



REMOVING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Workforce Innovation Grants expand opportunities for untapped workers



December 2025



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ELIMINATING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR WISCONSINITES



December 2025

Like many other states, Wisconsin in recent years has faced a workforce shortage driven primarily by an aging population and slowing birthrates. Given our already high labor participation rate—consistently higher than the national average—in Wisconsin we've chosen to focus our efforts on helping communities and workers overcome the remaining barriers to full employment.

In 2021, Governor Tony Evers created the Workforce Innovation Grant (WIG) Program to encourage communities to identify local workforce needs and develop and implement solutions that could be replicated elsewhere. Jointly administered by the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), the program used funding from the American Rescue Plan Act to fund 27 projects across the state.

Eliminating barriers to entering the workforce can ensure that employers and employees thrive together, building better communities and succeeding in the marketplace. Commitment to bringing everyone into the workplace can be a compelling way to drive employee satisfaction, customer appreciation, and overall prosperity.

That kind of commitment requires changes in attitude and a deep understanding of the needs of all employee groups. The innovations described in this report are helping to drive change and demonstrate the benefit of giving everyone a seat at the table.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sam Rikkers".

Sam Rikkers
Chief Operating Officer
Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation

TAPPING THE POTENTIAL OF OVERLOOKED WORKERS



December 2025

We are proud to support the WIG-funded projects in this report, which are creatively working to bolster the workforce pipeline for many in-demand occupational sectors faced with pervasive worker shortages in Wisconsin.

Governor Evers invested a groundbreaking \$158 million from the American Rescue Plan Act to not only support innovative pandemic recovery efforts, but to address the state's ongoing workforce needs. Projects in this report are examples of some of the creative, local solutions to regional workforce challenges. The grants have provided workforce training and supportive services to 18,000 Wisconsin residents since they began and continue to yield results today.

In rural and urban areas across our state, people face significant barriers to getting and keeping a job, including people with neurodivergence; those with intellectual, developmental, and physical disabilities; people who were formerly incarcerated; and people who lack a high school-level education.

As shown in this report, supporting evidence-based solutions for Wisconsinites eager to join or rejoin the workforce helps improve economic outcomes for these workers—and for the entire state.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Amy Pechacek".

Amy Pechacek
Secretary
Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development



THE CHALLENGE

TACKLING WISCONSIN'S WORKFORCE SHORTAGE BY INCREASING ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT

Solutions to Wisconsin's ongoing worker shortages can be found in the significant, untapped workforce pool of individuals who face barriers to finding and keeping a job. This pool of workers includes neurodivergent people; people with intellectual, developmental, and physical disabilities; people who were formerly incarcerated; and people lacking a high school diploma. WIG funding targeted programs working to break down societal barriers that have historically prevented these groups from fully participating in the economy.

For example, so-called "second chance" hiring of people who were formerly incarcerated can expand the nation's workforce and simultaneously provide those people with income and fulfillment. Research by the Society for Human Resource Management and the Charles Koch Institute found that 85% of human resources leaders and 81% of business leaders said second-chance hires performed as well or better than other employees.

The Harvard Business Review has published findings that show teams perform better when they are cognitively diverse. Similarly, the World Economic Forum briefing highlights how neurodivergent workers contribute valuable skills in creativity and analytical thinking.

Completing high school is a key determinant of employment success. CareerOneStop, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor, reports that people with a high school diploma or the equivalent are 33% more likely to be employed, and that those who are employed earn 40% more on average relative to people who didn't finish high school.

A labor market hungry for dependable employees in a range of sectors can ill afford to ignore these pools of workers seeking to make better lives. WIG-funded initiatives in this area are working to expand those opportunities and break down barriers to entering the workforce, so everyone has a chance to thrive.



THE VISION

CAPTURING PRODUCTIVITY AND SKILLS BY VALUING ALL SEGMENTS OF SOCIETY

As part of its work to develop an Economy for All, Wisconsin had the vision to tackle targeted workforce needs in a variety of areas, including transportation, education, health care, and housing, among others. A total of \$128 million was awarded to 27 projects during the course of the program.

