

Innovate Michigan!

2024 Co-Learning Plan Series

The Align Center for Workforce Development

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MICHIGAN STATE
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U.S. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

The Align Center for Workforce Development

A Rural Model for Economic Recovery and Workforce Equity

Michigan State University

Center for Community and Economic Development

EDA University Center for Regional Economic Innovation

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INTRODUCTION

Lenawee County, Michigan, like many rural areas, is facing significant economic shifts. Traditionally reliant on manufacturing, particularly from tier-two suppliers, the county's workforce is now grappling with a transition to electric vehicle production. This shift has destabilized the long-standing economic foundation, particularly impacting families who have depended on manufacturing for generations. The rapid pace of change presents a particular challenge for Lenawee County's employers and workers alike, compounded by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The disruptions to supply chains, labor shortages, and sudden cost increases during the pandemic led many local businesses to close, unable to withstand these pressures. As a result, workforce participation in the county is alarmingly low, with only 58% of the eligible workforce employed, a figure even lower than Michigan's already poor ranking of 44th among U.S. states. This has serious implications for the county's economic recovery and future growth.

Moreover, career planning and workforce preparation have not kept pace with these changes. In Lenawee's K-12 schools, counselors face overwhelming caseloads, averaging 535 students each, with most of their time dedicated to addressing behavioral issues rather than guiding students toward career opportunities. Even when students' career profiles are generated using software, the data is often underutilized and disconnected from local job opportunities. Parents are generally unaware of these resources, and the links between student aspirations and local career options remain underexplored.

This fragmentation extends to job seekers facing personal or systemic barriers, such as minority populations, elders, individuals with criminal records, or those with disabilities. They often encounter a maze of nonprofits and federal agencies, few of which collaborate effectively. The lack of a centralized, coherent entry point for workforce assistance exacerbates the challenges these populations face.

These economic and social challenges highlight the need for innovative solutions. Economic recovery in Lenawee County requires coherent strategies that integrate various community stakeholders, leverage innovative models, and actively engage residents in the process. To succeed, this effort must break free from traditional inertia, foster workforce equity, and create a unified, accessible system. The Align Center for Workforce Development (ACWD) is designed to address these needs by creating a rural model for economic and workforce recovery.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Economic development organizations (EDOs) have traditionally played a key role in guiding companies through periods of economic transition, largely through the use of federal, state, or local incentives. This support is typically focused on site selection, securing tax breaks, and other fiscal remedies aimed at attracting or retaining businesses. While these strategies address some challenges, workforce development is often overlooked or treated as an afterthought. It typically follows the arrival of new companies, which prioritize infrastructure and equipment investments before considering the training and upskilling of local employees.

In Lenawee County, however, it became clear that the key to long-term economic recovery was not simply attracting businesses but addressing the underlying issue of talent supply. Employers' growing concerns

over talent acquisition and retention predated the Great Recession but were masked by the widespread layoffs during that period. As the economy began to recover, it became evident that the talent pool was insufficient to meet local demand. The COVID-19 pandemic further deepened this talent crisis, driving home the need for a comprehensive approach to workforce development. The Align Center for Workforce Development was born out of this realization, with the goal of developing a local talent pipeline capable of sustaining the region's economic future.

INNOVATION THROUGH COLLABORATION

Collaboration is often touted as the key to innovation, but true collaboration requires more than just aligning operational programs. It involves integrating strategic goals across organizations, particularly those serving the same client base. This type of collaboration is rare, particularly in the workforce development and economic development sectors, where organizations frequently operate in silos. The ACWD seeks to break down these silos by creating a shared space for partners to collaborate on unified workforce development goals.

At the Align Center, collaboration is more than just co-locating services under one roof; it is about creating strategic partnerships that enhance the effectiveness of each organization involved. The focus is on integrating services to create a cohesive, client-centered system. For example, partners at the ACWD do not merely share clients but also share strategic goals, which include workforce equity and reducing the anxiety that clients often feel when navigating fragmented service systems. By working together, the Center's partners can offer a streamlined approach to workforce development, minimizing handoffs between agencies and building trust with clients. This integrated approach is crucial to addressing the unique needs of Lenawee's underserved populations.

PEOPLE FOCUS, NOT A PROJECT FOCUS

The Align Center for Workforce Development was designed with a focus on people rather than projects. Historically, economic development efforts have often centered on attracting or retaining businesses, with the assumption that job creation would follow. However, the ACWD recognizes that this approach overlooks the root cause of many local economic challenges: the lack of a cohesive, accessible employment path for local residents, particularly those facing cultural or economic barriers.

