



STRATEGIC PLAN

FINAL REPORT



**FIRELANDS
FORWARD**

**WORKFORCE
DEVELOPMENT**



Letter from Committee Chair

January 2020

Dear Reader,

We are proud of our region's tremendous progress over the last few years. We have seen record breaking investments from both the public and private sector that are supporting cutting edge companies and communities. We have confidence in the future if leaders across private, public and civic spaces continue to work together as we still have more work to do. Workforce development is a critical problem facing our area. Effective workforce development is essential to economic mobility and resilience, and good paying jobs are the foundation of a strong community. It is a complex challenge that requires a combination of strategies and a holistic approach across many stakeholders. The Firelands Forward Workforce Development Plan addresses this challenge.

The Firelands Forward Workforce Development Plan is designed to improve job skills, fulfillment, and retention. The Plan frames and builds coordination and collaboration across education, job training, and other supportive services to drive economic growth. It includes accountable and measurable solutions for improving the workforce. Key to the Plan's successful outcome is strong partnerships among all stakeholders, including government, private businesses, philanthropy, agencies, and educators across multiple communities. Labor is a shared regional asset, every person's and company's success will hinge on how well we work together. There is a place for you in the solution.

We have a real opportunity and a responsibility to make a difference. The Firelands Forward Workforce Development Plan is our roadmap to success.

Duff Milkie
Executive Vice President, General Counsel and Corporate Secretary
Cedar Fair



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Background

The Firelands Forward initiative 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 Partnership, which endeavors to spark regional economic growth and well-being in the Firelands region, identified that workforce challenges are a top issue impacting the regional economy and launched the Firelands Forward initiative to better understand and address the issue. In March 2019, the consulting team of Innovation Economy Partners and The New Growth Group was selected via a competitive bidding process to conduct a study of workforce challenges in the Firelands region and make strategic recommendations in support of the regional economy. This report summarizes the activities and outcomes of this process.

Businesses and people face a diffuse set of opportunities and challenges in the regional labor market; in a dynamic labor market context, there are many currently-operating policies, systems, and programs designed to serve the region. Taking a wide variety of factors into consideration, the consulting team conducted a seven-month process that culminated at the end of 2019 with recommendations for actions that the Firelands community can take to improve the region's labor market. The process involved three stages.

STAGE 1 | Articulate the Challenges. The first stage of the initiative endeavored to clearly define and articulate the challenges and objectives of the Firelands Forward initiative in a way that resonated with members of the community. This was accomplished through a deep dive analysis of regional labor market data and extensive interviewing and conversations with numerous people in the community. Over 100 interviews were conducted that included county commissioners, mayors, school district superintendents, executive directors of government agencies, chambers of commerce, business leaders, and nonprofit leaders.

STAGE 2 | Identify the Gaps. Next, the consultants facilitated a process called the Community Responsiveness Assessment, which qualitatively assessed the readiness and capabilities of the Firelands community to respond to the needs and objectives identified in Stage 1. Existing systems, capabilities, and activities were reviewed and mapped in relation to a paradigm of best practices in workforce development drawn from research and experience. This process resulted in clear identification of gaps in regional workforce and training systems, which suggested opportunities for new solutions.

STAGE 3 | Develop Solutions. Finally, given all that had been learned in the process to date, actionable solutions were developed with input from area leaders including specific initiatives focusing on targeted industry sectors and population segments, enhancements to existing programs and services, governance and oversight approaches, and budgets.