The WIG Program harnessed the power of creativity, regional collaboration, and innovative solutions to longtime local workforce needs. The grants encouraged development of leading-edge, long-term solutions enabling businesses and institutions to find ways to connect people to resources that meet communities' needs, support businesses' hiring goals, and help people find family-supporting careers more easily.

Three of these WIG-funded programs are creating access for individuals who face barriers to employment. Each of these initiatives has given people in these populations an opportunity to earn a living, improve their quality of life, and contribute to Wisconsin's vibrant economy.





INNOVATION ONE: THINK ABILITY CHANGES EXPECTATIONS, TAPS THE WORKFORCE POWER OF NEURODIVERGENT OR DISABLED PEOPLE

Think Ability Wisconsin is a collaboration of nine Wisconsin organizations, dedicated to opening the doors of employment for neurodivergent people and people with intellectual, developmental, and physical disabilities. This initiative, administered by the Down Syndrome Association of Wisconsin (DSAW), is using a \$9 million WIG award to provide training and resources for these potential workers, and to raise employer awareness of the value of this untapped workforce.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Think Ability Wisconsin provides a centralized point of access for the array of resources and wraparound services available for the neurodivergent and disabled.
- Navigators help clients and their families access resources, job retention services, and vocational training and envision a life path from middle school to high school and into the workforce.
- Its public awareness campaign is working to change societal and employer perceptions and shift attitudes toward hiring people who are neurodivergent or disabled.

THE SITUATION:

Of the 9.5 million individuals
in the U.S. with intellectual disabilities

NEARLY 1/3

have never held a job

Source: 2013 National snapshot of adults with intellectual disabilities in the labor force, Gary N. Siperstein, Robin C. Parker and Max Drascher
University of Massachusetts, Boston, MA, USA

As much as

**80% OF PEOPLE
WITH DISABILITIES**

are shut out of the labor markets

Source: 2024 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

THE EXPERIENCE:

Think Ability Wisconsin is opening doors to employment for neurodivergent people and people with intellectual, developmental, and physical disabilities, helping them and their families navigate an array of programs and resources—and helping employers understand the value of these individuals in the workplace.

DSAW and its eight partner agencies offer statewide resources, counseling, vocational training, and navigation services for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

This work is crucial, since people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Wisconsin represent a valuable pool of potential employees if only they had adequate support at a time when many employers struggle to attract workers. Think Ability offers a holistic, comprehensive approach to addressing the challenges of finding employment and navigating the transition to adulthood for people with disabilities while also solving Wisconsin employers' hiring and retention challenges.

"Everyone deserves a fulfilling job, but for people with disabilities, the barriers can be overwhelming. These individuals are out there, ready, willing, and able to be some of the best employees these employers ever have."

—Dawn Nuoffer, President and CEO, DSAW

Dawn Nuoffer, DSAW's president and CEO, says that while there are a range of services available, the services are decentralized, often making access difficult.

"Wisconsin is a resource-rich state, but it's almost so plentiful that families don't know where to go," Nuoffer says. "There's a lack of a single, coordinated access point where families can go for the type of wraparound, no-wrong-door approach that we offer."

Through its Think Ability Wisconsin Center, the initiative brings together agencies to answer those questions and get families tapped into the service pipeline earlier and under the guidance of experts.

"Because of the grant, we can direct them to the services they need and give them navigators to direct them to resources, job retention services, and vocational training," she says.

THE EXPERIENCE:

Too often, Nuoffer says, people with disabilities have access to children's systems that serve them until age 18 but aren't directed to adult services until they are 17 ½—leaving little time to make important decisions about employment, life after high school, housing, guardianship, and the vast amount of information being presented to them. Think Ability is helping families to bridge that divide and create transition plans earlier.

"For instance, if you have a 12-year-old on the autism spectrum, and they don't have an idea of what life might look like after high school, we can create a futures plan that meets them where they're at," Nuoffer says, adding that navigators can offer a continuum of support through middle and high schools and into the workforce.