The ACWD's approach began with a comprehensive needs assessment, which gathered information from local employers and residents to identify talent shortages and workforce gaps. This effort revealed a critical gap in career planning within the local K-12 system. Although schools had access to software that could generate career profiles for students, this information was not being used to connect students with local job opportunities. To address this, the ACWD placed career counselors in schools to help students navigate career options and develop pathways to local employment opportunities.

The ACWD also identified a gap in certification programs. Many residents lack the credentials needed to secure employment, falling into the space between having no documented skills and holding a college degree. The Center aims to fill this gap by providing industry-recognized certification programs, particularly for nontraditional populations, recent high school graduates, and adults seeking to reenter the workforce. By offering accessible pathways to employment, the ACWD is helping to create sustainable career opportunities for Lenawee County's residents.

THE STATUS OF THE ALIGN CENTER FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The Align Center for Workforce Development has made significant progress since its inception. A former church on the east side of Adrian, Michigan, was purchased and is being renovated to serve as the ACWD's physical hub. This location was chosen strategically, as the east side of Adrian is an area with high unemployment, underemployment, drug-related crimes, and general poverty. By situating the ACWD in this community, the Center aims to build relationships with residents, foster trust, and offer resources that address the unique challenges of the area.

The design of the building reflects the Center's mission to create a welcoming, accessible environment for all residents. The renovation includes training rooms, event spaces, offices for partner organizations, and a daycare facility to support adult students attending classes. A key feature of the building is the "friendly front porch," designed to make the Center feel approachable and inviting. Many social service agencies in the county are located near the east side but are often perceived as cold and unwelcoming. The ACWD seeks to create a different atmosphere, one that encourages residents to seek help and engage with the services offered.

The ACWD is on track to open its doors in June 2025. In the meantime, the project team is working closely with community stakeholders, including business owners, church leaders, and volunteers from organizations such as Hispanics for Lenawee Alliance (HOLA). These stakeholders are actively involved in the planning process, providing valuable input on the building's design, programs, and metrics. Additionally, the ACWD is exploring opportunities to leverage its resources to support the redevelopment of the east side's service and retail sectors, which have been decimated in recent years.

SPECIFIC MILESTONES AND PROGRESS

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT FOR EAST ADRIAN

The renovation of the ACWD building is well underway, with a focus on creating a space that will serve both workforce development and broader community needs. The Chico Martinez Event Center, located within the building, will serve as a venue for workforce-related events as well as community gatherings, such as weddings and funerals. This dual-purpose space helps bridge the social and economic divides in the community, creating a place where residents can come together for both professional and personal reasons.

Beyond the initial building, the ACWD is planning to establish a broader campus on Adrian's east side. This campus will include additional social service and health organizations, further integrating services that support both workforce development and overall community well-being. ProMedica Health's EBEID program, which focuses on the social determinants of health, is expected to be housed within the Align Center, providing a direct link between health and workforce development services.

COLLABORATION MODEL

One of the ACWD's key goals is to create a model of collaboration that goes beyond operational partnerships. The Center is actively engaging national associations to bring industry-recognized certification programs to Lenawee County. These certifications provide a critical pathway for residents to enter or advance in the workforce, offering credentials that are highly valued by local employers.

This approach fills a significant gap in the local education and workforce development system. While other counties may rely solely on community colleges to provide training resources, the ACWD is leveraging a diverse range of partners, including private sector trainers, subject matter experts, and industry foundations. By drawing on these resources, the Center can offer training that is tailored to the specific needs of local employers and industries.

PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The ACWD is building partnerships not only within Lenawee County but also in surrounding areas, such as Hillsdale and Jackson counties. These regional partnerships are critical to developing a comprehensive training network that can meet the needs of a wide range of employers and industries. ProMedica Health continues to offer financial literacy programs through the Center, and additional partners are being sought to expand the range of services offered.

These partnerships take time to develop, but they are essential to the long-term success of the ACWD. By building trust and sharing financial successes, the ACWD is creating a strategic network of partners who are committed to supporting the region's talent pipeline. This roadmap for partnership development was a key focus during the fellowship and remains central to the Center's future plans.

