

2023 STRATEGIC PLAN
FINAL REPORT



FIRELANDS
FORWARD

WORKFORCE
DEVELOPMENT



MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD

Dear Readers, when Firelands Forward was formed two years ago, our goal was to involve businesses in a regional effort to build a sustainable workforce, increase our ability to collaborate across industries and throughout the Firelands Region, and ultimately make our community better. We are so proud of what we have accomplished together and are excited to continue to work collaboratively over the next three years to continue to advance our work.

Firelands Forward is deeply appreciative of the support from regional partners, both public and private. Through this support, we have been able to build the first Employer Resource Network in the region, built to increase the retention of over 1,600 local employees. We have worked closely with North Point Education Service Center and the county Business Advisory Councils to build the Career Exploration Pipeline, a systematized approach to exposing our youth to local opportunities and connecting them with employment that provides family-sustaining wages. We have developed the first tourism, hospitality, and main street business Industry Sector Partnership recognized and funded at the state level. These are but examples of the progress the Firelands Region has made in addressing workforce challenges over the last three years. We are confident that with your continued support, we will continue to innovate with regional partners to attract, retain, and connect talent to our employers so that we can continue to be a great place to live and do business.

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NEW GROWTH GROUP'S UPDATE PROCESS

Firelands Forward engaged New Growth Group, the workforce development consulting firm who helped develop the strategic plan used to launch the initiative, to guide the process of updating Firelands Forward's strategic framework. This process included both qualitative and quantitative elements. Qualitative research included conducting interviews with over 50 key stakeholders throughout the region including representatives from members of the business community, economic development, community-based organizations, social service organizations and agencies, government officials, and education and training providers. Additionally, New Growth developed a survey to capture community member input.



The survey and interviews focused on gathering feedback about current strategic priorities Firelands Forward launched with and thinking about what future priorities might be considered. The quantitative methodology included updating the original data collected to inform the plan in 2019 with new projections and the inclusion of all the counties that we serve, Huron, Erie, and Ottawa Counties. To produce the quantitative data, New Growth Group used Lightcast, a labor market data program. Lightcast aggregates data from publicly available sources including the US Census Bureau, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the US Department of Labor, in addition to using its own proprietary methods to gather job opening and skills data.



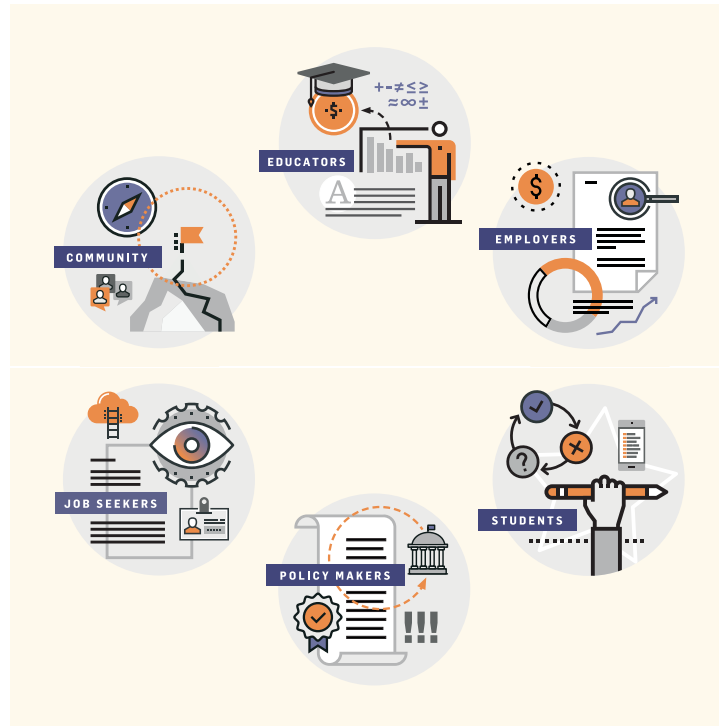
ABOUT FIRELANDS FORWARD

Firelands Forward was launched by the Firelands Partnership, a collaboration of economic development organizations and private industry partners representing numerous communities in the Firelands region. The Firelands' region, which includes Erie, Huron, and Ottawa counties, is located in North Central Ohio, borders Lake Erie, and encompasses much of the shores and islands region of Ohio and areas inland to the south. The Firelands Partnership, which sought to spark regional economic growth and wellbeing in the Firelands region, identified that workforce challenges are a top issue impacting the regional economy and launched Firelands Forward to better understand and address the issue.

The mission, goals, and organizational structure of Firelands Forward are designed to be employer led, keeping the collective voice of employers central in its strategies.

Firelands Forward operationalizes workforce development through an economic growth lens. By helping businesses develop a robust and healthy workforce, the region increases its potential to retain and attract businesses, grow gross regional product, and ultimately increase quality of life for its citizens.

This includes addressing systemic employment barriers, defining regional career pathways and creating equitable access to them, and exposing our population to the robust opportunities that exist within our region. By doing this, Firelands Forward works to reverse current outmigration trends and increase the opportunity for our region to grow our economy. To date, five strategic priorities have guided Firelands Forward.



Firelands Forward is an emerging organization, staffed with a Director and governed by an independent advisory board, by-laws, and separate financial accounts that guarantee its regional focus. The advisory board is comprised of public and private leaders from throughout the Firelands region with responsibility for ensuring the financial and programmatic activities of the organization occur as intended. Erie County Economic Development

Corporation serves as the fiscal and administrative agent for Firelands Forward.

Firelands Forward has created or implemented programming that has yielded substantial results while enhancing and enabling the regional workforce. Much of this has derived from a collaborative working group that consists of regional employers and community partners. The following timeline provides an overview of the work of Firelands Forward to date.

TIMELINE OF RESULTS FROM 2019–2022



2019–2021 INITIAL PRIORITIES

- 1 High School Career Connections Initiative** | An effort to support local school districts to familiarize, prepare, and connect students, especially students that are not college or military-bound, to jobs after graduation.
- 2 Boomerang Workforce Attraction Initiative** | An effort to market, recruit, attract, and incentivize individuals with connections to the community, but no longer live in the region, to return to live and work.
- 3 Un- and Under- Employed Workforce Connections Initiative** | An effort to coordinate supportive services and training for individuals with limited work histories, and possibly challenges associated with poverty, leading to new or improved employment.
- 4 Frontline Worker Retention Initiative** | An effort to coordinate supportive programs such as child-care and transportation for working poor individuals, and improve employer utilizations rates of these services, with a goal to encourage job retention in entry-level jobs and advancement.
- 5 Non-Profit Staffing Agency** | An effort to operate a staffing agency-like program with special focus on connecting people to jobs and coordinating supportive services with a goal of 90-day job retention and transition to permanent employment at a business.

