Create a collaboration of SUNY faculty and Tax Free New York Industry partners to offer students paid Internship experiences integrated into a variety of degree programs
 - Develop and support Innovation Hot Spot projects for emerging industries such as the 3 component Hot Spot model developed by Clarkson (Idea Capture – Development/Company Incubation – Relocation to Community of Origin).
 - Formalize articulation agreements between institutions of higher education and Apprenticeship programs to offer a dual certification in a skilled trade with an A.A.S degree

#2: Create community partnerships to promote cradle through career learning.

- Foster Pathways in Technology Early College High School Partnership – a public private partnership. This grant partners with public schools Clinton Community

College, Clarkson College, and area businesses to give high school students knowledge about potential future careers.

- Create a community roadmap to identify community partners and sustainable resources in order to develop a vision, actions, and investments needed for sustainable development and growth.

- Develop learning centers as resources for cradle through career learning.
 - WIBs will support high growth, high demand jobs through the allocation of WIA funding. Priority of service given to eligible veteran's and community members identified as low income and/or receiving public assistance.
 - Develop new entry level training opportunities by blending and braiding funding sources to support tuition for unemployed and underemployed workers including Disability Employment Initiative strategies, demonstration projects, and funding opportunities.
 - Develop private/public partnerships for paid internships to promote employment opportunities.

#3: Create an Advanced Manufacturing Training Institute.

- Develop and grow a continuum of learning opportunities to attract, retain, and grow talent for the expansion of current industry and the attraction of innovative new industries to the North Country.
 - Create flexible training models that include distance learning, satellite campuses, and summer residency for incumbent workers to advance careers.
 - Increase funding to provide meaningful training for dislocated workers in order to improve financial stability.
 - Create partnership programs that include on-the-job training opportunities and case management that address issues of unemployment by helping low-income individuals with job skills development, training, and/or employment opportunities.

Provide Career awareness opportunities for middle and high school students supported by area manufactures: Gateways, Workforce 2020, AIME (Assembly Industry Manufacturing Education), IMPACTT(Innovative Manufacturing Partnerships: Advancing Careers through Technical Training), STRIVE/THRIVE Network, Vision2Action, and National Manufacturing Day Events.

#4: Utilize the Governor's START-UP NY program to establish internships and work experience programs in the region by supporting North Country colleges and universities' efforts to require employers who take advantage of StartUp New York's incentives to provide such internships and work experience for residents in distressed communities.

Barrier #2: Insufficient job skills, education and/or training that enable the local labor force to meet an employer’s needs, or to transition to new employment opportunities;

Six of the seven counties comprising the NCREDC area are identified as having the highest unemployment rates in New York. The North Country is primarily an area made up of many and varied small communities that have endured a dramatic population loss due to a lack of meaningful employment for many young people.

Strategies:

#1: Create community partnerships to promote cradle through career learning.

- Create a community roadmap to identify community partners and sustainable resources in order to develop a vision, actions, and investments needed for sustainable development and growth.
- Develop learning centers as resources for cradle through career learning.

#2: Create an Advanced Manufacturing Training Institute.

- Develop and grow a continuum of learning opportunities to attract, retain, and grow talent for the expansion of current industry and the attraction of innovative new industries to the North Country.
- Target individuals earning less than 125% of poverty for advanced training programs in Manufacturing.
- Provide Career awareness opportunities for middle and high school students supported by area manufactures: Gateways, Workforce 2020, AIME (Assembly Industry Manufacturing Education), IMPACTT(Innovative Manufacturing Partnerships: Advancing Careers through Technical Training), STIVE/THRIVE Network, Vision2Action, and National Manufacturing Day Events.

Barrier #3: Large travel distances to job training and employment opportunities/Transportation

The region is sparsely populated with very few population centers and limited public transportation. Individualized transportation is necessary for integrating distressed populations into regional growth. In the seven county area 77.1 % of workers drive alone to work, 10% carpool. Only 5% currently use public transportation. Driving to work or job training, weather alone or in a carpool, is the most utilized form of transportation, supporting the fact that in order to become economically secure in the North Country, having a vehicle is crucial.

