

# 2023 WORKFORCE COMMUNITY PLAYBOOK



St. Louis, MO 63108 | [ninepbs.org](http://ninepbs.org)

## WE NEED MORE MIDCAREER WORKERS TO SUCCEED IN HIGH-DEMAND SKILLED CAREERS.

High-demand industries need more skilled workers, and more midcareer workers—those who have been in the workforce for more than ten years—need viable pathways to long-term employment in quality jobs.

The St. Louis region’s workforce community is actively working to diversify the talent pipeline, develop partnerships, promote equity, and anticipate emerging workforce needs. These efforts not only help meet the region’s economic needs, but also help increase quality of life. St. Louisans depend on equitable opportunities to earn a sustainable wage, find job satisfaction, and advance in their careers.



### ST. LOUIS COMPANIES EXPERIENCING A SHORTAGE OF WORKERS

**Skilled Trades** 63%

**Patient Care** 51%

**Manufacturing/ Maintenance** 46%

**Information Technology** 13%

(Source: 2023 State of the St. Louis Workforce)

### THE MIDCAREER WORKFORCE LANDSCAPE

The midcareer workforce landscape in the St. Louis region is poised to meet these shortages and create opportunities for workers to thrive.

**41%** of available jobs in these four high-demand industries are “middle skill” jobs—requiring some education but not a four-year degree

**47%** of workers 25+ in the St. Louis region have a high school diploma but no post-secondary degree

**65%** of the current workforce is midcareer—between ages 25-65

(Source: 2023 State of the St. Louis Workforce)

This means nearly half of the workforce is in a position to fill middle skill jobs with some upskilling or reskilling to either advance in their current industry or change industries. **It is vital that efforts engage midcareer workers**, many of whom are stuck in low-paying jobs and ready for change, in short term training and credentialing programs that can help them move into good jobs in these high-demand industries.



Racial and economic disparities in the St. Louis region impact workers' access to information, representation in certain industries, and opportunities to advance in high-demand skilled careers. Disproportionately impacted groups—women, people of color, veterans, people with disabilities, and justice-involved adults—have different experiences than others when they decide to pursue a career change. For these workers, access to a quality job is even more critical to their futures.

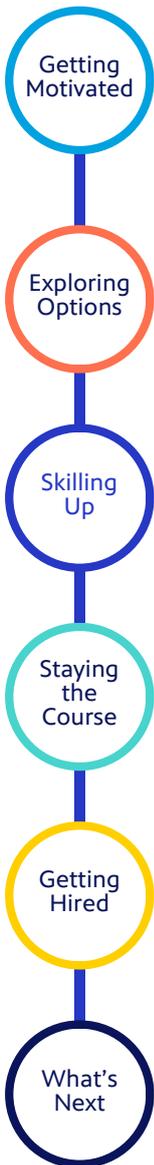


As midcareer workers upskill and reskill, community colleges and others are working to meet their unique needs. After all, today's students are older, more diverse, caring for family members, and increasingly likely to be working one or more jobs. They face myriad challenges as they seek to upskill or reskill. When they can overcome those challenges, midcareer workers are an asset. They come to new careers with **work experience, maturity, determination, and diverse perspectives**.



## **SUCCESS MEANS**

midcareer workers have equitable opportunities to advance and cross-sector partnerships flourish, meeting the region's workforce needs.



### AMPLIFYING VOICES AND WORKING TOWARD SOLUTIONS

Nine PBS has been a leader in the workforce ecosystem for six years. In 2021, we embarked on a two-year exploration of community need around securing viable, long-term employment in high-demand skilled careers through upskilling and reskilling for midcareer workers.

With community help, Nine PBS has worked to answer key questions to better understand the many aspects of midcareer change. Nine PBS engaged hundreds of stakeholders through convenings, individual discussions, and surveys to answer key questions around midcareer change: **What is working? What isn't? What can we do about it?**

On air, online, and in the community, we created and shared stories that encourage awareness and action around what midcareer workers and partners shared.

From these candid conversations and community stories, common themes emerged—across every sector and in each of six phases of midcareer change, relationships and representation played a critical role in success.

Individual relationships provide the encouragement, information, and support necessary for workers to make a career change; for companies to make more diverse, successful hires; and for partnerships between training providers and industry leaders to thrive. Each of these relationships are vital to ensuring equitable access to meaningful opportunities for people in our region.

Join us as we walk through each of these six phases, sharing how relationships and representation can pose barriers or provide support during a career change, as well as key takeaways from midcareer workers and other stakeholders in the St. Louis region who are working every day to affect change.

**FROM 2021 TO 2023, NINE PBS**

**PRODUCED 25 WORKFORCE STORIES**

**AIRED 1,875 TIMES**

**VIEWED 1.1 MILLION TIMES**

# WHAT MOTIVATES MIDCAREER WORKERS TO MOVE INTO HIGH-DEMAND CAREERS?



Exploring Options

Skilling Up

Staying the Course

Getting Hired

What's Next

Making the decision to change careers can mean making a decision to move toward greater economic mobility, quality of life, job satisfaction, and more. It also means stepping into a period of stress, uncertainty, and risk. So what is it that motivates people to make a career change?