2022 by the numbers



146

EMPLOYEES ASSISTED
THROUGH OUR
FIRST EMPLOYER
RESOURCE NETWORK

\$100,000

awarded industry sector
partnership grant

REINTRODUCED
HURON COUNTY 2-1-1
CALL SERVICE

161

RESIDENT NEEDS
IDENTIFIED

9

employers
utilizing
Regional
Childcare
Study



200+

Community Engagements

6,000+

Students supported
in career exploration

by the region's Business Advisory Councils

Published a White Paper:

"Workforce
Hierarchy
of Needs"



Recognized Locally and
Internationally

2 awards

BUILT BETA MODEL OF
REGIONAL DIGITAL TOOL

WorkInFirelands

421%

ROI for businesses in
Fireland Forward's
Employer Resource
Network

12+

SCHOOLS ENGAGED
THROUGH STUDENT
INTERACTION

60

Teacher
Business
Bootcamp
participants

3-county

Ongoing Housing Study



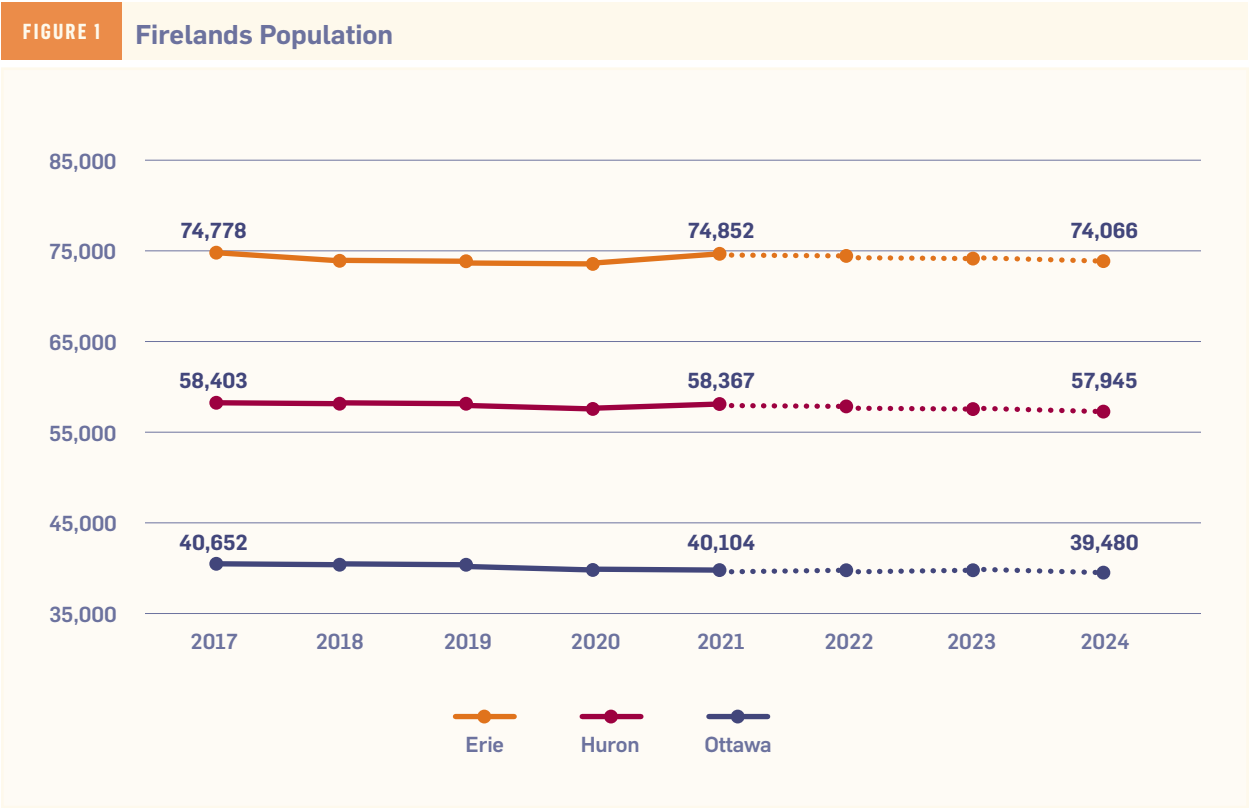
CURRENT LABOR FORCE In the initial strategic plan, historical data showed a decline in population with the decline anticipated to continue—indicating a shrinking supply of labor. An aging population and long commute times were identified as contributing factors. Taking a look at current data, this trend has slowed. While the population is expected to continue to decline, the rate of decline has slowed revealing a generally steady population size.

-1%

Population decline projected through 2024

+1%

Population growth from 2020 to 2021



Note: Dotted line represents projections
Source: EMSI-Lightcast

The Firelands Forward team also examined the migration patterns of residents. The table below describes Erie, Huron, and Ottawa's top 20 sources of in- and out-migration. Most people move into or out of counties near the Firelands region. Table 1 details the top 10 in and out-migration centers for each county in the Firelands region with key regional and nearby counties bolded.

TABLE 1 In- and Out-Migration of Erie, Huron, and Ottawa County Residents

Movers Into Erie County		Movers Into Huron County		Movers Into Ottawa County	
Former Residence	People Moving In	Former Residence	People Moving In	Former Residence	People Moving In
Lorain County, OH	607	Erie County, OH	584	Lucas County, OH	281
Huron County, OH	519	Lorain County, OH	277	Wood County, OH	225
Cuyahoga County, OH	253	Sandusky County, OH	261	Sandusky County, OH	211
Sandusky County, OH	206	Richland County, OH	231	Cuyahoga County, OH	145
Ottawa County, OH	141	Seneca County, OH	82	Erie County, OH	144
Franklin County, OH	91	Ashland County, OH	67	Lorain County, OH	55
Lucas County, OH	68	Cuyahoga County, OH	64	Franklin County, OH	52
Medina County, OH	47	Crawford County, OH	51	Seneca County, OH	44
Seneca County, OH	41	Franklin County, OH	45	Plaquemines Parish, LA	25
Summit County, OH	37	Ottawa County, OH	39	Allen County, OH	22