THROUGH JUNE 2025,

446 PEOPLE

have been placed in jobs

MORE THAN

3,300

people have been hosted
at employer trainings

THOSE PLACED THROUGH
THINK ABILITY HAVE A

96%

employment retention rate

One important part of Think Ability's work is outreach to employers to change attitudes about hiring people who are neurodivergent or disabled.

"They just need employers to give them the opportunities and the trainings to succeed," said Nuoffer, adding that employers have not historically viewed neurodivergent people as an untapped labor pool. Think Ability has mounted a public awareness campaign and outreach effort to change those attitudes.

Think Ability's media campaign has reached the public with billboards, public-service advertisements online, and on TV and radio. Through June 2025, the campaign generated 470,018 website visitors and 432.9 million media impressions, participated in 1,426 outreach events, and hosted 3,340 people at employer trainings.



THE EXPERIENCE:

"We talk about increased profit margins, employee retention, employee morale, and expanded consumer base—because people who love people with disabilities frequent and shop at businesses that hire people with disabilities," she says. "These jobs aren't only good for people with disabilities, they're good for business."

As of June 2025, Think Ability's efforts have placed 446 people in jobs with an average \$13.20 hourly wage at placement. Its other metrics have demonstrated its statewide impact:

- 48,178 individuals served
- 4,360 enrolled in support service or trainings
- 436 youths completed job trainings
- 96% employment retention rate
- 1,796 people with disabilities enrolled in online classes

One of Think Ability's program participants, 15-year-old Maddy Stannis, is employed as a hostess at the New Berlin Ale House and helps with busing tables and wrapping silverware. "At my age, it's hard to decide on a career," Stannis says. "I'm proud to be working at my age. I am unique, kind, and a hard worker."

Nuoffer says the program is pointing the way for employers and those with disabilities, in hopes of enriching lives, brightening futures, and building Wisconsin's workforce.

"It's time to open the door to new possibilities. People with disabilities are getting the skills and training needed to thrive in a wide variety of industries," Nuoffer says, "They're ready for an opportunity, a job, a career. All you have to do is start with 'Yes.'"

THE RESULTS: 2022–2025

As of June 2025

 **MORE THAN
48,000**

individuals have been served
by Think Ability Wisconsin



LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Wraparound services aren't just for workers.

Nuoffer says employers also need guidance in shaping their hiring practices, and Think Ability responded by offering employer education on how to interview, onboard, and retain people with disabilities.

2. Changing attitudes takes time and patience.

The group has placed 446 people into the workforce, which is short of the original goal of 1,000 placed. In the first two years of the grant, preexisting systemic challenges and cultural barriers limited placements to just 45—but Nuoffer says those barriers are beginning to lessen as a result of their work. From July 2024 to June 2025, the group reported an additional 401 placements.





INNOVATION TWO: *EDUCATION IN WISCONSIN'S PRISONS OFFERS SECOND CHANCES, STRENGTHENS THE WORKFORCE*

A quality prison education system eases reentry into the workforce and has been shown to reduce recidivism rates by more than 40%. That was the aim of the Prison Education Initiative (PEI), a collaboration of UW-Madison and other members of the Universities of Wisconsin. PEI used a \$5.7 million WIG to help educate prisoners prior to their release.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Connects the prison education efforts of UW-Madison with UW-Green Bay, UW-Eau Claire, and UW-Stout, and with several correctional institutions in Wisconsin
- Provides largely in-person instruction for associate and bachelor's degree programs, in addition to digital certificates in soft skills
- Renovated or built out modern learning spaces, with new furniture, digital display boards, and computers

THE SITUATION:

In Wisconsin,

**40% OF
THOSE RELEASED
FROM PRISON**

will return within three years

Source: 2021 Wisconsin Department of Corrections

Those who participate in a correction education program are

**28% LESS
LIKELY TO REOFFEND**

than those who do not

Source: 2018 RAND Corporation

Every \$1 invested in education

**SAVES UP
TO \$5**

in reincarceration costs

Source: 2013 RAND Corporation

THE EXPERIENCE:

Each year about 8,000 people leave Wisconsin's prison system. Of those, about 40% will return within three years.