**MOST COMMON REASONS FOR CHANGE**

- Job loss
- Need for higher income, benefits, or advancement
- Unsatisfied in a role
- Returning to the workforce

(Source: Focus Group Discussions, 2021-2023)

Midcareer workers who are upskilling and reskilling in high-demand careers are largely moving away from restaurant, retail, and warehouse positions citing lack of benefits, instability, lack of opportunity for advancement, and yes—burnout.

Many feel that their skills were being underutilized and say that they are “finally” ready to take a step towards changes they have wanted for a long time.

There are many reasons midcareer workers delayed educational pursuits—whether to raise children, because they were too busy working to make ends meet, or because they simply didn’t know what they wanted to do other than “go back to school.” Without clarity about their goals or information about well-defined career pathways, the costs were too high, the risks too great. So, they kept working jobs that they were unhappy in simply because there were still bills to pay. With a rise in affordable, short-term, lower-risk training options, more midcareer workers are now finding the motivation to change.

In a survey of nearly 3,000 community members, the top three reasons for moving into high-demand careers were **better pay, better career growth opportunities and more career satisfaction**. (Source: Nine PBS Community Survey, August 2023)

## CONFIDENCE INCREASES MOTIVATION

Confidence emerged as a theme in every phase of career change. Midcareer workers and partners alike talked about how increased confidence translated to greater motivation.

70%

ranked “confidence in their ability to successfully transition into something new” as **extremely important** when considering career change

(Source: Nine PBS Community Survey, July 2022)



Midcareer workers emphasized that **relationships and representation provided the most effective confidence boost**. They reported that relationships, especially with those people they could relate to and trust, increased confidence in their abilities and assured them they had the necessary support to succeed. More than 20% of focus group participants reported that the primary reason they decided to pursue a high-demand career was because “someone in their life encouraged them to.” (Source: Focus Group Discussions, 2021-2023)

The lack of supportive and representative relationships can also discourage or prevent people from making a change. Too often, workers heard warnings that it was “too late for them”—especially for those over age 50 or with barriers to employment like felony convictions. While relationships propel many people forward, the lack of supportive and representative relationships can hold people back.

Representation is not only about race, age, and gender. Disability representation, criminal justice involvement, and similar socioeconomic backgrounds and identities can help people succeed in making a career change and are critical to boosting confidence, accelerating motivation, and clarifying direction.



**“I didn’t think I had what it takes. My adult children helped change my mind and gave me the confidence to do it.”**

-Dede, Healthcare

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Build a reputation for advancement so that workers are eager to join, ready to grow.
- Create more good jobs by increasing pay, benefits, and advancement opportunities.
- If higher pay isn’t possible, focus on flexibility and advancement.
- Everyone can advocate for it never being too late to make a change.

## MIDCAREER PROFILE: ROSE WILSON, GEOSPATIAL ANALYST

Rose worked in aviation for more than two decades as a flight attendant. She enjoyed the work and appreciated the benefits, the travel, and the ability to provide for and teach her family through her job.

After being laid off during the COVID-19 pandemic, Rose began contemplating a career change. Her children were grown and self-sufficient, so she had the freedom to make a change without worrying about how it might affect them. Rose learned about Rung for Women, a St. Louis-based career accelerator for women that provides coaching, career development, and training services. Rose was accepted to the program and initially pursued a career in healthcare. As she progressed through the training, she found that it wasn't what she really wanted to do.



Around that time, Rose learned about an African American mathematician named Gladys West, a “hidden figure” credited with developing the global positioning system (GPS) in the 1970s. Not until 2018 did West receive full recognition for her contributions. Rose was inspired.

With her grandchildren's encouragement to embrace technology and Rung for Women's connection to Maryville University's geospatial program, Rose decided to leave healthcare and pursue a career in geospatial intelligence. “It felt like part two of my career in aviation,” she explains, “I just knew it was what was next for me.”

**“I was not going to be left behind. Failure was not an option for me.”**

Much like when she first became a flight attendant, Rose is still the only person who looks like her in many professional circles. She sees that as even more reason to perform at her best and show others what is possible. “I'm 63 years old! I'm raising grandchildren but I was not going to be left behind. Failure was not an option for me. Now, I am a Geospatial Intelligence Analyst and I absolutely love it!”



## WHAT IS GEOSPATIAL TECHNOLOGY?

Technology that deals with the location of things—from national defense, to agriculture, finance, healthcare, and even ordering dinner.