Movers Out of Erie County		Movers Out of Huron County		Movers Out of Ottawa County	
Former Residence	People Moving Out	Former Residence	People Moving Out	Former Residence	People Moving Out
Huron County, OH	584	Erie County, OH	519	Lucas County, OH	276
Lorain County, OH	571	Lorain County, OH	278	Sandusky County, OH	246
Sandusky County, OH	203	Richland County, OH	272	Wood County, OH	215
Cuyahoga County, OH	169	Sandusky County, OH	255	Erie County, OH	141
Ottawa County, OH	144	Seneca County, OH	134	Lorain County, OH	67
Franklin County, OH	86	Ashland County, OH	106	Cuyahoga County, OH	49
Lucas County, OH	54	Cuyahoga County, OH	70	Huron County, OH	39
Wayne County, MI	36	Crawford County, OH	67	Richland County SC	35
Wood County, OH	34	Franklin County, OH	51	Franklin County, OH	33
Lee County, FL	33	Manatee County, FL	30	Lee County, FL	32

Source: EMSI-Lightcast

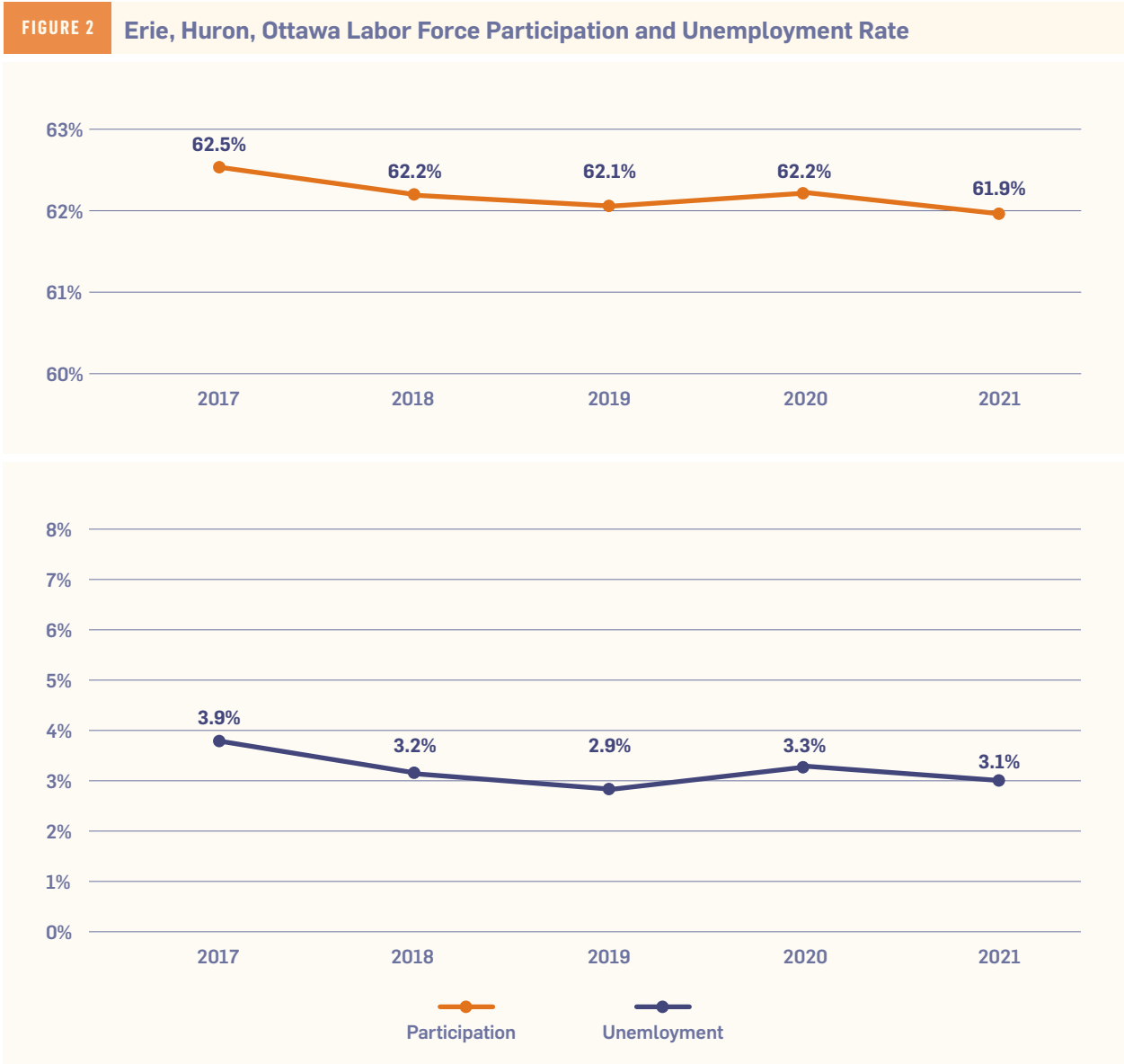
Population is only one part of the equation of the available labor for job growth. The Labor Force Participation Rate and Unemployment Rate provide a clearer picture of the entire pool of talent available to local employers. Labor force participation has decreased slightly over time, as shown in the figure below, all the while remaining around 61%. Next to this figure is the unemployment rate- which has remained near 3 to 4%. Overall, the Firelands Region had over 5,300 job openings in key sectors which is an increase from 2018 when first measured. Combined with Figure 3, because jobs are also growing, the steady labor force participation and unemployment rates demonstrate continued economic growth of the region.

61%

Average labor force participation rate

3-4%

Average unemployment rate



Source: EMSI-Lightcast

The table below further breaks down labor force participation by demographics such as age, race, and ethnicity, among others. In addition to age (youth 16-19 and elderly), low educational attainment and high poverty seem to be major factors in low labor force participation rates.