Strategies:

- #1: *Create opportunities for low-income individuals to become economically secure through funding and collaboration to remove transportation as a barrier to employment.*
- Expand access to affordable individualized transportation through affordable car ownership and/or repair.
- #2: *Capitalize on and develop further programs similar to “Wheels for Work”*
- #3: *Incentives for maintaining the vehicle/budgets & employment.*
- Create funding innovation in low or no-interest loan programs which teach the fundamentals of car ownership/maintenance with an emphasis on maintaining personal budgets.

Barrier #4: Limited availability of, and/or inadequate quality affordable early care and learning childcare services.

NYS average annual Day Care center enrollment cost for infants is 14K and for 4 year olds is 11.6K. NYS average annual Family Child Care home cost for infants is 10.4K and for 4 year olds is 9.6k. At the median income rates it would mean 16% of income for married couples and 54% of income for single mothers if they had an infant in a center based option. These costs are prohibitive to those working in a minimum wage position.

Strategies:

- #1: *Create partnerships with banks and lending institutions to create incentives for Child Care Small Business Start Up.*
- Develop forums for financial institutions to learn more about Child Care investing.
 - Partner with SBA to focus forums on childcare mentorship programs and business skills for providers
 - Develop low interest loan and incentives for existing or emerging businesses
- #2: *Create incentive for women and minority owned businesses focused on early care and learning centers.*
- Develop connections to available women owned business grants to explore matching funding for start up costs
 - Partner with SBA to focus forums on available grants and loans, childcare mentorship programs and business skills

- Utilize resources assistance programs specializing in Micro-enterprise with the role of developing small business and entrepreneurial assistance.
- Explore availability of training and technical assistance to comply with regulations
- Develop wage and education incentives to promote success of business

#3: *Engage community in solutions regarding writing and/or revising Day Care Regulations.*

- Establish a standing committee of individuals involved in Early Care and Learning programs.

Barrier #5: Housing, Weatherization and Energy Services

Lower income families are more vulnerable to energy costs than higher-income families because energy represents a larger portion of their household budgets. In 2012 it is projected that families with gross annual incomes below 50K will spend 21% of their average after –tax income of 22.4K on energy

Lack of sustainable employment impedes necessary preservation and rehabilitation of homes. The median household income in the North Country is the lowest of all NYS regions, and the poverty rate is the highest in the state. The median value of “owner occupied units” increased by 80.2% since the 1990 census - the lowest in the state and the percentage of “cost-burdened owners” increased by 182.7% - the highest increase in the state.

Strategies:

#1: *To assist low-income populations that are adversely affected by the escalating costs of home heating services.*

- Provide weatherization services that reduce energy costs for low-income working families;
- Provide home rehabilitation services that address structural issues as well as impacting the energy efficiency of the structure.

#2: Develop a housing coalition of all the entities that address housing issues in the North Country Region.

#3: Increase funding for current housing programs such as HOME and CDBG that provide for new construction and rehabilitation for owner-occupied and rental units.

- #4: Develop new funding to bring substandard homes up to the HUD quality guidelines or increase current funding levels.
- #5: *Increase funding for seniors for emergency and safety repairs in their homes, thereby allowing them to stay in their homes and not be institutionalized.*
- #6: *Expand funding for those who are developmentally challenged.*
- #7: *Expand the work scope and funding for Weatherization Assistance Program.*
- #8: *Increase Section 8 subsidies or create a new subsidized housing program.*
- #9: *Implement consumer education through a variety of mediums, including classroom setting, one on one and roundtables to relay important information about energy conservation tips, resources, financial literacy, services and budgeting.*

Barrier #6: The Digital Divide and access to high speed broadband technology.

Rural geography and economic disparity are prohibitive to access of high speed, broadband technology. Affordability of home computers, age, and cost of internet service are considered as factors contributing to the digital divide

Strategies:

- #1: *Increase accessibility to broadband technology for all residents of the North Country by increasing fiber optic cable network.*
Create public/private partnerships through SUNY and Tax free New York industries to provide tax incentives to new companies that will expand and maintain network.
- #2: *Increase educational opportunities for all community members to improve digital literacy skills.*
 - Provide Public Awareness/Educational campaigns to promote digital literacy.
- #2: *Decrease the digital divide.*
 - Increase awareness of, and opportunity to employment in e-work and education including: tele-commuting and distance learning courses.
 - Provide resources to promote small business entrepreneurship as a vehicle for sustainable economic development in the area of internet work centers equipped with computers and basic training.
 - Foster and support Senior Centers as Community Resource Centers for educating seniors on digital literacy.

