



WorkforceWorks!! 2026: Workforce Development Month

Public Awareness Campaign: Understanding America's Public Workforce System

A Civic Guide to One of America's Most Important and Least Understood Public Systems

Every day, millions of Americans benefit from public systems they know well—our schools educate children, libraries provide access to information, and public health departments protect our communities.

Yet there is another public system working quietly in communities across the country that many Americans have never heard of.

- It helps businesses find skilled workers.
- It helps workers prepare for new careers.
- It supports veterans transitioning into civilian employment.
- It connects young adults to their first job.
- It assists individuals who have lost employment, changed careers, or are rebuilding their lives.
- It strengthens regional economies by bringing employers, educators, community organizations, and government together around one common goal: *Building a strong workforce.*

This guide is designed to explain how America's public workforce system works, why it exists, and why it matters to every community.

What Is America's Public Workforce System?

America's public workforce system is a nationwide network of federal, state, and local partners working together to help people gain skills, find employment, and meet the workforce needs of employers.

Rather than operating as a single agency, the system is built through collaboration among Workforce Development Boards, American Job Centers, educational institutions, economic development organizations, employers, labor organizations, community-based organizations, and many other partners.

Together, these organizations help ensure communities have the workforce needed to compete in a changing economy.

Why Was It Created?

- Strong economies depend on more than businesses and workers; they depend on connections.
- Employers need access to skilled talent.
- Workers need opportunities to build careers.
- Communities need coordinated strategies that respond to local economic conditions.
- America's public workforce system was designed to bring those pieces together.

Over the years, federal workforce legislation has evolved to strengthen coordination among education, workforce, economic development, and employer partners. The current framework is guided by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which emphasizes local leadership, employer engagement, accountability, and access to career opportunities.

What Is WIOA?

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is the primary federal law governing America's public workforce system.

Passed with strong bipartisan support in 2014, WIOA established a coordinated approach to workforce development by aligning employment services, education, vocational rehabilitation, and workforce programs.

The law recognizes that workforce challenges are local. Instead of creating one national solution, WIOA empowers communities to develop strategies that reflect their regional economies while remaining accountable for results.

Through WIOA, eligible individuals may access career coaching, skills assessments, education and training opportunities, supportive services, and other resources designed to help them prepare for and succeed in the workforce. The law also supports workforce services for youth, adults, and dislocated workers, including Rapid Response services that help communities respond to significant layoffs and connect affected workers with new employment and training opportunities.

At its core, WIOA is about expanding opportunity. It helps communities serve individuals facing barriers to employment by increasing access to education, career pathways, workforce services, and training that can lead to long-term economic mobility.

What Are Workforce Development Boards?

Workforce Development Boards are local governing bodies established under WIOA that are responsible for planning, coordinating, and overseeing workforce strategies within their regions. They help determine how workforce investments are prioritized locally while bringing together public and private partners to address regional workforce needs.

Each board brings together leaders from business, education, labor, economic development, government, and community organizations to identify workforce priorities and respond to local labor market needs.

Their role is not simply to operate programs.

Their role is to convene partners, align resources, support employers, and expand opportunities for workers.

Every community looks different, so every Workforce Development Board develops strategies that reflect the needs of its own region.

Federal Stewardship and Accountability

America's public workforce system is built on two important foundations: opportunity and accountability.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) authorizes the nation's public workforce system and establishes its purpose—helping individuals prepare for employment, supporting employers' workforce needs, and strengthening regional economies through locally driven workforce strategies.

At the same time, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) establishes government-wide standards for how federal financial assistance is managed. Through the Uniform Guidance, the OMB provides the framework for financial management, internal controls, procurement, monitoring, reporting, and oversight for organizations that receive federal grant funding.

Together, these frameworks help ensure that Workforce Development Boards and their partners deliver workforce services while managing public funds responsibly, transparently, and in accordance with federal requirements.

This shared commitment to accountability helps protect taxpayer investments while giving communities the flexibility to respond to their unique workforce needs.