# HOW DO MIDCAREER WORKERS CHOOSE WHICH CAREER PATHWAY TO PURSUE?

Many midcareer adults are already aware of high-demand career pathways. More than 45% of the midcareer individuals we spoke with **had always been interested** in the career they are now entering, but for a variety of reasons, hadn't pursued it until now. Many cited a lack of information about how to access training and job opportunities. **The pathway was unclear.** In a community survey, 42% of people said that the biggest barrier when considering a career change was that they **"wouldn't know where to start."** (Source: Nine PBS Community Survey, July 2022)

While social factors like personal interest and peer influence are key to building career awareness, accessing information on high-demand careers typically occurs through online research. Some begin their research about specific careers, but others start with more general searches like "women in trades" or "jobs working with people."

**"All I knew was that maybe in a union, I'd have more respect and more stability. So I started searching online about women in trades."**

-Melanie, Skilled Trades

## COMPARING OPTIONS

In St. Louis, 21% of the workforce has some college, but no degree. (Source: *2023 State of the St. Louis Workforce*) The experience of enrolling but not completing a program makes people compare new training and educational programs more cautiously.

Fifty-one percent of focus group respondents said that they **learned about their program from someone they know**, while 35% learned about it through **online research and/or advertisements**. For some, the online research helped them choose between several programs leading to the same "good job." Others compared potential careers alongside the available programs.

## PATHWAY COMPARISON CRITERIA

- Length and cost of training
- Flexibility
- Job placement support and/or apprenticeships
- Promise of a good job

(Source: Focus Group Discussions, 2021-2023)



In rural communities, community colleges seem to be a “first stop” for information gathering. Those midcareer workers were aware that the community college was a viable resource and once they had decided to make a career change, they met with career counselors to explore possible pathways. They completed assessments, learned about costs, timing, and expectations and were able to make informed decisions about which pathway to pursue.

The majority of midcareer workers preparing to upskill or reskill engaged community colleges only after deciding on a career pathway. Their online research led them to the community college for specific training that met the demands of the career pathway they had chosen.

Doing extensive online research and comparing options is challenging for those who are already working one, two, or three jobs to make ends meet. As a result, some people who are interested in upskilling or reskilling are unable to undertake the process and access needed information. For others, the challenge is a lack of trust after having participated in programs that did not deliver what they had expected.



**“I did the lost college kid thing, unsure what I wanted to do, never successfully completing anything. As time passed, I found myself in a job I enjoyed but I knew I would never get the respect I deserved or opportunities to advance without more education.”**

-Jessica, IT

## PATHWAYS LEADING TO A GOOD JOB

- 69%** Tech Schools
- 64%** Apprenticeships
- 56%** Community Colleges

(Source: Nine PBS Community Survey, July 2022)

Whether midcareer workers are exploring options that they’ve always been interested in, programs they learned about from someone they know, or working to overcome other challenges, they are exploring options to determine whether this change is feasible and if the pay off—the good job—will have been worth their investment.

## WHAT IS A GOOD JOB?

**Pay is consistently ranked the most important characteristic** of a good job by midcareer workers, community members, and partners.

Health insurance followed closely with sense of belonging and job satisfaction competing for third place. Sense of belonging is closely tied to culture while satisfaction was most often in connection with feeling valued and challenged to grow.

Creative freedom and paid family leave ranked among the least important characteristics. The groups who rated paid family leave lowest had a much higher median age, suggesting that it may not be immediate personal concern for them.

(Source: Nine PBS Community Surveys, July 2022 and July 2023, 2023 State of the St. Louis Workforce, Focus Group Surveys, April 2021-August 2023)

## REPRESENTATION IMPACTS CAREER EXPLORATION

Justice involved individuals, veterans, military spouses, and adults with disabilities describe feeling less confident about their career exploration because of stereotypes and biases. They describe a lack of individualized support and the tendency of well-intentioned providers to make assumptions about their skills and interests.

Stigma around skilled trades and manufacturing persists, limiting access to these high-demand skilled careers for women and people of color. During recent focus groups, a single mother nearing completion of her welding program talked about how a story in the newspaper about a mom who became a welder gave her hope. Another shared about not being taken seriously as a “girlie girl” in the trades. And yet another talked about her own misperception of women in trades not being “bookish” like her. Each of these women found mentorship and connection with other women once they had taken the chance to pursue this new career. Lack of representation prior to that though, had left them feeling very alone.

Adults over age 40 noted that they often felt out of place or even “invisible” in marketing materials for continuing education and career advancement opportunities. Many feel that with a decade or more still ahead for them in the workforce, there should be more representation of older, working adults.

As part of this midcareer initiative, Nine PBS has created stories that highlight diversity in high-demand industries and remains committed to magnifying and deepening understanding of our community. Many programs and organizations are working to expand opportunities, increase awareness, and improve perceptions of these career pathways for both youth and midcareer workers.

Whether through newspaper articles, broadcast content, online advertisements or word of mouth—seeing people they can relate to makes a difference in people’s awareness of opportunities and their access to information they can trust about those opportunities.