Helping incarcerated people learn skills that provide a pathway to jobs after their release could reduce recidivism and save the state \$45,000 annually for each individual who does not return to prison. That's the aim of the PEI, which received \$5.7 million in WIG funding to help educate prisoners prior to their release.

The initiative connected prison education efforts at UW-Madison and other Universities of Wisconsin institutions to provide inmates with degree and certificate programs that will improve their odds of success when they return to society and to the Wisconsin job market.

"The one thing that has proven to be reliably effective at keeping people from returning to prison is participation in prison educational programming," says Peter Moreno, the initiative's director.

Prior to the grant, some college jumpstart programs were offered. These were primarily individual classes designed to persuade prisoners to continue an education upon release. But WIG funding allowed the Universities of Wisconsin to open diploma and degree programs in some of Wisconsin's correctional institutions.

The PEI effort grew out of a UW-Madison instructional effort called *Odyssey Beyond Bars*, which introduced inmates to prison-based education in an introductory writing class at Oakhill Correctional Institution in Oregon, Wisconsin.

The grant enabled UW-Madison and UW-Green Bay to collaborate in providing an associate degree in general studies program, in which UW-Green Bay provides the credits and tuition and UW-Madison offers instruction and student support.



THE EXPERIENCE:

The associate degree prepares graduates to transfer into a four-year-degree program. On the way to an associate degree, each semester students can also earn “digital badges”—a micro-credential in work-ready skills that certifies achievement in a specific work-related area.

Moreno says many of the badges focus on communication skills because feedback from employers showed that they prize people who can communicate, work well in teams, and follow procedures.

“We also support folks getting out of prison and re-entering society, getting them connected to housing, to campus-based resources, and employers.”

The Oakhill program has also won federal Pell Grant approval to provide the federal student aid needed to sustain the program. Moreno says Pell Grants are necessary to help finance prison education programs, noting that when Pell Grant eligibility for prison-based programs was eliminated in 1994, more than 90% of the college-instructed prison education programs evaporated.

AS OF SUMMER 2025,
132 STUDENTS
had taken degree coursework
through a UW institution

MORE THAN
200 STUDENTS
had earned digital badges
as of summer 2025

The grant funding helped forge a collaborative program between UW-Stout and UW-Eau Claire to establish a bachelor’s degree program at Stanley Correctional Institution about 35 miles northeast of Eau Claire. There, the two universities offer instruction and student support, and UW-Madison’s PEI program provides an on-site coordinator to align the efforts of the students, the universities, and DOC.

At the Stanley Correctional Institution, there are two bachelor’s degree programs. UW-Eau Claire is offering a bachelor of science degree in professional studies which is customizable in four different areas, and UW-Stout is offering a degree in management and leadership. The program at Stanley is seeking the important Pell Grant eligibility.

As of summer 2025, 132 incarcerated students have taken associate or bachelor’s degree coursework through a UW institution, with almost all of the instruction delivered in person, and more than 200 students have earned digital badges.

THE EXPERIENCE:

There have been 19 associate of arts and sciences degrees conferred at Oakhill, four from prior semesters and 15 awarded in May 2025. Of the four prior-semester graduates, three have left prison and returned home, and all are employed.

Moreno recognizes that the numbers are small, but the program has aimed to keep graduation rates high to help sustain Pell Grant funding.

"If we're able to make a dent in recidivism and allow people to be more productive when they come home from prison, it's worth the investment."

- Peter Moreno, Director, Prison Education Initiative

WIG funding also supported UW-Green Bay courses at Taycheedah Correctional Institution, a women's prison in Fond du Lac, in hopes of building a degree program there in the future.

Prison education helps stabilize individuals and families, prevent cycles of crime, and create safer communities, Moreno says. And it can save taxpayers' money. A RAND Corporation study found that every \$1 invested in prison education saves \$4 to \$5 in reincarceration costs.