TABLE 2 Labor Force Participation Rates, by Demographics

	Erie County		Huron County		Ottawa County		Ohio	
Total								
Population 16 years and over	62%	38,359	62%	28,492	58%	33,979	63%	5,981,522
Poverty Status								
Below poverty level	48%	4,715	43%	3,771	60%	1,571	47%	840,097
At or above the poverty level	85%	36,993	82%	29,086	81%	20,136	84%	5,852,073
Educational Attainment								
Less than high school graduate	68%	2,659	59%	2,840	61%	1,190	54%	476,837
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	73%	12,849	73%	12,960	76%	6,988	72%	1,848,646
Some college or associate's degree	83%	12,418	80%	9,271	83%	7,792	81%	1,828,144
Bachelor's degree or higher	88%	10,120	89%	4,678	83%	4,734	88%	1,919,024

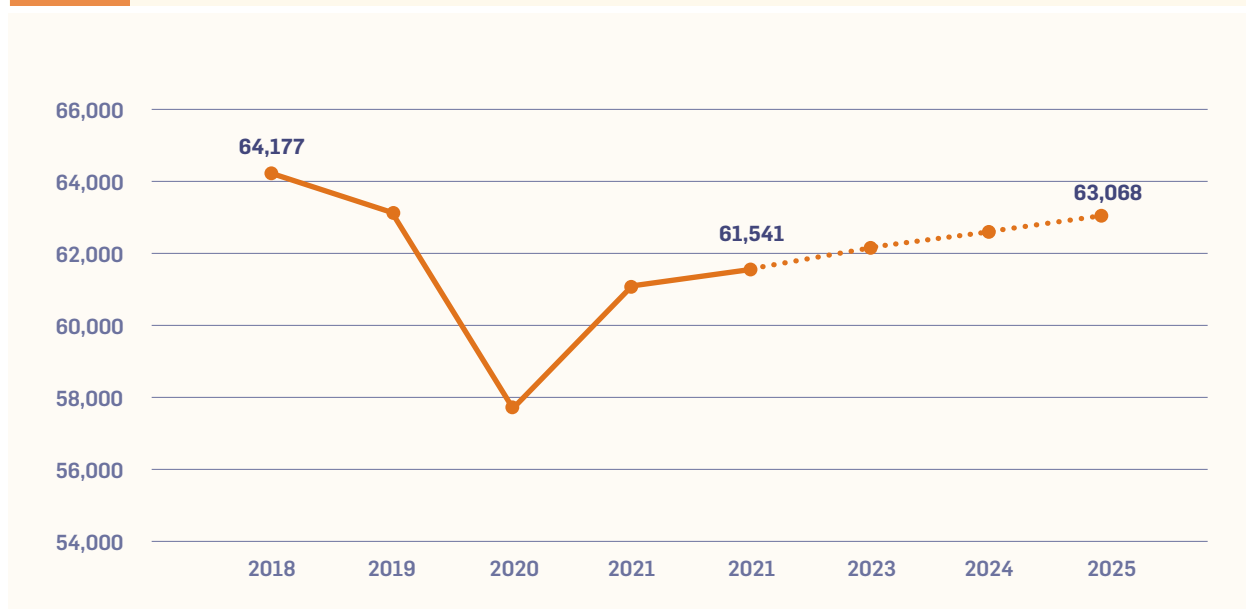
Source: US Census Bureau American Community Survey 2021 5-Year Estimates S2301

Note: Educational Attainment LFP is only for population age 25-64

Note: Poverty for age 20 to 64

Even with a steady population, businesses are still straining to fill their hiring needs. Figure 3 shows that despite the dip in jobs caused by COVID-19, the region continues to show strong job growth. Current projections show that the region is projected to regain the jobs lost from the pandemic in the next 3 years.

