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Grant Provides Funds for Customized Training

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For employers challenged to find workers with high-demand skills, the Wisconsin Fast Forward (WFF) grant program offers a solution: create your own training program. Established in 2013, the WFF grant program funds innovative customized business-led training that fills a workforce need that may be unique to a company, industry sector or region.

Training projects receiving WFF grant funds spur collaboration among employers, workforce development boards, state agencies and educational systems. Administered by the Office of Skills Development (OSD) at the Department of Workforce Development, WFF has funded 200 worker training initiatives with more than \$20 million in grant contracts since its creation.

Since launching the grant program, the Department of Workforce Development has made the application process more user-friendly with regional workforce development boards serving as conveners—bringing together employers with similar workforce challenges to utilize the training grant funds and guide them through the process. Applicants in all sectors can now apply for the grant at any time throughout the year, with awards announced quarterly.

WFF grant dollars fund a variety of initiatives but are primarily used to train new hires and upscale incumbent worker skills in order to meet a business's specific workforce needs. An example of upscaling is a manufacturer who uses WFF grant dollars to train incumbent workers to perform maintenance on a specific machine versus finding new hires with the necessary maintenance skills. In that situation not only are the employer's workforce needs met, but employee morale also gets a boost from internal promotions. Upscaling an employer's current workforce also creates room at the front end for new-hire training.

Standard WFF grants include:

- **Worker Training Grants for All Sectors** – Award amount \$5,000 to \$400,000. Open to any size business.
- **Worker Training Grants for Small Business Occupations** – Award amount \$5,000 to \$50,000. Open to businesses with 50 or fewer full-time employees.

Grant dollars are only awarded to business-led training that doesn't already exist. The training must also result in wage increases for incumbent workers. New-hire training programs must result in employment for 85% of participants. Applicants are encouraged to include individuals from at-risk and special populations, including military veterans, ex-offenders, minorities and disabled individuals.

New-hire training typically includes more than one employer. Regional workforce boards will bring together multiple companies within a sector to customize training that benefits all involved. In the west central region we put together new-hire training for manufacturers that included instruction in math, geometric dimensioning and tolerancing, and blueprint reading. The trainees were then presented back

to employers in a reverse job fair, where employers could hire individuals based on the skills they just learned. Other examples of successful WFF-funded training can be found throughout the state.

Regional workforce development boards are ready to assist employers with the WFF grant application process. The boards often partner with local technical colleges to provide the training.

Training-related expenses such as the cost of instructors and instructional materials are covered by grant funds. All expenses must be documented and approved by the OSD. Matching funds equal to 50% of the grant dollars must be committed by the grant recipients. When multiple businesses are involved in the grant application and training initiative, the workforce development boards can serve as the fiscal agent to maintain confidentiality among all employers involved.

The online grant application along with scoring information and application tips can be found on the Wisconsin Fast Forward website at www.wisconsinfastforward.com.