SINGLE PATHWAY FOR CLIENTS AND EMPLOYERS

One of the primary objectives of the Align Center for Workforce Development (ACWD) is to create a singular, streamlined pathway for both clients seeking training and employers in need of certified workers. The Center's approach is to customize its training programs based on the specific demands of local employers, focusing on certifications rather than traditional college degrees. By offering industry-recognized certifications, the ACWD provides a more attainable and realistic goal for nontraditional populations, such as recent high school graduates without college aspirations, and adults looking to reenter the workforce or pivot into new industries.

This focus on certifications is particularly valuable in today's job market, where many employers prioritize skill-specific credentials over formal academic degrees. For example, in the flooring industry, which is currently facing a shortage of installers, the ACWD is partnering with local businesses to develop a targeted training program. This program will not only train workers but also provide them with the necessary certifications to secure jobs in the industry. These certifications are critical for ensuring that workers meet the quality standards expected by employers, which in turn helps businesses maintain their reputations and customer satisfaction.

By aligning the Center's resources, instructors, consultants, and partnerships with the needs of local employers, the ACWD is creating a talent pipeline that addresses the immediate and future demands of the regional economy. The emphasis on non-degree tracks reflects the growing trend of employers seeking practical, hands-on skills that can be learned through shorter, more focused training programs. In many cases, employers are even willing to cover the cost of training for workers, as long as the time to certification is significantly shorter than that required to earn a college degree.

The creation of a single, accessible pathway for clients is crucial to the success of the ACWD. This pathway ensures that residents of Lenawee County, particularly those from underserved populations, have access to the training and resources they need to secure stable, well-paying jobs. At the same time, local

employers benefit from a steady stream of certified workers, helping to address the region's talent shortages and support economic growth.

COMMUNITY NAVIGATORS

A key component of the Align Center's success has been its engagement with the local community through the hiring of community navigators. These navigators, who are residents of the east side of Adrian, play a vital role in connecting the Center to the community. Their familiarity with the area, its people, and its challenges allows them to serve as trusted intermediaries, helping residents access the services and programs offered by the ACWD.

In August 2024, the ACWD held a large community outreach event, designed primarily by the community navigators. This event, which attracted over 400 residents, provided an opportunity for the community to engage with the Align Center, learn about its mission and services, and tour the building under renovation. The event featured several family-friendly activities and provided attendees with food and backpacks for local children, further solidifying the Center's role as a community hub.

The success of this event demonstrated the importance of having local residents involved in the design and implementation of the Center's programs. Community navigators not only help build trust between the ACWD and the residents of East Adrian, but they also ensure that the programs and services offered are aligned with the real needs of the community. By providing a direct line of communication between the Center and the people it serves, the navigators play a crucial role in fostering community engagement and participation.

The work of the community navigators goes beyond outreach events. They are involved in day-to-day activities at the Center, helping residents navigate the various programs and services offered. They assist with everything from enrolling in training programs to connecting residents with financial assistance, transportation, and childcare services. Their role is to reduce the barriers that many residents face when trying to access workforce development resources, ensuring that the Center is truly inclusive and accessible to all.

FRIENDLY FRONT PORCH

One of the core design principles of the Align Center for Workforce Development is the concept of the "friendly front porch." This idea goes beyond the physical design of the building; it reflects the overall culture and approach of the Center. From the outset, the ACWD has been committed to creating an environment that is welcoming, inclusive, and culturally sensitive.

The physical design of the building is intended to foster this sense of openness and inclusion. The "friendly front porch" is more than just a literal porch; it symbolizes the Center's commitment to creating a space where residents feel comfortable and welcomed. Many social service agencies in Lenawee County are located near the east side of Adrian, but these agencies are often perceived as uninviting, with cold, institutional exteriors that can deter residents from seeking help. The ACWD aims to break this pattern by creating a building that is warm and approachable, both in its appearance and its operations.

This philosophy of creating a welcoming environment extends to the services offered by the ACWD. The Center's partners and staff are trained to be culturally sensitive and responsive to the diverse needs of the

community. This is especially important given the challenges faced by many residents of East Adrian, who may have experienced distrust or discomfort when engaging with traditional service providers. By modeling collaboration and inclusivity in everything it does, the ACWD is setting a new standard for how workforce development and social services can be delivered in a way that respects and empowers clients.

NEXT STEPS FOR THE ALIGN CENTER

As the Align Center for Workforce Development prepares to open its doors in June 2025, several key areas of focus will guide its next steps:

BUILDING COMPLETION

The completion of the building will mark a significant milestone in the ACWD's journey. Once the renovation is finished, the Center will have a central location to consolidate its training programs, services, and partnerships. This will simplify access for residents and provide a one-stop resource for workforce development in the community. The new building will also provide much-needed space for community events, training programs, and partner organizations, allowing the ACWD to expand its offerings and serve a larger population.