FIGURE 3 Erie, Huron, Ottawa County Job Growth

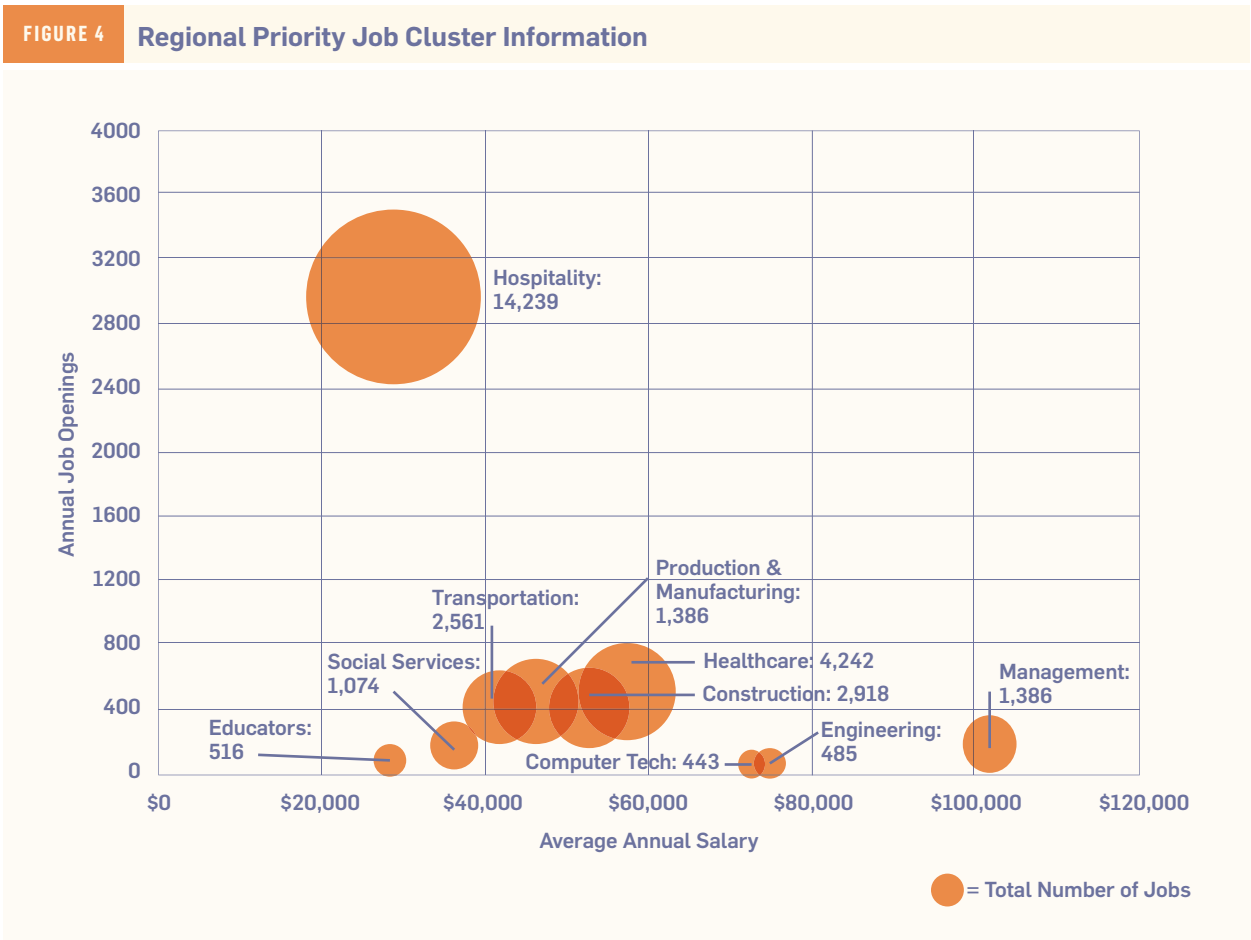


Source: EMSI-Lightcast

Note: Dotted line represents projections

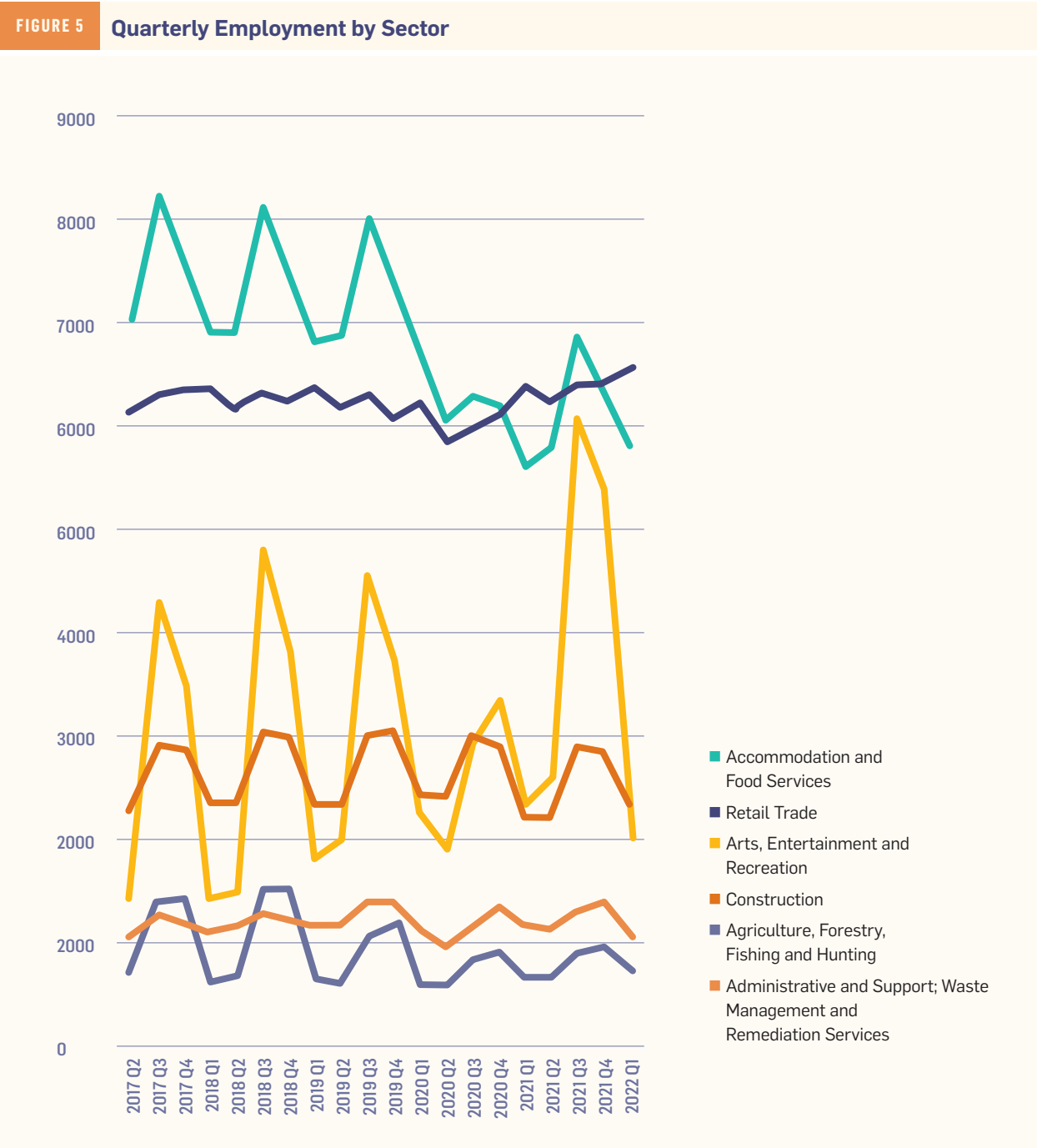
In 2019, data showed that there were approximately 4,000 open jobs in key regional sectors comprising a mix of pay scales, skill levels and skill sets, and locations. The total number (including part-time, full-time and seasonal employment) of annual job openings is 5,301, an increase from 2018. Notably, the number of job openings increased across all key occupational sectors except Construction. In an update to this information, we find that Hospitality, Manufacturing and Healthcare continue to be leading industries. Hospitality is by far the largest sector in the region with over 14,000 total employees (including part-time and seasonal) and almost 3,000 annual job openings in 2022. This job opening number is reflective of the challenges the Hospitality sector has faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic—many workers left the sector during the pandemic and have not returned. Additionally, as the sector continues to recover and grow talent attraction remains a top priority. When considering only full-time employment, manufacturing is the region's strongest sector.

Figure 4 shows the variety and scope of industries in the region.



Source: EMSI-Lightcast


Another important factor to consider is the seasonality of many industries in the region. Key among them are accommodation/food service; arts, entertainment, and recreation; and management—all of which are key to the tourism industry in the region. Additionally, the research found seasonality among the construction and wholesale trade sectors, both of which are essential for continued growth in the region. Figure 5 shows the quarterly employment trends of these sectors.





Source: EMSI/Lightcast

SETTING GOALS FOR THE FUTURE

Firelands Forward seeks to maintain the momentum it has created throughout the region and build on the organizational development that has been shepherded by regional leadership. Firelands Forward as an organization has matured and is in a very different place than it was at the outset. Recognizing this, it is no surprise that this update looks different than the initial strategic plan. In the process of gathering community input for the update, key stakeholders recognized that many of the challenges facing the region are interconnected, and it is hard to address one without addressing others. To be able to do this, this plan uses the Attract, Retain, Connect framework to organize strategies. This approach organizes the work of Firelands Forward around improving community-level outcomes rather than focusing results on more narrow programs and initiatives. Firelands Forward will measure its impact by the strength of the region's economy by focusing on building a skilled and supported labor force. With this in mind, Firelands Forward will use the following outcomes to measure regional impact.