**“If he could do it after being incarcerated, then I could do it too. It showed me I could be more than an inmate and I could actually be something.”**

**-Kyle, Skilled Trades**

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Make career and program information **simple and accessible** during “off” hours.
- Provide individualized exploration support to reduce stereotyping.
- Gear career exploration events to midcareer workers.
- Be clear about how you define a good job.

# WHO IS INVESTED IN HIGH-DEMAND SKILLS TRAINING?

While individuals carry the burden of researching and comparing training programs that lead to good jobs, training providers and employers have a tremendous responsibility to align programs with industry demands, ensuring people have the right skills to enter available jobs as quickly as possible.

Training providers have embraced the need for flexibility and innovation, making iterative changes to programs from one cohort to the next based on both student and industry feedback. They are focusing on stackable credentials and restructuring programs to help students overcome common barriers to completion.

A practical, job-focused approach recognizes that career impact is what drives upskilling and reskilling students. For example, community colleges have largely “flipped the focus” from certificate and degree completion to increased confidence and quicker career impact, which often leads to certificate and degree completion.

**“ It was disheartening that someone could come in for welding and then get held up because they need to take a speech class. ”**

-Richard Hudanick,  
Dean of Career and Technical Education,  
East Central College

## STRONG WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIPS

Industry partnerships help shape credentials and required competencies, and often create employment opportunities for students. Industry leaders and subject matter experts serve on program advisory boards, as adjunct instructors, and informal sounding boards. The effectiveness of these partnerships depends on consistency of representation and frequent engagement. Partners note that technology and industry needs are rapidly evolving and the old model of meeting once a year on program design is no longer viable.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF STRONG PARTNERSHIPS

- Shared mission and values
- Clear, consistent communication
- Collaboration with creativity and transparency
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion alignment

(Source: Nine PBS Partner Survey, April 2023, Partner Conversations 2022-2023)

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The dynamics of these partnerships vary by industry. Healthcare partnerships are fairly well established with an increasing focus on flexibility and earn-and-learn opportunities. IT, and manufacturing needs are more individual and rapidly evolving, making those partnerships more dynamic and, sometimes, more challenging.

Strong partnerships inform program competencies while also signaling shifts to program duration. Due to staffing shortages, more companies are asking community colleges and other training providers to get students ready to work faster, focusing on broad skills and “passing the baton” to employers for on-the-job training.



According to the *2023 State of the St. Louis Workforce* report, **companies rely on on-the-job training** more than any other training option, but even that dropped 14% from 2021. Companies also reported a 9% drop in partnerships with community colleges for sourcing talent. Partnerships with non-profit organizations, however, increased 2%, making it the number one partnership for sourcing talent. There are continued opportunities for strengthening partnerships across the educational and non-profit sectors. Collaboration creates a win for students through career impact, a win for programs through increased completion, and a win for employers through an increase in skilled workers.



### PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Community colleges are often seen first and foremost as transfer institutions, offering general education courses that lead students on to a four-year university. While that is part of what they do, they also play a vital role in upskilling and reskilling the workforce in the St. Louis region. There are **more than 240 career-focused programs available** at community colleges in the St. Louis region. Bringing those programs to light is a big part of changing perceptions.

While partners and community members alike see community colleges as a valuable resource, focus group participants largely admitted to having thought of community colleges as the place for pre-requisites and people who couldn’t get into a “good school.”

**“I had no idea they had training and certifications that would actually help you get a job and have a real career!”**

-Alex, Manufacturing

**97% OF PARTNERS**

**94% OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS**

surveyed said community colleges are **valuable resources for information** on short term credentialing in high-demand careers

(Source: Nine PBS Community Survey, July 2022 and Nine PBS Partner Survey, October 2021)



Midcareer workers dreaded taking classes that seemed irrelevant or posed additional obstacles —like math classes that they just couldn't quite pass—to their career aspirations.

When their research pointed to the community college being the best option for their career change, they were surprised. They found that the community colleges were welcoming, supportive, and incredibly positive. Now, they say they would highly recommend it to friends, coworkers, and especially their children.

## SKILLS TRAINING COSTS

Cost is one of the biggest considerations when choosing to upskill or reskill. In fact, the cost of training is sometimes the sole determinant in choosing a skill pathway. Diverse funding streams make it possible for organizations like LaunchCode and CyberUp to offer free training. Community colleges are cultivating industry partnerships and securing grants to offset student costs, which allow some community college students pursuing workforce training to gain critical skills without facing the burden of tuition.

Students and community college faculty highlighted that tuition is only one cost factor. There are a lot of overlooked expenses—books, lab and technology fees, exams and licensing, transportation, childcare, and household expenses—that add up. These additional expenses make a big difference for students and are seldom covered by traditional funding. Faculty are working to increase access to free or low-cost textbooks, but other expenses persist.