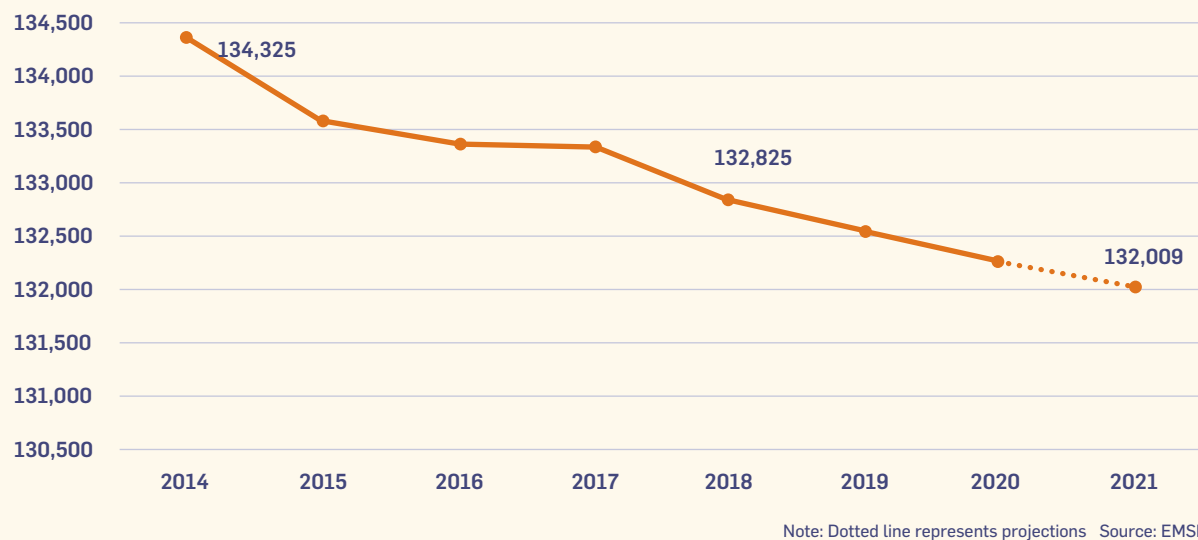
Throughout the process, a Firelands Forward Steering Committee met monthly to review progress and discuss critical issues. Members of the committee, see page 12 for the full list, were selected with an intent to achieve broad representation from business, government, education and community stakeholder groups. Additionally, extensive efforts were made to keep the general public informed and engaged in the process. A community-wide launch event was held, and attended by over 200 people, to kick off the initiative. Monthly web events, called Fireside Chats, were hosted, recorded, and posted online to provide members of the general public an opportunity to hear updates and ask questions. "Key stakeholder" discussions were organized in one-on-one or small group settings with critical members of the community including public and elected officials, school district leaders, government agency executives, key business leaders, and philanthropic leaders. The outcomes of each stage are summarized ahead.

STAGE 1 | Articulate the Challenges

A review of regional labor market data revealed several noteworthy challenges facing the Firelands Region.

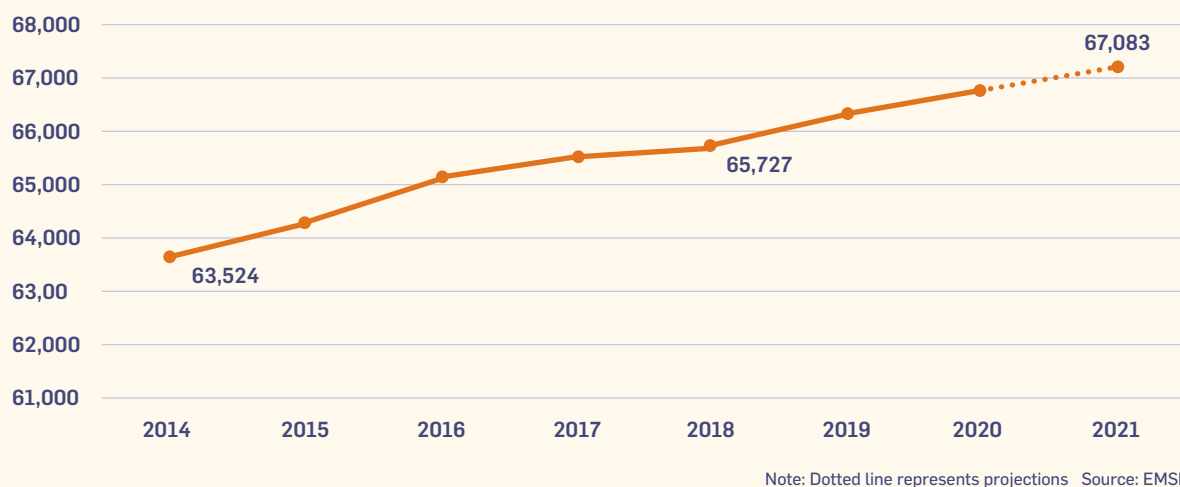
The regional population is declining (Figure 1), which means the supply of labor is shrinking. Although not shown in this chart, it is additionally worth noting that the population segment ages 65 years and above is growing, while all other segments are shrinking. Of note, approximately 64 percent of Erie and Huron County residents work in their county of residence, which is 8 percentage points lower than average among counties nationally. Long commutes are likely one factor contributing to outmigration.

