

# Workforce key for economic development

By Amy Whitehead

**W**orkforce development is now recognized as a key driver of economic competitiveness. Having a skilled, high-quality workforce is critical to the success of local businesses, large and small.

In 2018, *Site Selection* magazine ranked workforce as the number one issue impacting corporate site-selection decisions. Also in the top 10 site-selection factors was “university and college resources,” which is indicative of the role that institutions of higher education play in technology transfer, community partnerships, innovation, and, of course, workforce and education.

As someone who recently added the word “workforce” to her title, I can reaffirm that workforce development is essential to economic development, but also that it takes time to learn all of the local, state, regional, and federal programs and resources that are available to communities and to individual workers. If you are recently entering the workforce development conversation, you will want to familiarize yourself with the players and programs that could provide much needed services to your community. If you are ready to start a conversation about workforce development in your city, use this checklist to guide your initial outreach and learning:

- Arkansas has eight workforce development regions. These regions oversee a variety of programs and funding for underemployed and unemployed individuals. One-stop centers are located in each region to provide a one-stop shop for individuals seeking employment and training, as well as businesses needing to find a skilled workforce. Get to know your regional workforce development office and one-stop center, and educate yourself on the in-demand jobs that are approved for Workforce Investment Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding in your region.
- Though the unemployment rate is at a record low for the state, there are still workers needing to increase their skill level. Funding programs such as the Arkansas Department of Higher Education’s Arkansas Workforce Challenge Scholarship, Arkansas Rehabilitation Services, MyCAA (funding for spouses of active duty military personnel), and WIOA are available to help your workforce reach its full potential.
- The Office of Skills Development (OSD), a division of the Arkansas Department of Career Education,

is an excellent resource for communities. Learn about the OSD grants that are available to help existing businesses provide training and professional development to their workers. One community that has taken advantage of the workforce training grants program offered by the Office of Skills Development is Mississippi County. “Since the Office of Skills Development workforce training grant program became available during the 2016-17 fiscal year, Mississippi County has been awarded 57 grants resulting in approximately 940 workers receiving training,” said Cody Waits, deputy director for OSD. “Companies in Mississippi County received funding totaling \$430,000 saving companies over \$235,000 in training costs.” OSD also oversees the Secondary Technical Centers and various apprenticeship programs for adults, students and employers.

- Initiate a conversation with your regional higher education partners, local school district, area business, and economic development professionals on the challenges facing your city and region, and about the initiatives that exist to help ensure a strong workforce pipeline. If these conversations are already occurring, that is great news! Find out how municipal government can have a seat at the table and then provide support and advocacy for those workforce efforts.

Municipal government has a vested interest in economic development and should therefore be an active participant in promoting workforce development. Though there are many players and programs involved in this effort, taking the time to learn the stakeholders and programs is an important step that local elected officials can take to better understand economic development in 2019 and beyond.



*Amy Whitehead is the assistant vice president of community and workforce development at the University of Central Arkansas. UCA offers a variety of workforce development training programs that are eligible for funding for individuals needing to increase their skills and prepare for the workforce, including the Arkansas Coding Academy and online workforce development programs. For more information visit [uca.edu/outreach/workforce](http://uca.edu/outreach/workforce). Contact Amy at [amyw@uca.edu](mailto:amyw@uca.edu) or (501) 852-2930.*