"If people are committing fewer crimes and if there is less recidivism, that means there are fewer victims, safer neighborhoods, less strain on the criminal justice system. It has a stabilizing effect," Moreno adds. "If we're able to make a dent in recidivism and allow people to be more productive when they come home from prison, it's worth the investment."

Because prisons were, for the most part, not specifically designed to accommodate educational spaces, the project worked with the Department of Corrections (DOC) and used WIG funding to provide those learning spaces within correctional facilities.



THE EXPERIENCE:

Moreno says about \$1.6 million in grant funding went to underwrite improvements at several prisons, including Oakhill and Stanley.

For example, at Oakhill two classrooms, two study spaces, and its Learning Center were renovated to include new furniture, interactive digital display boards, and computers. An entire area was improved to provide two classroom spaces, a closet, and an office for initiative programs in the facility's basement. All furniture and the layout of the space were designed by students in the degree program who are also in a DOC internship at Oakhill with the Bureau of Correctional Enterprises.

At Stanley, three rooms were renovated to provide for more classroom space and move a different program to a new location. New furniture, computer docking stations, and interactive digital display boards were also installed. Other educational improvements were made at Taycheedah, Oshkosh, Green Bay, Redgranite, and Sturtevant.

WIG-funded instruction and facilities improvements are playing a critical role in ensuring the long-term success of educational programs in state prisons that prepare incarcerated people for jobs upon their release.

"Wisconsin needs workers and we have folks in prison who really want to learn and work," Moreno says. "There's a tremendous demand for self-improvement and learning inside."

The initiative received a \$6.9 million grant from Madison-based Ascendium Education Philanthropy to sustain its work. Moreno says the goal of the grant is to continue building UW degree programs in prisons, help graduates get jobs, and hire a career advisor and a re-entry support coordinator, among other things.

THE RESULTS: 2022–2025



As of spring 2025,
19 DEGREES
had been conferred at
Oakhill Correctional Institution alone

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Partner with prisons.

Building a strong, collaborative relationship with DOC and clearly communicating program needs is essential. "Corrections' main priority is security and ours is academic freedom and free thought, and those things are sometimes in tension," says Moreno. "But the teamwork we have is wonderful." That relationship is central to long-term sustainability.

2. Education requires space.

Providing funding for adequate, dedicated physical spaces for education within correctional facilities is also vital and merits an investment of resources to help strengthen programs for the long haul.

3. Microcredentials lead to achievement.

Moreno says the program also offers a "digital badge" program, essentially a series of microcredentials in specific work-ready skills such as communication. These digital badges are often embedded in a larger degree program to provide a sense of real achievement and encourage participants to continue on their academic path to build their skill sets. Moreno says the digital badges were partly the result of discussions with employers focusing on their needs. One of the first needs that emerged from those talks was human relations. "We were expecting to hear back from employers about hot jobs and hot skills," he says. "What came back was that they want people who can work in a team, communicate through conflict, follow rules, and learn how to do the job."





INNOVATION THREE: GATEWAY PARTNERSHIP OPENS WORKFORCE OPPORTUNITY BY CLOSING EDUCATIONAL GAP

Gaining access to Wisconsin's job market is often limited when the applicant lacks at least a high school diploma. The Southeast Wisconsin Talent Optimization Project used \$5.7 million in WIG funding to broaden access to a high school equivalency diploma (HSED) in Racine, Kenosha, and Walworth counties, removing this barrier to finding a job.

HOW IT WORKS:

- Provided a four-week pre-HSED program to prepare participants for the 16-week Work Ready HSED program of instruction and testing
- Offered courses in English and Spanish in both online and in-person formats
- Provided access to counseling and support services, as well as job placement services, job fairs, on-site recruiting, and more

THE SITUATION:

In Wisconsin

**6.6% OF
RESIDENTS**

over 25 lack a high school diploma

Source: 2023 U.S. Census Bureau

Workers without
high school diplomas

**MAKE \$200
LESS WEEKLY**

on average than those
with diplomas

Source: 2023 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Adults over 25 who lack
high school diplomas have the

**HIGHEST
UNEMPLOYMENT**

rates in the U.S.

