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In 2017, the Council enhanced its existing community workforce training program, known as **Employment and Child Care Opportunities Plus (ECCO+),** by adding a credentialing track that would provide a path toward higher-wage and living wage employment, while at the same time addressing the shortage of qualified school bus drivers faced by many districts in Kentucky.

The Council, utilizing allowable funding from both Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) and Head Start (HS), developed a new (approximately) 14-week training and job placement program. This program includes coursework, behind-the-wheel training, and job placement/employment support to facilitate eligible participants to receive a nationally recognized Commercial Driver’s License-with Passenger B certification. Specifically, participants in the CDL track of ECCO+ complete an intensive training program that includes a minimum of eight hours of classroom instruction in preparation for the written knowledge test to obtain a CDL permit. Participants also complete a 30-hour minimum of behind-the-wheel skills training. Those obtaining a permit will complete a further 16 hours of classroom instruction on topics such as vehicle care and maintenance, driving fundamentals, defensive driving, laws and regulations, vehicle operation, pupil management, first aid, and special needs topics.

ECCO+ addresses the critical shortage of passenger bus drivers faced by school districts across Kentucky and mass transportation businesses. With the largest expected growth rate of any transit occupation, it is estimated that there will be more than 330,000 job openings for drivers across the nation by 2022.

The goal of ECCO+ is to directly impact the ability of participating adults to achieve long-term self-sufficiency through increased educational attainment and higher-wage or living wage employment.

Adults who complete the program increase skill levels and competencies, leading to community-based employment and increased economic mobility for the entire family.

ECCO+ has a transformative impact on the community, too. By creating ECCO+, the Council has added an additional training program for CDL-Passenger B certificated that is accessible to income-eligible participants. The Council asserts that without its ECCO+ program, transportation routes in the community may have been discontinued due to a lack of credentialed drivers.

At the start of the 2016-2017 school year, Fayette County—the largest of our four core communities, with a school district (Fayette County Public Schools, or FCPS) that educates more than 40,000 students each year—had approximately 20 available positions for school bus drivers.

Now, 21 months after the onset of the global pandemic, the shortage of qualified and trained bus drivers has reached a fever-pitch in our community. Despite hiring 19 new full-time bus drivers and five additional substitute drivers since the beginning of the 21-22 school year, the school district continues to face shortages daily which is having a direct, and significant, impact on student attendance. As an example, one day FCPS 37 bus drivers called out of work for the day. As reported on November 30, 2021, canceled bus routes have led to nearly 1,200 students missing at least a half-day or more of school.

At the same time, the global pandemic caused a significant disruption in Community Action Council’s ability to continuously provide its CDL-Class B coursework and training supports. As part of the executive order from Governor Beshear, the Kentucky Department of Transportation offices closed to the public in March 2020 and remained closed for most of the 20-21 program year. When local offices reopened, they did so with limited hours, effectively reducing the number of people who can make an appointment to complete and pass a road test, especially if a test needs to be taken more than once.

Our own adherence to health protocols meant that when Community Action Council reopened to the public in May 2021, we continued to limit in-person gatherings to a maximum group size of 10, which limited the number of people we could expect to enroll in and successfully complete our program. Nearly six months later, we have been able to relax the small group size requirement and have also doubled the number of cohorts we have in order to help Fayette County Public Schools and other local districts address their serious staffing shortage.

ECCO+ ensures that more adults earn a living wage. It has been the experience of the Council that CDL graduates accept positions and earn more than $17/per hour, with many increasing to $18/per hour within the first 6-12 months.

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The CDL track of ECCO+ targets for recruitment unemployed and under-employed Fayette County residents as a strategy for reducing poverty through local workforce development. CDL graduates may see a wage increase of more than $19,000.

From July 2021-November 30, 2021, and due to the COVID-29 related impacts described earlier, just six participants earned a CDL-Passenger B license. But as of this writing, the Council has 60 participants enrolled in its CDL program in Fayette County, and 10 of those participants have earned a permit and are currently preparing for the road test. We have a waiting list of 15 participants for the cohorts set to begin in January. Our CDL Training Coordinator is closely connected with local school districts and is assisting with employment referrals of our recent program graduates.