 **Labor Force Participation Rate.** The Labor Force Participation Rate is defined by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics as the percentage of the civilian population who are 16 years and older that is working or actively looking for work. It is an important labor market measure because it represents the relative amount of labor resources available for local employers. Many factors contribute to the Labor Force Participation Rate including the age distribution of the population; access to employment- which includes readily available transportation, accessible childcare, affordable housing close to job locations; and regional wages. Firelands Forward has a vision of reaching and maintaining a Labor Force Participation Rate of at least 62%. This goal is higher than the current statewide (December 2022) rate of 61%.

 **Unemployment Rate.** The Unemployment Rate indicates the percentage of the population who is actively seeking employment but are currently jobless and available for work. Like the Labor Force Participation Rate, there are many factors that contribute to Unemployment, including; transitioning between jobs due to seasonal employment, larger shifts in the economy, and skills mismatch between workers and available jobs. Firelands Forward has a vision of maintaining an unemployment rate which is less than 5%. This number is higher than the current unemployment rate of the region and of the state (4.2% as of December 2022). This slightly elevated number is set to account for seasonal changes in employment and for economic shifts that may occur.

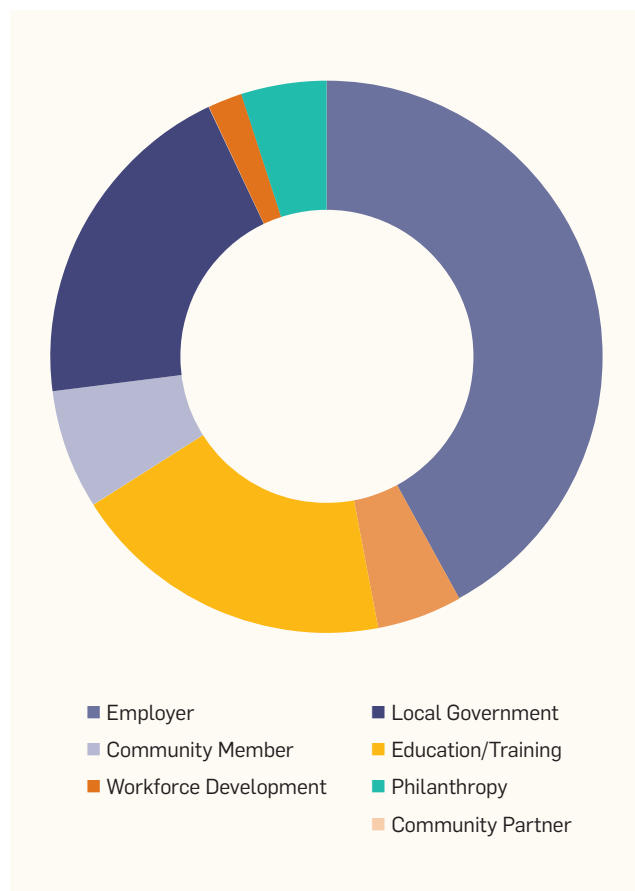
 **Population Growth.** When taken in tandem these two measures help to determine the health of the labor pool of the region. The other key outcome Firelands Forward seeks to address is population growth. As demonstrated in the previous section, the strength of the economy hinges on both the health and size of the labor force. A growing population will ensure that the size of the labor force is large enough to meet the region's economic needs. The Firelands Forward strategic plan seeks to impact these measures through interventions; to attract High School students to jobs in the region, attract boomerang and new talent to the region, facilitate connections for working individuals and families to resources to help them stay in the workforce, and identify challenges which keep people out of the workforce. Our hypothesis is that if we do this well and effectively partner and align with other regional initiatives focused on community and economic development, we should be able to holistically address the talent needs of the region.

ROOTED IN REGIONAL INPUT

In addition to the quantitative data process, Firelands Forward wanted to ensure that the updated plan was anchored in feedback from voices from around the region. To do this, New Growth engaged over 50 regional stakeholders in conversation to get a broad spectrum of views on how successful Firelands Forward has been at achieving its initial goals and to gather input on areas of focus for the future. Community conversations were held with representatives from business, education and training, community-based organizations, social services, and economic development. Additionally, a region-wide survey was developed to engage a wider audience. The survey collected responses from over 45 organizations and companies throughout the region. The survey asked respondents to provide input on how they have interacted with Firelands Forward and to offer feedback on how to prioritize future strategies. An overview of regional input is detailed in the graphic below.

89%

said the region is more collaborative because of Firelands Forward



Regions Highest Priorities

- Continuing **High School Career Connections**
- Supporting **un- and under-employed workers**
- Launching **Boomerang Workforce** initiative

Additional Strategic Considerations

- Addressing **childcare**, affordable **housing** and **transportation**
- Supporting **small businesses**
- Supporting **working families**
- Attracting **new talent** to the region
- Continuing to foster and build **relationships between counties**

Themes from Community Engagement

(Over 59 regional partners engaged)

- Continue **High School Career Connections** initiative
- Build a **stronger communication platform** to strengthen referrals and connections
- Build the system through **sharing learning** from Employer Resource Network
- Building **staff capacity** will help support additional work
- Help support partners through developing **shared accountability** to results
- **Support connections** of job seekers to employers

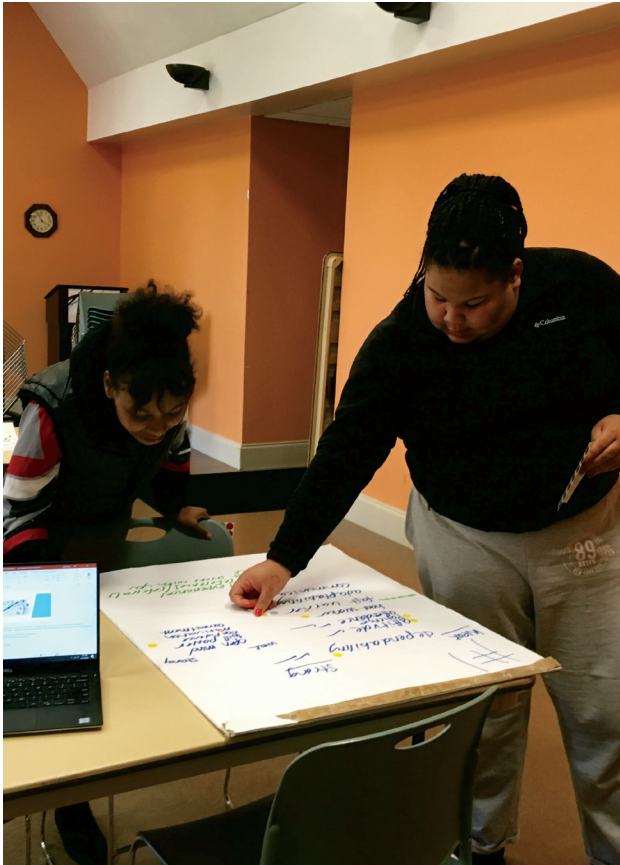
This input was critical to helping shape the strategic plan and prioritize the initial actions which are detailed in appendix A.

