

Preparing a workforce for the future: ACT Work Ready Communities

By Shelby Fiegel

Arkansas may boast an impressively low unemployment rate, but nearly 80,000 jobs remain unfilled in the Natural State. Despite workforce challenges and other ripple effects caused by COVID-19, employers still require a qualified and educated workforce to fill those positions. This puts pressure on our communities and education systems to create workforce pipelines and support systems that prepare our workforce to meet current and future demands.

How do we ensure that economic growth continues in our state? That's where programs like the ACT Work Ready Communities (WRC) step in. The WRC initiative empowers states, regions and counties with data, processes and tools that drive economic growth by identifying skills gaps and quantifying the skill level of their workforce. Individuals that participate in the program leverage the ACT WorkKeys National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) to measure and certify work skills needed for success in jobs across industries and occupations. The overall goal is to show prospective employers concrete proof of an individual's skills and potential training needs to match them with appropriate employment opportunities.

Currently, Arkansas counties have a 45-percent participation rate in the program (with 34 of 75 counties having achieved certified work-ready status) and 975 Arkansas-based employers recognize the ACT WorkKeys NCRC in support of WRC goals. The most recent county to receive the WRC designation was Grant County, where a diverse group of community leaders partnered to receive the certified work-ready designation.

To begin the certification process, Grant County leaders attended the ACT Work Ready Communities Boot Camp, an executive leadership training program focused on creating and implementing tailored efforts to improve the county's work readiness. Leaders met with local employers, policymakers, educators and economic developers to establish goals and build a sustainable WRC model to fit unique community needs.

"We know that economic development and education are closely associated. That's why the Sheridan School District is proud to have played a role in helping Grant County achieve status as an ACT Work Ready Community," said Dr. Karla Neathery, superintendent

of the Sheridan School District. "The skills our students are learning in Work Ready and JAG (Jobs for America's Graduates) classes, as well as internships and other courses, help prepare them to be outstanding contributors to a workforce. When these students demonstrate those skills on the NCRC assessments, they receive credentials to indicate their work-readiness to potential employers. We believe designation as an ACT Work Ready Community aligns perfectly with our school's mission to empower our students to become lifelong learners who are responsible, contributing citizens."

To garner communitywide support and align the WRC process with long-term community goals, leaders representing Kick Start Sheridan, a citizen-led effort focused on outlining and implementing community and economic development strategies, were involved.

"The Kick Start Sheridan initiative was started to help prepare our community for the future," said Brad McGinley, who serves as the Grant County extension agent staff chair with the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture. "Achieving ACT WRC status was one of our initial goals identified in our countywide strategic action plan. Having a skilled workforce that matches the needs of employers is key to driving economic development in our county forward."

Leaders throughout Grant County understand the necessity of developing a high-quality workforce and the positive impact it has on local employers. Grant County Judge Randy Pruitt said, "It's exciting to participate in a program that matches an individual's skill set to job opportunities in Grant County. It will aid economic development not only in our county but the surrounding region as well."

For more information on ACT Work Ready Communities, go to www.workreadycommunities.org.

Follow Kick Start Sheridan on Facebook at www.facebook.com/KickStartSheridan to keep up to date on community and economic development efforts in Grant County. 🍷



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