Strategies and Implementation

Barrier	Strategies	Outcomes	Measure
#1. High School Dropout Rate	#1. Aspirational learning Opportunities	Create and sustain NC P-TECH utilizing NYSED and IBM funding. Build STEM schools using P-TECH model and expand to additional counties within region.	Increase in the number of NC residents who receive their High School Diploma and/or GED.
	#2. Community Partner – cradle - career	Resources and Learning centers developed focused to create employment opportunities.	Employment Statistics.
	#3. Advanced Manufacturing Training Institute	Identify partnerships and resources to develop vision, actions, and investments for sustainable development and growth.	Increase number in public-private partnerships. Employment statistics.
	#4. Start-Up New York	Replicated model programs throughout the NC region.	Increase in programs such as Gateways, AIME, IMPACTT, etc.
#2. Insufficient Job Skills, ed. &/or training to meet employer's needs	#1. Community Partnerships.	Career awareness provided for middle and high school students	Decrease in the unemployment rate. Increase in meaningful employment opportunities.
	#2. Advanced Manufacturing Institute	Development of Manufacturing partnerships.	Employment statistics.
#3. Transportation	#1. Opportunities for low-income to become economically secure through funding/collaboration in car ownership &/or repair	Low-income families increased ability to gain or maintain employment through reliable transportation.	Increased local partnerships Increase participation in job training opportunities. Employment statistics.
	#2. Develop programs like “Wheels to Work”	Development of new community Program. Community Creates job opportunities for those with no transportation	Public – private partnership development. Employment Statistics.

<u><i>Barrier</i></u>	<u><i>Strategies</i></u>	<u><i>Outcomes</i></u>	<u><i>Measure</i></u>
	#3. Incentive for maintenance of vehicles/budgets & employment.	Boosts Educational opportunities. Helps Move low-income individuals into jobs	Employment Statistics. Job retention.
#4. Inadequate quality affordable early care and learning child care.	#1. Incentives for affordable Child Care small business start up.	Create 140 new small businesses/self employment opportunities. Increase employment opportunities for low-income families. Transportation barrier for child care eliminated.	Small Businesses/self employment opportunities Created. New Jobs Created. Employment statistics.
	#2. Incentives for Women and Minority owned business focused on affordable early care and learning centers	Create 120 new small businesses. Increase employment opportunities for low-income families. Transportation barrier for child care eliminated.	Minority owned Small Businesses Created. New Jobs Created. Employment statistics.
	#3. Managing regulations	Increase of childcare opportunities in local communities. Maintenance of safety regulations yet eliminating factors that prevent new businesses starting up	Additional small business/self employment opportunities. Increase in the number of currently operating early care and learning child care businesses.
#5. Housing Weatherization, and Energy Services	#1. Escalating costs of home heating services	Decreased need for Emergency HEAP Distribution. Increase Quality of Life for low income families. Green Jobs Connection - BPI	Decrease in use of Emergency HEAP grants.
	#2. Develop a North Country Housing Coalition	Preserve existing federally assisted homes and housing resources, Expand the supply of low income housing, Establish housing stability.	5 year maintenance plan developed. List of Identified needs. Increase in area populations.
	#3. Increase funding for current housing programs (HOME, CDBG, & etc.)	Homeownership. Dev. strategies to meet local priorities for affordable housing.	Increase in home sales. Increased grant funding in region.

<i>Barrier</i>	<i>Strategies</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>	<i>Measure</i>
	#4. Funding to bring substandard housing up to quality standards	Develop viable NC communities. Provide suitable living. Create Public-Private Partnerships.	Employment statistics. Increased number of Partnerships.
	#5. Expand the work scope and funding for Weatherization Assistance Programs	Create Jobs and Job Training. Reduction of Energy bills for low income families. Green Jobs Connection with Building Performance Institute, Inc (BPI)	Employment Statistics.
#6. Digital Access and Digital Divide	#1. Increase accessibility to broadband technology	Increase installation of fiber optic cable network.	Increase number of households receiving service.
	#2. Increase educational opportunities for community to improve digital literacy skills	Increase employment in tele-work.	Employment statistics.
	#3. Decrease the digital Divide.	Increase of adult learners accessing digital literacy as a means to earn a high school equivalency diploma and entrance into advanced occupational skills training.	Increased number of individuals receiving GED. Employment statistics.