HELPING FIRELANDS' WORKFORCE SUCCEED

The Firelands Forward staff, partners, stakeholders, and investors partner to strategically grow our region's economy by connecting a stable skilled, and supported labor force to meaningful and sustaining employment. Our role in this mission is to drive economic growth through innovative regional workforce strategies. Firelands Forward is a community hub that addresses challenges and is a catalyst for change. To do this we listen, collaborate, facilitate, lead, and partner.

✓ **Listen.** Firelands Forward keeps its ear to the ground to stay informed of challenges facing the businesses and residents of the Firelands Region. Through meeting often with business leaders, commissioners, super-

intendents, city council members, and mayors we seek to stay informed and identify ways we can support positive change. Another key component of this work is to understand the root causes of the challenges facing our communities. Through dedicated research—such as the Childcare Study—and data collection we are able to look at a challenge from all perspectives, and work toward a data-driven collective solution that meets the needs of all stakeholders.



✓ **Collaborate.** Firelands Forward has focused on building an environment of collaboration throughout the region. Recognizing the complexity of workforce development, we collaborate with business leaders, investors, government officials, and community members to co-create and support initiatives. This focus on collaboration has led to partnerships that have shown results throughout the region. In conversations and surveys over 89% of stakeholders engaged noted that the region has become more collaborative on workforce issues because of the work of the organization.

✓ **Facilitate.** As strategies are co-created by the region, Firelands Forward mobilizes resources and people to support strategic initiatives. While the needs of each initiative will differ, Firelands Forward facilitates the connections to limit duplication and support alignment to other regional work. An example of this work is partnering with the Norwalk Area United Fund to bring 2-1-1 service to Huron County. The 2-1-1 service focuses on dispensing non-emergency community information such as financial assistance information, utility assistance, transportation options, mental health and recovery resources, services for elderly and disabled individuals, veteran services, immunization and health care options, clothing closets and thrift stores, food pantries and nutrition programs, housing and shelters, crisis services, and legal resources.

✓ **Lead.** Another way Firelands Forward works to support the region is to lead initiatives and programs. Firelands Forward works with the community leaders and stakeholders to identify solutions to challenges faced by businesses and residents and co-creates solutions that Firelands Forward staffs and leads. The Employer Resource Network (ERN) is an example of this work. The initial strategic plan identified worker retention as a challenge. To begin to address this challenge, Firelands Forward brought together the ERN as a potential solution, providing the coordination and staffing support for the initiative. As the ERN has grown in popularity and more employers have become involved, Firelands Forward will continue to support and expand this regional resource.

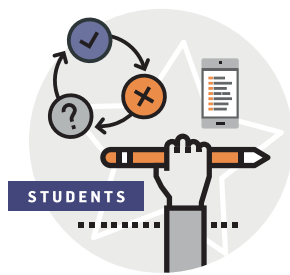
The **Employer Resource Network** places a Work Wellness Coach within a business to aide in employee retention and professional development. Through case management and one-on-one coaching, our Work Wellness Coaches help employees work through employment barriers to boost overall morale in the workplace and reduce turnover costs for the business.

✓ **Partner.** Firelands Forward also works to maintain and support programs in the community which are having an impact and helping to move the needle on regional outcomes. This sustained support may look like connecting organizations, businesses, or collaboratives to financial resources such as grants and loans, recruiting partners, sharing information, or providing staff. The Firelands Tourism, Hospitality, and Main Street Business Alliance selection for an Industry Sector Partnership grant by the Ohio Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation is an example of this work. This grant will help galvanize local tourism, hospitality, and main street businesses around a common goal; growing the sector- helping the region create or sustain the programming needed to ensure a strong local workforce and advocate for the industry.



STRATEGIES TO CREATE CHANGE

Recognizing its role and contribution to the region, Firelands Forward has identified strategies to make progress toward their vision of driving economic growth. These strategies are based on community input, organizational experience, and expertise created with input from community leaders and vetted with the community through a series of conversations and outreach efforts. The below outlined strategies are organized by three pillars, attract, retain, and connect rather than projects. This demonstrates the organizational approach to create the change needed to grow the region's economy by connecting a stable, skilled, and supported labor force to meaningful and sustaining employment.



ATTRACT

The Attract Pillar is focused on re-building the region's young workforce by keeping high school graduates and attracting young professionals back to the region. Key efforts within this strategy include expanding the High School Career Connections initiative and launching the Boomerang Workforce Initiative.

High School Career Connections Expansion. During the community engagement phase of the strategic plan update, the High School Career Connections initiative was identified as a high priority for the region. Nearly all parties engaged recognized the opportunity to continue to engage high school students and expressed the importance of maintaining and expanding this work. Building on existing momentum Firelands Forward has identified three key areas of focus to expand the High School Career Connections initiative:

- **Continuing to Build the Career Exploration Pipeline.** This focus area would allow Firelands Forward to work further back in the educational pipeline, developing a system of engagement for students as early as middle school to help them identify their career interests and aptitudes. As students progress through high school, a systems approach would be in place to build awareness of career opportunities and educational/training pathways within the region, drawing on input from multiple regional stakeholders. The intended outcome of this work is to increase the number of graduating students who consider careers within the region.
- **Implementation of WorkInFirelands Web Platform.** The WorkInFirelands platform is designed to directly connect residents of the region with job openings. When used in partnership with regional high schools, this will allow students who have been engaged in the Career Exploration Pipeline to further explore career and internship opportunities within the region. Additionally, the Platform will allow Firelands Forward to collect data about the health of talent connections in the region. WorkInFirelands will benefit high school students and job seekers by connecting them directly to regional jobs and services; employers by providing direct access to the talent pipeline and through limiting competition to only other regional businesses; and the regional workforce development ecosystem by providing trend data which can inform programs, address gaps, and strengthen connections. The intended outcome of this work is to increase the number of graduating students who are linked to direct employment opportunities.
- **Enabling Business Advisory Councils.** Firelands Forward will continue to facilitate connections with and between the Business Advisory Councils and the high schools and Educational Service Centers of the region. This effort includes teacher and student bootcamps as well as regional career fairs. Through

this continued engagement and efforts, Firelands Forward seeks to enable the Business Advisory Councils to continue playing an active role in the development of initiatives and programs which are aligned with the goal of keeping high school graduates in the region for employment. To measure progress on this initiative, Firelands Forward has identified the following metrics:

800 regional high school students who participate in supported programming/WorkInFirelands

100 businesses connected/participating in supported programming/ WorkInFirelands

100 students employed in regional businesses as a result of supported programming/WorkInFirelands

- **Launch Boomerang Workforce initiative.** Along with the High School Career Connection initiative, formally launching the Boomerang Workforce initiative was identified as the second highest priority in the Attraction Strategy. Now that the organization has built a solid foundation, regional partners and Firelands Forward staff have noted that the conditions are set to launch the initiative. This initiative is focused on engaging young families and working professionals from the region who have left to encourage them to explore career opportunities in the Firelands. To measure progress on this initiative, Firelands Forward has identified the following metrics:

1,000 people reached through outreach/ engagement either directly or through partnered organizations

1% population increase of young families and working professionals



RETAIN

The Retain Strategy is focused on retaining the current workforce. Firelands Forward will engage with businesses to understand gaps and needs, and build or support programming that educates, trains, and provides upskilling opportunities to ensure employees have the right skills to stay and advance in the Firelands

Region. Key efforts within this strategy include scaling the Employer Resource Network (ERN) and systematizing upskilling through Industry Sector Partnerships (ISP) and Business Associations.

Scale ERN. Like the High School Career Connections initiative, the ERN was identified as an important resource within the region by key stakeholders. Many of those engaged encouraged the expansion of the ERN by expanding the capacity for employers to join. The ERN will also share best practices, resources and connections made through the ERN with employers who are not in the network to scale the impact. To measure progress on this initiative, Firelands Forward has identified the following metrics:

2,500 employees served by ERN; **20** participating businesses in ERN with positive ROI

95% of workers retained in ERN by participating employers

Systematize upskilling through Industry Sector Partnership's (ISP's) and/or Business Associations.

Building on the existing strength of the Firelands Manufacturing Alliance and Bay Area Human Resources Association as well as the recent selection of the Firelands Tourism, Hospitality, and Main Street Business Alliance for an Industry Sector Partnership grant from the Ohio Office of Workforce Transformation, Firelands Forward seeks to leverage existing assets and explore the development of new partnerships with the goal of providing a clear and systematic approach to upskilling incumbent and frontline workers in the region. To measure progress on this CONNECT initiative, Firelands Forward has identified the following metrics:

5 employer-led partnerships and association led upskilling strategies

150 employees who participated in upskilling opportunities



CONNECT

The Connect Strategy is focused on building the connective tissue of the region to enable collaborative solutions in order to tackle multifaceted challenges related to workforce development and address barriers to labor force participation and employment. Key efforts within this strategy include continuing to conduct regional studies, utilizing existing resources to help businesses get innovative with solutions, and continuing to build and deepen relationships throughout the region.

Continue Building the Region's Data Capacity. The value of the Childcare and Housing studies led by Firelands Forward, should continue to be a priority. Building the data capacity of the region through studies and data collection allows Firelands Forward to identify regional challenges which impact labor force participation and employment and share this critical information with key stakeholders to begin to build data-driven regional and collaborative strategies to address them. Firelands Forward will continue to build the capacity of the region to collect and use data to identify challenges and inform solutions. To measure progress on this initiative, Firelands Forward has identified the following metrics:

5 initiatives and strategies using data to build toward collective solutions

Development of regional workforce health scorecard to inform the region on changing workforce trends

Leveraging Regional Collaboration to Build Solutions. Firelands Forward is uniquely positioned in the region to facilitate conversations that bring together multiple sectors to identify actions and practice changes which will begin to move the needle on addressing barriers to employment. Recognizing their unique position, Firelands Forward plans to continue to foster collaboration through facilitating conversations with business leaders and aligned community-based organizations to identify workforce development solutions for the region. To measure progress on this initiative, Firelands Forward has identified the following metrics:

10 regional partners that change policy and practice as a result of engagement with Firelands Forward

30 regional partners who engage and actively participate in collective solutions

Build and Deepen Regional Partnerships. A signature strength of Firelands Forward is their role as a strategic partner in the region who can collaborate across initiatives to bring a workforce lens to challenges. Firelands Forward intends to maintain this role through continuing to deepen existing partnerships and forge new ones. Through working in this way, Firelands Forward hopes to align its work with other regional collaboratives and strategies to leverage and mobilize regional resources. This will increase the region's ability to address multifaceted challenges facing residents and businesses. To measure progress on this initiative, Firelands Forward has identified the following metrics:

6 aligned grant funded projects Firelands Forward participates in

\$900K of leveraged assets (both fiscal and in-kind) aligned to support collaborative workforce development efforts region wide

SUSTAINING MOMENTUM

To effectively and efficiently carry out its mission and achieve the goals outlined in this strategic plan, it is imperative that Firelands Forward has the organizational capacity to be successful and sustainable over the long term. Key elements of this include a flexible and aligned staff and a Diversified Funding Strategy.

✔ **Flexible and Aligned Staff Capacity.** Both the existing Firelands Forward staff and key stakeholders identified limited staff capacity as a challenge to continued expansion and growth. Continuing to build a staffing structure that is nimble enough to flex to the needs of the region and aligned to priority actions is critical to the success of Firelands Forward. With this in mind, Firelands Forward will continue to engage its advisory board and fiscal agent to ensure that it has the resources and partnerships necessary to fully execute its strategic priorities.

✔ **Diversified Funding Strategy.** A diversified funding plan is essential to Fireland Forward's organizational stability. Diversifying the sources of funding helps to reduce the organization's dependence on any one source of revenue and can provide a more stable and predictable revenue stream over the long term. To ensure the organization has the necessary fiscal resources to support its staff and initiatives, Firelands Forward will continue to partner with existing funders to ensure alignment with their priorities while exploring additional grant opportunities at both the state and federal level. Additionally, using the ERN as a model, Firelands Forward will consider if there are ways to monetize existing and new initiatives in a fee-for-service model to directly align staff capacity to those initiatives which support regional businesses.

WORK WITH US

Together, we can continue to grow our region's economy by connecting a stable skilled and supported labor force to meaningful and sustaining employment. Firelands Forward is poised and built to support the creation of regional solutions with partners and businesses. Join us in helping us create a more collaborative region by sharing your insights and expertise. The more we understand the business needs of the region, the better we can build relevant and quantifiable solutions to address challenges.



Contact Us | Reach out to our staff to share your knowledge, join a working group, or address a concern.

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