FIGURE 1 Population Decline, Erie and Huron Counties, 2014 - 2021



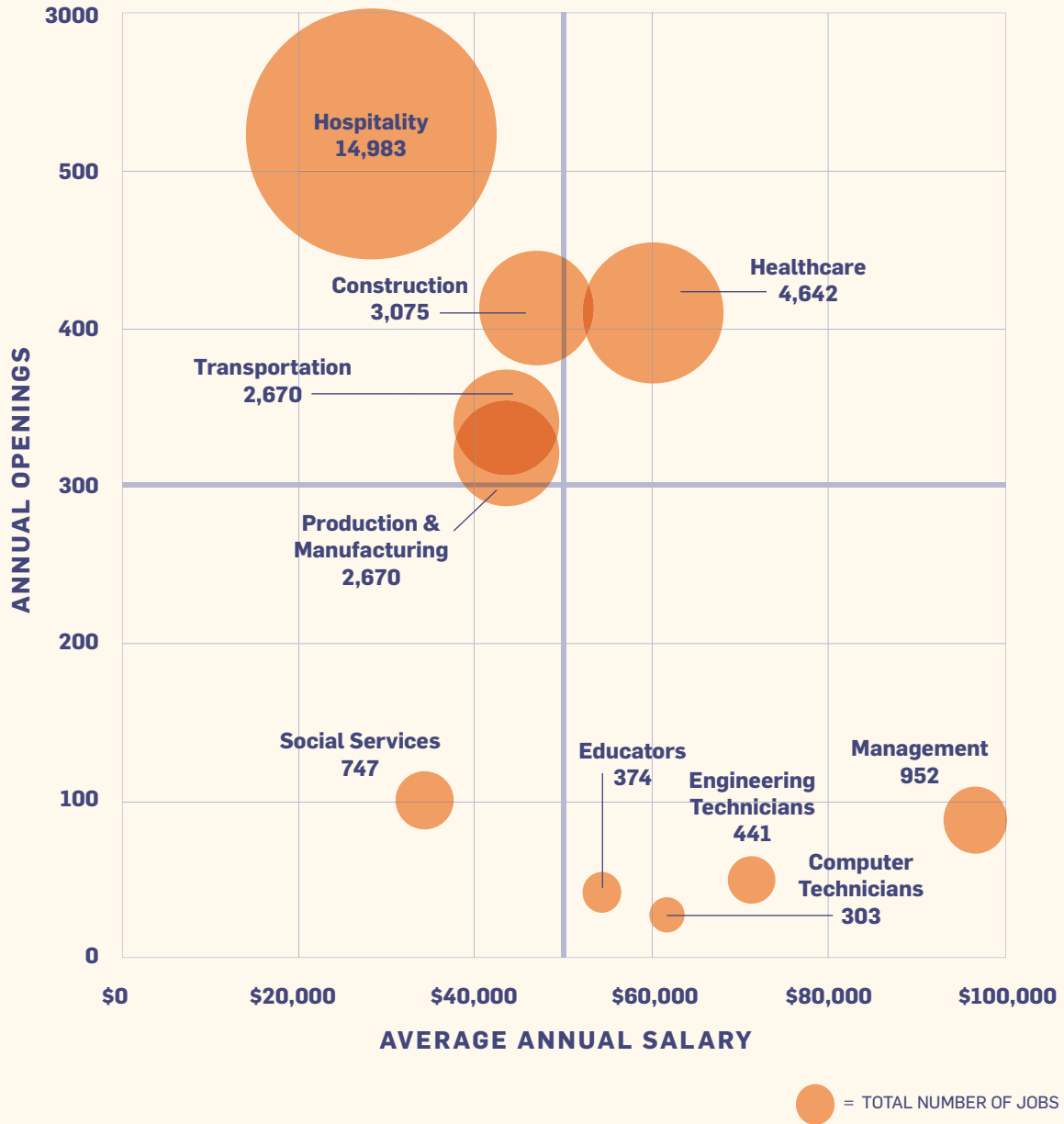
The job market is growing, which is straining businesses given that there is a shrinking labor pool. Figure 2 shows that the overall number of jobs in Erie and Huron Counties is increasing. Many businesses are reporting extreme difficulty hiring workers, which is leading to missed opportunities for revenue and growth.