**“I was always interested in going to college but didn't want to commit to anything because of cost. Investing in training was a big risk since I wasn't totally sure what I wanted to do.”**

-Nicole, IT

Despite how important financial assistance is for midcareer workers, many traditional funding sources —like state and federal grants, private scholarships, and even employer subsidized tuition—are underutilized. Students and faculty identified several common challenges.

## WHY DON'T FUNDS GET USED?

- Student misperception about how/if to apply for scholarships
- Funds misaligned to student's needs
- Process is too long or too restrictive for short-term programs
- Staff turnover adds complexity to already cumbersome processes

(Source: Nine PBS Partner Discussions, 2021-2023)

Government funded programs for workforce development often have stipulations that prevent many midcareer workers from accessing funds—whether because of income eligibility requirements, required documentation, or simply the time required to apply. Several partners shared that they are hesitant to even recommend those funding sources, preferring to find alternatives for students that are faster and more flexible. Instead, they are looking to industry leaders and employers for scholarships and tuition assistance.

Employer-sponsored tuition programs are helpful, but those that require students to pay out-of-pocket before being reimbursed can be problematic. Many midcareer workers opt out of tuition reimbursement programs because they would rather maintain the freedom to change jobs as needed than risk having to repay their employer if they decide to leave before their contract is up—a common stipulation of tuition reimbursement. Paid tuition up front or through earn-and-learn programs are effective alternatives.

A deeper understanding of the midcareer workers' needs is beginning to inform new ways of thinking about funding for skills training. However, change takes time.

### **RELATIONSHIPS AND REPRESENTATION IMPACT TRAINING**

People make a difference in the micro and macro success of skills training and workforce partnerships.

Individualized support from diverse faculty at every step helps connect students with funding options, resources, and other critical guidance. Faculty become advocates and cheerleaders who boost confidence, provide support, and make connections to key resources and information that support students' success.

Nontraditional students often fear being the oldest in the program and having to overcome stereotypes. Most were pleasantly surprised once they got started in their program of choice. Cohorts were more diverse and welcoming than any of them expected. Students say that talking one-on-one with instructors and other workforce faculty helped them feel like they were in the right place at the right time.

Individual relationships also make a difference in the success of cross-sector partnerships. Changes in leadership and staffing result in lower participation in collaborative projects, process breakdowns, and communication lapses. Some partners even described “crumbling initiatives” when a personal connection is lost.



**“The stigma is real. I was afraid I’d just be that sad mom finally going to school to better herself. It was intimidating.”**

-Erica, Skilled Trades

## **WHAT CAN WE DO?**

- Restructure programs to increase confidence and income quickly.
- Commit to flexibility for classes, labs, and on-the-job training.
- Cultivate strong partnerships to reduce student costs, balance work/school expectations, and create win-win-win scenarios.
- Prioritize opportunities for students to connect and support each other.

## MIDCAREER PROFILE: TRACY SOHN, LPN

Tracy says she had worked every kind of job you can imagine—bartender, waitress, hotel desk clerk, banker. For the last 10 years, she had been working as a hair stylist and really enjoyed the work and her clients. But having reliable health insurance had become a priority. It was time for a change. When Tracy looked back on her past jobs, she saw immediately that what she liked most was working with and talking to people, not being at a desk all day. So she Googled “jobs working with people,” and a plethora of healthcare options came up.

In her research, she came across a Certified Medication Technician program and was intrigued. The training was relatively short, but **the program would increase her student loans without actually increasing her income.** Then, she looked into nursing. She figured, “If I’m going to take on more student loans, I may as well do something where I can actually make some money.” Her criteria for evaluating nursing programs? Fastest and cheapest.

She found the Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) program at St. Charles Community College and wanted to learn more about “bridging” to the Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN) and take the exam to become a Registered Nurse (RN). She met with an advisor. The school requires an orientation session prior to application that helps students get an accurate view of what their next year will look like.

Tracy describes it as a “fast, hard year” and says that the time required to study was the biggest challenge. Tracy was able to focus full time on training. She says her husband “really held it all down at home so [I] could focus.”

Many who start the program do not complete it. Tracy knows that it is **not just hard work but also the support that is necessary to succeed.** She says the relationships she formed with classmates provided much needed support and resulted in lasting friendships. Tracy is now working as an LPN on a cardiac floor and is nearing completion of her Associate Degree in Nursing, preparing to take the exam to become a Registered Nurse.



**“If I was going to increase my student loans, I wanted to be sure it was doing something where I could actually make some money.”**



### HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO BECOME A NURSE?

Community college programs in the St. Louis region cost \$13,000 - \$18,000 for the two-year Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN).

Bridge programs for those with LPN credentials reduce time and cost, but they are highly competitive, accepting significantly fewer students each year than traditional ADN programs.