In other words, America's public workforce system is designed to achieve two goals at the same time:

- Expand opportunity for workers and employers.
- Demonstrate responsible stewardship of public resources.

Both are essential to building public trust and strengthening communities.

What Are American Job Centers?

Across the country, American Job Centers operate under different names that reflect their local communities, each state has their own network of American Job Centers. A few examples of these centers are OhioMeansJobs, MichiganWorks, and WorkOne in Indiana. While the names may differ, they all share the same mission of connecting people and employers with workforce services and opportunities.

Individuals can visit an American Job Center to receive career guidance, job search assistance, skills assessments, training referrals, résumé assistance, supportive service connections, and information about education and employment opportunities.

For individuals who qualify, American Job Centers also help determine eligibility for WIOA-funded education and training opportunities. These investments help people gain the skills, credentials, and experience needed to prepare for careers in high-demand industries and strengthen their long-term employment opportunities.

Employers also use American Job Centers to recruit talent, host hiring events, identify training resources, and connect with workforce partners.

These centers bring multiple workforce services together in one place, making it easier for both workers and businesses to access support.

Why Employers Matter

The public workforce system was built around a simple principle: *Workforce development succeeds when employers help shape workforce solutions.*

- Employers identify skill needs.
- Workforce partners develop training.
- Educational institutions prepare talent.
- Workers gain pathways to careers.

This employer-driven approach helps communities build talent pipelines that respond to real workforce demand rather than assumptions about future needs.

Employers also benefit from workforce partnerships that support apprenticeships, on-the-job training, incumbent worker training, customized training, and other work-based learning opportunities. These strategies help employers develop the skilled workforce they need while creating meaningful career pathways that strengthen both businesses and local communities.

How Is the System Funded?

America's public workforce system is supported through a combination of federal, state, local, and partner investments.

Those resources are often coordinated—or "braided"—with contributions from educational institutions, community organizations, employers, philanthropy, and economic development partners to maximize impact and reduce duplication.

This collaborative approach allows communities to respond more effectively to local workforce needs.

Why Local Leadership Matters

A manufacturing community faces different workforce challenges than a rural community, a healthcare hub, or a technology corridor.

That's why workforce development is designed to be locally governed.

Local Workforce Development Boards bring together regional partners to develop strategies that reflect local industries, employer demand, and community priorities.

Local leadership creates national strength.

Why This Matters to Employers

Employers depend on access to skilled workers.

The public workforce system helps businesses:

- Recruit qualified talent
- Design industry-responsive training
- Build apprenticeship and work-based learning opportunities
- Upskill current employees
- Respond to changing workforce demands

When employers thrive, regional economies grow.

Why This Matters to Communities

Strong workforce systems contribute to stronger communities.

When people have access to education, training, career coaching, and employment opportunities, businesses are better able to grow, families achieve greater economic stability, and communities become more resilient.

Workforce development is about more than jobs—it is about strengthening the economic vitality of entire regions.

Why This Matters to Every American

Whether you've used an American Job Center, participated in a training program, hired through a workforce partner, or benefited from a stronger local economy, chances are you've already experienced the impact of America's public workforce system.

Most people simply don't realize it.

Understanding how the system works helps communities recognize the partnerships, public investments, and local leadership that support economic opportunity across the country.

Why Public Awareness Matters

America's public workforce system creates opportunity every day, yet most Americans have never heard of it. That lack of awareness has consequences.

When employers, taxpayers, voters, policymakers, educators, and community leaders understand how the system works, they are better equipped to engage with it, support it, and benefit from it. Public understanding helps strengthen trust in public investments, encourages employer partnerships, informs policy discussions, and connects more individuals to workforce opportunities.

For Workforce Development Boards and their partners, communication is more than marketing. It is public education. Every success story, employer partnership, apprenticeship, hiring event, and community investment helps demonstrate how the public workforce system strengthens regional economies and expands opportunity.

A stronger public understanding leads to stronger public trust. And stronger public trust helps ensure that America's workforce system continues to evolve, innovate, and serve communities for generations to come.