FIGURE 2 Job Growth, Erie and Huron Counties, 2014 - 2021



There are approximately 4,000 open jobs comprising a mix of pay scales, skill levels and skillsets, and locations. Figure 3, below, depicts this variety.

FIGURE 3 Average Salary, Annual Openings, and Total Jobs for Key Occupations



US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages and EMSI, economicmodeling.com

A great deal of additional information was accumulated from the more than 100 interviews and conversations conducted with members of the community. Several thematic challenges emerged:

- Many members of the workforce development community lack familiarity with basic labor market trends including quantities and locations of open jobs, skillsets, and pay scales.
- Some members of the business community lack familiarity with the competitiveness of wage and benefit structures relative to similar jobs in other communities and in relation to living wages in the region.
- There is a high degree of misinformation or over-estimation among many community members about the functions, capabilities, and resources available in the public sector, especially in regards to public workforce development and social services. It should be noted that Erie and Huron Counties have a lower (and declining) share of people using social service benefits than the state average, although there is a frequently-articulated perception that the counties have a culture of social service dependency.
- Despite grappling with challenging issues related to hiring and retention of workers, especially in lower-skilled frontline jobs, members of the business community are largely unaware or skeptical of public services that could be used to mitigate these workforce challenges.
- There is a high degree of interest among all members of the community that were interviewed to improve how people and businesses connect in the labor market, but it is unclear which organization would lead an effort or what the effort would entail – a variety of suggestions were received.
- Members of the community see successful workforce development, economic development, and places as intertwined. There is interest in strategies mindful of connectivity between job clusters, hubs of people, and neighborhoods of concentrated poverty; involving things like efficient public transportation, targeted neighborhood outreach, and focused investments in important corridors.

Given these challenges, an objective was stated: Reduce the number of job openings by 2,000.

Detailed information was assembled to help clarify this objective including the composition and locations of the available jobs, skillsets, and pay scales. Additionally, several subsets of the population were identified as potential sources of labor to fill these job openings. Figure 4 lists these potential populations.

FIGURE 4 Potential Sources of Labor

| POTENTIAL SOURCES OF LABOR | ESTIMATED QUANTITY |
|---|--|
| Graduating high school students | 1,523 graduating seniors two years ago. 882 did not enroll in college last year. |
| People with ties to the Firelands region that no longer live locally | 7,669 outmigrants per year. (5.7% of population, compared to 6.2% of U.S. residents who changed county of residence in the previous year) |
| Disconnected workers with limited or no work history | 18,483 people ages 16-65 are not engaged in work. (U.S. Labor Force Participation = 63%, Firelands Labor Force Participation = 61%) |
| Unemployed individuals | At an unemployment rate of 4%, 2,565 individuals are currently unemployed. (U.S. Unemployment Rate = 3.6%) |
| Working poor members of the community currently employed in front line jobs | 8,949 FT year round workers. (21% of workers earn less than \$25,000 annually, 18% of U.S. FT workers earn less than \$25,000 annually) |

STAGE 2 | Identify the Gaps

Given the stated objective, the process next sought to assess the community's readiness and capabilities to improve connections between specific segments of people and jobs. A Community Responsiveness Assessment took a deeper look at five important capabilities, derived from research, best practices, and experience, that would be needed to fulfill the workforce objective of filling 2,000 job openings. The assessment involved qualitative research (interviews and online surveys) that looked for evidence and examples of these important workforce development capabilities and functions actively working in the community. Figure 5 details the elements and findings of this assessment.

FIGURE 5 Community Responsiveness Assessment

OVERALL ASSESSMENT



Collective Impact Capacity

Seeking Evidence of the Following

- Common workforce agenda that connects and aligns multiple public systems.
- Mutually reinforcing activities and collaborative projects in support of the common agenda.
- A shared measurement system that drives continuous improvement.
- Collaborating organizations are in continuous communication.
- Dedicated administrative resources and staff to coordinate collaborative activities.

Key Findings

- K-16 Business Advisory Councils bring school districts together; limited evidence of projects as they are in early stages.
- Limited evidence of initiatives or projects focused on solving employer workforce shortages.
- No backbone or shared measurement capacity.

Citation: Kramer, M. and Kania, J. (2011) Collective Impact. Stanford Social Innovation Review. Can be retrieved at: <https://www.fsg.org/publications/collective-impact>



Business Engagement Capabilities

Seeking Evidence of the Following

- Public capacity to engage and adapt workforce solutions for businesses.
- Evidence of business leadership in workforce initiatives.
- High degree of business engagement in design, delivery, recruitment, hiring, and measuring workforce programs.