# CHALLENGES ARE INEVITABLE. SUPPORT HELPS.

Midcareer adults who are upskilling and reskilling face myriad challenges. Partners and focus group participants alike explain that midcareer adults simply have more “life to navigate” than others. Access to supportive networks and relationships, financial assistance, and reliable transportation are essential in navigating a successful career change. While other resources are helpful, these are the “game changers” without which few people are able to succeed.

## WORKING WHILE UPSKILLING AND RESKILLING

Even when tuition is affordable or free, midcareer adults still have bills to pay and homework to complete and only so many hours in a day. Add to that the cost of training, and some are understandably overwhelmed. Many described working two or three jobs and sleeping only three to four hours per night to juggle going to class, studying, and caring for family members.

Fewer parents participated in focus groups, but those who did shared that access to childcare and daily parenting responsibilities were a significant struggle. Several non-parenting participants commented that they would “never have made it” if they had children and that they had seen many parenting classmates drop out. Clearly, students who are working, training, and parenting are at disadvantage.

**“I had to decide whether to keep that basic job or make sure I finished this program that would give me a real career.”**

-LaRon, Skilled Trades

Some midcareer workers gave up jobs to focus solely on their training, relying on friends/family, working occasional overnight shifts or the gig economy to make ends meet. Going without a steady paycheck is only feasible for a short time and without additional supports like stipends, food pantries, transportation assistance, and other income/savings, it is nearly impossible for most midcareer workers.

## BIGGEST BARRIER WHEN CHANGING CAREERS?

**69%** Time to invest in gaining new skills

**54%** Cost

**51%** Childcare

(Source: Nine PBS Partner Survey, July 2022)

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In shorter-term programs (6-8 weeks) workers are more likely to give up other jobs and simply “get by” but in longer programs (up to 24 months) most students are juggling work and school. They stressed the difficulty of this path but many said the promise of a good job and a strong support network kept them going.

Even when finances, childcare, and transportation are handled—however inadequately—there is still the challenge of time. Working and studying around the clock leaves little time for accessing other needed resources like food stamps or mental health services, making it even more challenging for these midcareer workers to persist. They need help at night and on weekends—when most supportive services are closed. Research shows that jobs with unpredictable or unstable schedules are also associated with economic, food, and housing insecurity and for working parents, with adverse effects on children’s well-being.

When midcareer workers are expected to work overtime or adjust shifts, they are often faced with whether to go to work or class. For most, keeping the job that pays the bills is more important. Missing class though, has repercussions—especially for those enrolled in accelerated programs where it is even harder to keep up.



Community colleges are working to structure programs in ways that make it easier to make up labs, complete work virtually, and connect with instructors outside of class. Other training providers have invested in virtual and self-paced options designed with working parents in mind.

Work obligations can impact class attendance but also create barriers to internships and/or clinicals that have rigid schedules. Several midcareer workers described missing out on opportunities because they couldn’t make the schedule work. Others simply were not able to get there.



### TRANSPORTATION

Lack of reliable transportation limits midcareer workers’ access to training and good jobs. Many programs provide bus passes or ride vouchers while individuals are enrolled in training but a common concern was how those individuals would get to work after completing their training. For those who have their own transportation but are struggling financially during this transition, restrictions on funding prevent assistance through gas cards or basic car repairs.

Transportation is a well-documented, systemic barrier in the St. Louis region and many groups are working to address it. One such group, spearheaded by Construction Forum, has created a directory of resources and robust partnerships addressing every aspect of gaining a legal, personal vehicle, driver’s license, and insurance. They aim to make these resources accessible to any worker in need of reliable transportation—regardless of their enrollment in a particular grant or program.

**“We don’t ever want a student to have to choose between losing a job or going to class.”**

-Becky Epps,  
Center for Workforce Innovation,  
St. Louis Community College

Some argue for greater creativity and industry investment in systemic change as reliable transportation can help to solve skilled staffing shortages, increase diversity, and promote a more unified economic region.

### SUPPORT THAT WORKS

Comprehensive support from a coach, mentor, or case manager who provides a voice of encouragement and connection to other resources is incredibly valuable. Assigned mentors or coaches seem to be more effective than those that are simply available if needed, mirroring the tendency midcareer workers have to access supports only when they are offered directly, by a person who is proactively engaging them rather than through an email or drop-in service.

62%

said “supportive networks” are extremely important to successful career change

(Source: Nine PBS Community Survey, July 2022)



Midcareer workers who have been away from the school/study environment for a long time sometimes struggle with technology and hesitate to speak up, afraid of stigma about their age. Most found that when they did seek support, it was available but not always at the odd hours they needed it most.

By cultivating strong partnerships with other community agencies, expanding collaborative services, and offering “warm hand-offs,” it is easier to address gaps, adjust schedules, and sometimes, make exceptions to offer support that actually works for the midcareer adults who need it most.