Source: 2025 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

THE EXPERIENCE:

When an applicant lacks at least a high school-level education, gaining access to Wisconsin's job market is often limited. Employers often use a high school diploma as a benchmark to gauge potential employees' foundational skills, but according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 6.6% of state residents over age 25 lack this important credential. Gateway Technical College and its partners recognized those difficulties and designed a WIG-funded program to broaden HSED access and remove this barrier to finding a job.

The Southeast Wisconsin Talent Optimization Project aims to help bring people into better jobs, build earning capacity, and open the door to higher education and employment.

Gateway's project provided a four-week pre-HSED program to prepare participants for the 16-week Work Ready HSED program of instruction and testing. Beyond that, it offered courses in English and Spanish in both online and in-person formats. The on-site options were offered at central sites, both during the day and at night, to make them more convenient and accessible.

"The goals of the program were crucial because they addressed a significant educational gap in Southeastern Wisconsin, where there are about 35,000 working-age individuals without a high school diploma."

- Marshlli Hamilton, Director, Southeast Wisconsin Talent Optimization Project

Participants were able to access counseling and support services as needed to remain on track to completion. The college also provided events featuring industry employers in multiple sectors to give students more information about job possibilities and requirements and connect businesses with potential employees.



THE EXPERIENCE:

Gateway partnered with the Southeastern Wisconsin Workforce Development Board, the YWCA of Southeast Wisconsin, and Higher Expectations for Racine County on the project.

Jeffrey Kehl, supervisor for business services for the Southeastern Wisconsin Workforce Development Board, says his team provided job placement assistance, job fairs and on-site recruitments, work-based learning, and resource referrals for participants.

“These components have aimed to create a comprehensive approach to workforce development that supports individuals in achieving their career goals through education and higher wages, and helps the employers find skilled and motivated workers,” Kehl says.

The program helped 603 people attain their HSED under the grant. They fell short of their original goal of 1,105 graduates in the performance period due to a higher-than-expected dropout rate—including some students who left for personal reasons, such as for health and family concerns, and some who landed jobs prior to completing their HSED. While some amount of attrition is typical for this type of program, the grant project offers insights into potential pitfalls to address in future endeavors.



THE EXPERIENCE:

Ultimately, says Hamilton, “By providing a path to graduation, the program helped participants gain a sense of accomplishment and, more importantly, equipped them with the credentials necessary to pursue better employment opportunities. This directly supported workforce development and economic mobility.”

“From a workforce development standpoint, the grant has allowed an ever-increasing talent pipeline with graduates that will have improved access to better paying jobs and career advancement opportunities.”

- Jeffrey Kehl, Supervisor for Business Services, Southeastern Wisconsin Workforce Development Board

The four-week preparatory class—which taught English and math—was especially helpful, Hamilton says, to better prepare students for success in the program.

And the access to area employers also benefited students. “The grant enabled us to strengthen connections between students and regional workforce opportunities, allowing us to better understand their needs and support their educational and career goals,” Hamilton says.

THE RESULTS: 2022–2025



During the grant project,
603 PEOPLE
earned their HSED via the
Southeast Wisconsin Talent
Optimization Project

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Continuity is crucial.

Hamilton says key representatives of other partners experienced employee turnover, which made it more difficult to achieve program goals on an established timetable. She suggested having cross-training in partner organizations to ensure that someone with knowledge of the people and the program are available to step in, if needed.

2. Access is key.

Ensuring that the program is as accessible as possible to accommodate language differences, personal schedules, and learning venues was also a priority to encourage broad participation and success.

THE CONCLUSION:

Businesses in need of dependable employees cannot afford to ignore groups of would-be employees with skills to offer. These WIG-funded programs are helping to tap the potential of multiple overlooked populations in Wisconsin's communities and workforce.

By helping to change societal attitudes toward underrepresented workforce groups and educating businesses on best practices in hiring and employment, these programs are ensuring that these pools of eager and able talent are not ignored.

These programs recognize that creating an Economy for All requires that everyone has a shot at respect, earning a living, improving their quality of life, and contributing to Wisconsin's economic vibrancy.