COLLABORATION

Collaboration will continue to be a driving force behind the ACWD's success. Once the building is operational, regular partner meetings will be held to ensure that all services are aligned and that partners are working together to achieve the Center's goals. Strategic partnerships with organizations such as ProMedica Health, local community colleges, and private sector trainers will be essential in delivering comprehensive, high-quality training and services.

TRAINING PROGRAMS

The ACWD's training programs will be designed around the needs of local employers, with a focus on industry-recognized certifications and non-degree tracks. These programs will provide a pathway for residents to gain the skills needed to secure jobs in high-demand industries such as construction, manufacturing, and healthcare. The Center's training offerings will be flexible and responsive, allowing employers to request specific courses and ensuring that residents receive the most relevant and up-to-date training available.

SUSTAINABILITY

Securing diverse funding streams will be crucial to the ACWD's long-term sustainability. In addition to state grants and private donations, the Center will generate revenue from training programs and facility rentals. The event space, for example, will not only be used for workforce development events but also be available for community events such as weddings and funerals. This dual-purpose use will help the Center generate income while also serving the broader community.

As the Center moves toward full operation, fund development will remain a top priority. ACWD will continue to seek support from local businesses, individuals, and foundations, all of whom have a vested interest in the success of this community resource. The Center is poised to become a cornerstone of East Adrian's economic recovery, and its sustainability will depend on continued investment from both the public and private sectors.

CONCLUSION

The Align Center for Workforce Development represents a bold and innovative approach to addressing the systemic workforce challenges faced by rural communities like Lenawee County. By focusing on people rather than projects, the ACWD is creating sustainable career pathways and equitable economic opportunities for residents. Through its emphasis on collaboration, community engagement, and strategic partnerships, the Center is breaking down the traditional silos that have long hindered economic development efforts.

As the ACWD prepares to open its doors in 2025, it stands as a model for how rural communities can leverage workforce development as a tool for economic recovery and growth. The Center's people-focused approach, combined with its commitment to inclusivity and cultural sensitivity, sets it apart from traditional workforce development initiatives. By bringing together residents, businesses, and community organizations in a shared mission, the ACWD is creating a new path forward for Lenawee County—one that prioritizes equity, sustainability, and collective action.

LEARNING MILESTONES

The Align Center for Workforce Development has achieved several key learning milestones that may serve as a valuable guide for other communities embarking on similar initiatives:

SHARE YOUR VISION AND STAY COMMITTED

The importance of sharing the vision for the Align Center and staying committed to it, even when faced with challenges, cannot be overstated. From the initial concept to the implementation phase, the ACWD has remained focused on its mission of workforce equity and community revitalization. This unwavering commitment has been key to building trust with stakeholders and securing the support needed to move the project forward.

BALANCE IS KEY

Leading an innovation project is demanding work and maintaining a healthy balance between personal and professional life is essential for long-term success. The development of the ACWD has been a marathon, not a sprint, and finding ways to stay balanced—whether through exercise, spending time with family, or taking moments for reflection—has been crucial for the leadership team.

FINANCIAL PLANNING IS CRUCIAL

No matter how important or impactful a project may be, sustainability always hinges on financial planning. The ACWD's leadership has worked diligently to secure the funding needed to bring the project to fruition, but the work doesn't stop once the building is complete. Securing ongoing revenue streams—from program fees, rentals, and donations—will be essential to ensuring the Center's long-term viability. Building a financial cushion early on has helped the ACWD navigate unexpected challenges and stay on course.

TRUST THE PROCESS

Building trust with partners, stakeholders, and the community has been a key factor in the success of the ACWD. This trust has been earned through transparency, collaboration, and a willingness to listen to and learn from others. The ACWD has embraced a process of continuous learning and adaptation, which has

allowed it to remain flexible and responsive to the needs of the community. The success of this project is a testament to the power of trusting in the process and staying the course, even in the face of uncertainty.

The MSU EDA University Center for Regional Economic Innovation (REI) seeks to identify and develop new economic development tools, models, policies, and practices to support innovative economic development, high-growth enterprises, and job creation in distressed regions across the state. REI is establishing a new economic development ecosystem to cope with the ever-changing global and regional dynamics. Through this ecosystem, REI engages innovative and creative minds which results in new economic development practices.

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