

The Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership

Developing a highly qualified workforce for the Milwaukee metropolitan area

The Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP) is a non-profit organization that serves the needs of Milwaukee-area employers, unions, and community residents. Its purpose is three-fold: to help local companies modernize plants and adopt new workplace practices; to upgrade the skills of current workers; and to recruit, train, and mentor new employees.

The 1980s was a decade of devastation for Wisconsin's largest city; in just ten years, Milwaukee County lost fully a third of its traditional industrial base. Unemployment and poverty rates rose sharply, union membership plummeted, and laid-off workers — many of whom had few transferable skills — could not find new jobs. In the meantime, companies that stayed in the area began adopting new technologies that their employees lacked the know-how to use. If firms were going to modernize, the local workforce would have to be brought up to speed.

That's where the WRTP came in. In the early 1990s, area labor leaders brought together a group of employers and unions to strategize about how to keep companies competitive and productive — and how to attract and retain qualified staff. By exchanging information about common problems, WRTP participants, or worksite-partners, were able to devise solutions — for example, effective recruitment and training programs — that could be implemented industry-wide.

The WRTP began by focusing on the future workforce. As Milwaukee's manufacturing sector began to recover in the mid-1990s, many older workers were reaching retirement age. As a result, by the second half of the 1990s, manufacturing accounted for only five percent of the area's job growth — but fully 25 percent of job openings! At the same time, welfare reform forced many adults into the low-wage labor market — but without the skills they needed to obtain family-sustaining jobs.

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Starting in 1997, the WRTP began to develop a nationally recognized model of employment-linked training with support from the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The WRTP received a demonstration grant from the U.S. Department of Labor in 2000 to replicate the model in a wide range of other sectors, including construction, health care, hospitality, technology, transportation, and utilities.

As part of this broader effort, the WRTP has successfully revitalized the BIG STEP apprenticeship preparation program in Milwaukee. BIG STEP has begun to place more low-income community residents in apprenticeships than all other programs in the area combined. The WRTP has also responded to the shortage of paraprofessional health care workers by achieving the best placement, wage, and retention rates for Certified Nursing Assistants in the area, and has begun to develop training and career upgrading programs for them to advance within the field.

Overall, the results have been impressive. At first, just a half-dozen firms participated in the WRTP process. Today, the WRTP consists of 125 worksite-partners covering about 75,000 employees. Between 1995 and 2000, these partners invested more than \$100 million in education and training — an investment that has paid off in the form of higher productivity, higher wages, and the creation of some 6,000 new jobs.

At the same time, the WRTP has placed more than 1,400 community residents in jobs — good jobs that offer an average starting wage of more than \$10 per hour, plus health insurance, pension, and other benefits. In their first year on the job, workers showed a jump in average earnings from \$9,000 to \$23,000! Moreover, about 75 percent were still working after that first year, well over half of them in the same or a better job — a remarkable achievement considering the substantial barriers these workers face. Of workers placed in jobs under MJI programs, about half had received some form of public assistance before becoming gainfully employed. More than 90 percent are people of color.

To reach even more prospective employees, the WRTP is strengthening its ties to community-based organizations. It has also joined with the YWCA of Greater Milwaukee (one of several private agencies administering Wisconsin's welfare program) to create a hands-on Workforce Training Center, where trainees learn to assemble products, install plumbing or electricity, pour concrete, process bank transactions, or care for patients in hospitals and nursing homes.

Most recently, the WRTP has received funding from the Ford Foundation to study the feasibility of developing a cooperatively owned staffing company. The coop would return a larger share of revenue to workers than a traditional staffing company and provide union benefits.

The success of the WRTP model is based on the commitment of employers and unions to hiring low-income and unemployed community residents. The WRTP offers members a cost-effective alternative to conventional staffing agencies in the recruitment, development, and advancement of qualified workers. Membership in the WRTP contributes to the development of family-supporting jobs in a highly competitive business environment.