**“If they are doing their clinicals at 3 am, then we’re there at 3 am. They deserve the same support that students working more typical hours do.**

-Terri Warmack,  
Health Careers Outreach Coordinator  
East Central College

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Assign coaches or mentors, be proactive, make direct connections to resources.
- Offer support virtually and during “off” hours, allow flexibility for make-up classes
- Identify less restrictive funds for transportation and other non-tuition costs.
- Cultivate community partnerships. If you don’t offer it—know who does.

## MIDCAREER PROFILE: STEVEN LOVE II, LPN



**“You definitely need support if you’re going to do this. It can really take a toll on you.”**

Steven hadn’t always been interested in healthcare but he says it was always “in the family.” He planned to go away to a four-year university, believing it was a better option than community college. After staying close to home to care for siblings and help with family expenses, he began to appreciate the impact caring for others can have. He decided to pursue training in the St. Louis region to become an EMT.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Steven needed to make a career change. A friend recommended an assisted living facility that offered in-house training to become a Certified Medication Technician (CMT). Even though it felt like a step backward, Steven knew that any experience in a healthcare setting would be beneficial. He got the job, completed the certification, and was working full-time as a CMT while completing prerequisites to go into nursing.

Steven didn’t realize the community college offered more than just prerequisites until a teacher told him about the Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) program. Steven planned to become a Registered Nurse (RN) but when he learned about the shorter, less expensive LPN program, he saw an opportunity.

He says the LPN program was tough on its own, but working full time was really challenging. **“Some days I would end up working overnight and then go straight to class. It was even harder when we had exams, but I stuck it out, paid my bills and my tuition and in the end, it was worth it,”** Steven explains. He says that family and classmates have been his biggest supporters. The close bonds, constant encouragement, and ability to study together kept him going. What Steven earns as an LPN makes it possible to pay for the bridge to the RN program. He says he couldn’t have taken this step with what he earned as a CMT or while working multiple restaurant jobs.

Steven is now working as an LPN at an assisted living facility while working toward his Associate’s Degree in Nursing and RN at the community college. He says his perception of community colleges was all wrong. They offer affordable options, and smaller classes mean more support from instructors and classmates.

Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) was in the top 5 in-demand, middle-skill jobs with nearly 6,000 job postings. Average annual LPN salary in St. Louis is \$55,200.

Registered Nurse (RN) is in highest demand with over 32,000 job postings. Average annual RN salary in St. Louis is \$77,390.



(Source: 2023 State of the St. Louis Workforce and Bureau of Labor Statistics)

# HOW DO MIDCAREER WORKERS GET HIRED IN HIGH-DEMAND SKILLED CAREERS?

Some workers who are upskilling and reskilling already have the job and their training is either an extension of their current role or an employer-sponsored move to a new role. That isn't the case for all midcareer transitions, though. Others take a significant risk in changing careers, and sometimes getting hired is more difficult than expected.

## MOST EFFECTIVE RESOURCES TO OBTAIN NEW CAREER

**91%** Work-based experiences

**65%** Networking opportunities

(Source: Nine PBS Partner Survey, March 2022)

## WORK-BASED EXPERIENCES

Apprenticeships, internships, and other earn-and-learn opportunities place midcareer workers on the job, earning a wage, while they develop their skills.

Missouri ranks third in the nation for completed apprenticeships and fourth for new apprenticeships. Yet, according to the *2023 State of the St. Louis Workforce Report*, companies report a decrease in usage of both apprenticeships (down 7%) and internships (down 10%) since 2021. With the recently passed "Intern and Apprentice Recruitment Act", there are new incentives for companies to increase the number of apprenticeships and internships they offer.

Partners say that misperceptions cause hesitation about offering apprenticeships and create frustration for companies and midcareer workers alike. Accurate, detailed information about what to expect is crucial. Community colleges and other training providers are committed to providing education to help dispel myths and offer support for creating new apprenticeship opportunities, seeing them as a win-win-win.

While work-based experiences are ranked the most effective resource for obtaining a new career, there are many midcareer workers who are getting hired through direct placement/referral from their program or through friends and family. Relationships are the driver yet again in getting people where they want to go.

## FOCUS GROUP EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

**82%** are working in the field they trained in

**33%** were referred or placed by their program

**27%** found their job through a family member or friend

(Source: Nine PBS Focus Group Surveys, 2022 - 2023)

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**“Flexibility in manufacturing may sound like an oxymoron but we have been able to attract great workers who otherwise wouldn’t have been able to work with us.”**

-Ashley Nelson,  
Strategic Chief People Officer,  
True Manufacturing

Some companies are creatively reallocating tasks and developing more middle skill positions that are more easily filled through apprenticeships and internships and offer clear pathways to higher pay and degree attainment for those who want to advance. Others have developed new, part-time positions with dozens of possible shifts and increased internal change management and training to highlight the importance of transferrable skills—rather than traditional degrees and experience.