Key Findings

- Career-technical institutions have a high degree of business engagement.
- K-12 districts and public workforce agencies have much more limited business engagement.
- No or limited evidence of business-led workforce development initiatives (aside from emerging Firelands Forward initiative).

Citation: Spaulding, S. and Martin-Caughey, A. (2015) The Goals and Dimensions of Employer Engagement in Workforce Development Initiatives. The Urban Institute. Can be retrieved at: <http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/2000552-The-Goals-and-Dimensions-of-Employer-Engagement-in-Workforce-Development-Programs.pdf>

FIGURE 5 Community Responsiveness Assessment

OVERALL ASSESSMENT



Education and Training Adaptability

Seeking Evidence of the Following

- In-demand educational pathways are known and mapped.
- Cross-institutional relationships support educational transfer and advancement.
- K-12 on-ramps raise awareness, guide, and connect students to in-demand educational pathways.
- Adult and career-technical on-ramps engage students in in-demand educational pathways.
- Advisement and support systems encourage students to stay engaged in in-demand educational pathways.
- Pathways include systems for helping students connect to work.
- Pathways are friendly for working learners.

Key Findings

- Career-technical institutions and programs are responsive to regional workforce needs; K-12 districts are responsive to instructional requirements of the state and the learning needs of students.
- Strong dual enrollment and early college options for K-12 students.
- Mixed evidence of K-12 or postsecondary focus on career awareness, guidance, and post-graduation career connections.
- Strong focus on supporting students to stay engaged in educational pathways.
- Many options for adult and working students.

Citation: Bailey, T., Jagers, S., and Jenkins, D. (2015) What We Know about Guided Pathways. Columbia University, Community College Research Center.
Can be retrieved at: <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/what-we-know-about-guided-pathways-packet.html>



Labor Force Attachment (Candidate-Job Matching) Adaptability

Seeking Evidence of the Following

- Available jobs are captured and integrated into a candidate matching system or program.
- Available candidates are actively cultivated and integrated into a candidate matching system or program.
- Proactive systems match candidates to in-demand jobs using a system that includes integration with employer human resources processes.
- Systems support the attraction of candidates from outside the community.
- Services are provided supporting post-placement job retention.

Key Findings

- OhioMeansJobs maintains an online job posting list; limited or no direct outreach to businesses to discuss job openings.
- Limited or no proactive connection of candidates to in-demand jobs; limited or no evidence of the use of employer-responsive assessments; K-12 has few resources available to help students connect to jobs.
- Limited or no evidence of strategies to attract candidates from outside the community.
- Limited or no evidence of services provided to support post-placement job retention.

Citation: The New Growth Group, LLC. (2017) Evaluation of a Demand Driven Workforce Solution.
Can be retrieved at: <https://www.skillsforchicagolandfuture.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/2017-SCF-New-Growth-Report.pdf>

FIGURE 5 Community Responsiveness Assessment

OVERALL ASSESSMENT



Coordination Among Funding Organizations

Seeking Evidence of the Following

- Funding agencies, organizations, and philanthropies are aligned with a common vision or agenda.
- Funding rewards successful achievement of workforce outcomes.
- Hallmark programs braid funding in support of aligned goals.

Key Findings

- Limited evidence of public/private funder alignment around a common workforce development agenda. Erie County Foundation Council represents an opportunity to deepen alignment around workforce-related issues.
- Limited evidence that public/private funders systematically reward successful performance.
- Some evidence of braided funding. E.g. career-technical/adult education integration, dual enrollment offerings.

Citation: Spark Policy Institute. Blending and Braiding Defined.
Can be retrieved at: <http://tools.sparkpolicy.com/overview-blending-braiding/>

This exercise highlighted several gaps, which represent opportunities to improve regional capabilities to serve the labor market. Several key recommendations emerged as a result:

- Establish a coordinating agent capable of communicating with organizations in the workforce community, utilizing data to identify and select priority issues in the job market, and spearheading collaborative initiatives.
- Establish a mechanism to improve coordination among funding agencies including county and local governments and philanthropic organizations.
- Improve the capabilities of public organizations to engage businesses with a goal of helping overcome issues of business lack of awareness and reticence to use available workforce resources, and jointly designing new, adaptable solutions.
- Improve “labor force attachment” systems with capabilities to assemble pools of job orders and candidates and make matches.

At the conclusion of this exercise, the process captured a reasonably thorough picture of the actors involved in regional workforce development (including county and local governments, school districts, postsecondary education and training institutions, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropic organizations) and spoke to executive leadership from a majority.

STAGE 3 | Develop Solutions

The development of solutions occurred on two levels. First, potential projects were drafted that would serve to cultivate pools of workers from the identified sources of labor and connect them to jobs. Second, an organizational structure to govern, administratively and fiscally manage, and implement projects in a multi-organizational collaborative environment was envisioned.

Five potential projects were drafted that would serve to reduce the number of regional job openings by connecting a targeted source of labor. Briefly, these projects were:

- **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. associated with poverty, leading to new or improved employment.
- **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.
- **Un- and Under- Employed Workforce Connections Initiative:** An effort to coordinate supportive services and training for individuals with limited work histories, and possibly challenges
- **Frontline Worker Retention Initiative:** An effort to coordinate supportive programs such as childcare 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.
- **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.

The projects were presented and discussed in several forums including the Firelands Forward Steering Committee, Bay Area Human Resources Association, and Huron County Leadership Meeting. Following discussion, participants in these forums were asked to vote for their favorites. Cumulatively, approximately 50 individuals voted anonymously using a real-time polling application.

From these votes, the High School Career Connections and Frontline Worker Retention Initiatives emerged as the leading vote recipients, and as such, have become priority projects for Firelands Forward. All projects were considered worthwhile and will be considered as Firelands Forward grows in scope and capacity.

The consulting team has recommended an organizational structure (Figures 6 and 7) to establish new capacities in the Firelands region that address the gaps and recommendations emerging from the Community Responsiveness Assessment. Additionally, the recommended organizational structure prioritizes several factors:

- The initiative must not duplicate systems, work, or staffing that already exists. It should seek to leverage existing work wherever possible.
- Rules for fiscal management must be established that allow organizations to achieve a return-on-investment for contributed funds.
- The structure must be credible, transparent, and neutral so multiple organizations can collaborate with trust.

FIGURE 6 Committee Structure



FIGURE 7 Staffing and Responsibilities



Finally, a vision for sustaining the initiative has begun to emerge. An annual budget has been estimated of \$370,000, to begin, and fund-raising efforts have started. Figure 8 lists major elements of the budget. The goal is to achieve financial sustainability and stability within three years where the first year is primarily supported by local contributions, the second year enhances local contributions and fuels programming with external grant funding, and the third year incorporates a private-public revenue generation strategy.

By Year 3, the initiative will be 75 percent sustained through external grant funds and revenues.

FIGURE 8 Annual Budget

| CATEGORY | ANNUAL BUDGET |
|---------------------|------------------|
| Personnel | \$240,000 |
| Outsourced Services | 90,000 |
| Technology | 40,000 |
| Total | \$370,000 |

Next Steps

There are three primary next steps that will occur within six months. The project team is focused on accomplishing these steps by the second quarter of 2020. First, fundraising with a goal to raise \$370,000 in commitments. Second, the organizational chart will be fulfilled meaning Steering and Sub-Committees will be established with by-laws, staff will be recruited and hired, and the Erie County Economic Development Corporation will become prepared to financially manage the Firelands Forward Initiative with regional oversight. Third, the sub-committees will begin meeting with a goal of fully developing strategies and plans for their respective initiatives.

A plan for measuring the initiative will be enacted that captures the breadth of partnering organizations connected through the Firelands Forward initiatives, the quantity of existing funding aligned around common goals and new funding raised, and measurable throughput of projects including students and workers participating in programs along with outcomes such as job placements.

The Firelands Forward initiative is taking important first steps along a pathway toward improving the regional labor market. If successful, this initiative has the potential to deliver a large, positive return on investment in the region, measurable in job placements, job retentions, wage gains, and new public funds available for institutions to invest in training and hiring programs. In the coming months, experts and leaders throughout the region will have an opportunity to shape the first projects and participate in a vision endeavoring to assemble new resources in support of the region's workforce. As a result of these first steps, citizens in the Firelands region should expect to start seeing results within twelve months, and the initiative should be evolving in the second year to expand its impact.

Steering Committee Members

**Abbey Bemis, Sarah Ross,
and Heather Horowitz**

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Development Organizations

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