At some point, getting hired does still come down to the resume and the interview where practices have continued to evolve. Diverse interview panels, representative hiring, skills demonstration or work samples, and referrals from nonprofit partners who prepare applicants for the interview process are becoming more common.

Midcareer workers say that gaining experience in new industries is hard—especially for nontraditional candidates and those reentering the workforce.

## **FLEXIBILITY AND CREATIVITY ATTRACT TALENT**

Companies have had to shift their thinking about how to attract and retain skilled workers. Competition for skilled workers is unrelenting and it requires new ways of doing business. Companies are modifying job descriptions and degree requirements and thinking differently about how to hire more diverse candidates.

Skills-based hiring provides one avenue for hiring more midcareer workers. Research shows that skills-based hiring results in significant reduction in both time and cost to hire and also boasts more than **85% increase in hiring diversity and employee retention**. (Source: TestGorilla, The State of Skills-Based Hiring 2023).

While most employers say they are open to skills-based hiring, adopting this practice can be difficult. For companies with government contracts and union-negotiated job descriptions, there is little flexibility in degree requirements, making the skills-based option more challenging.



**“It’s hard being the new guy. Everyone wants you to have experience, but how are you supposed to get it?”**

-Herman, Skilled Trades

## STRONG PARTNERSHIPS PROMOTE DIVERSITY

As companies seek to attract diverse, skilled talent, they are expanding their recruitment efforts to include more robust partnerships. These partnerships help open more doors to people of color, veterans, people with disabilities, and justice involved individuals. Strong partnerships bridge the gap between these nontraditional, midcareer candidates and employers. They can provide the job readiness and “warm hand off” that so many stakeholders described as vital.



## PARTNERSHIPS FOR SOURCING TALENT

### #1 Nonprofit organizations

### #2 Two-year colleges

(Source: St. Louis Community College *State of the St. Louis Workforce Report, 2023*)

Community colleges and other nonprofit partners provide a variety of benefits and services to companies and job seekers. From translating skills across industries, to educating recruiters on skills-based certificates, to training supervisors on second-chance hiring, trauma-informed approaches, and accommodations for people with disabilities, they have invaluable expertise that results in more quality jobs for midcareer workers.

There are also specific employment services that rely on business partnerships to address these gaps. Each has a bevy of services and areas of expertise but the result is the same—increased job readiness, confidence, and placement through strong partnerships.

Some are concerned that the competition for talent could carry over to competition amongst potential partners, resulting in companies withdrawing support due to confusion. Clear communication and true collaboration remain paramount.



**“By getting traditionally under-represented people into low-cost, high-paying careers, their presence alone is a feat of activism in inclusion and diversity.”**

-Aurora Bihler,  
Program Coordinator,  
Building Union Diversity

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Increase the number of available work-based experiences.
- Restructure roles, shifts, and job descriptions to attract midcareer workers.
- Prepare midcareer workers with skills-based resume and interview techniques.
- Connect and communicate with partners who have expertise in areas of diversity.

## MIDCAREER PROFILE: JUSTIN GAFFNEY, PRODUCT OWNER



Justin had always been interested in tech but hadn't thought about pursuing it until he was burned out in the print factory job he had been working for more than ten years. He wanted more responsibility and knew he had other skills he could develop.

The blockchain and cryptocurrency movements renewed his interest in tech. He began saving so that he could quit his job and focus full-time on reskilling. Justin enrolled in Code Camp through St. Louis Community College and LaunchCode, where the intense training and camaraderie with classmates were incredibly beneficial.

Even with savings and financial aid, paying the bills was difficult, but he stayed focused and sought out support while he was in training. Despite all of his planning, skills, and determination, the transition to employment in this new field was really hard. **“I searched for well over a year for an entry-level software engineer job but ended up having to go back to printing because I had bills to pay.”** Justin kept his skills sharp by participating in hackathons, taking online courses, and coding every chance he got. He says that the patience, dealing with rejection, and continuous learning while working full-time were exhausting but all paid off.

Justin says LaunchCode was “instrumental in me finding a job, they were very supportive” and kept sending information about job openings and job fairs. When he arrived at a job fair and saw the line of over 100 applicants for the software engineer positions and almost no one in the project manager line, he figured it was worth a shot. He got the job and more than a year later, couldn't be happier. He says that a lot of people going into tech don't get a lot of onboarding or support when they're getting started so the more rigorous the training the better prepared you are to jump in and figure things out.

**“It was hard but I knew on the other side of it I would have a less stressful, more rewarding career.”**

“I am actually back in college for finance and am excited about continuing my career in fintech.” Since we first met Justin, he has led a team to win a hackathon and become an ambassador for a web3 project. “I constantly meet and work with people from around the world!”

## ST. LOUIS REGION'S TECH WORKFORCE

The average tech worker earns **1.6x** the average wage for the region. Increasing **diversity in tech is a priority**; approximately **1/3 of tech workers are women but only 7.6% are Black.**



# WHAT HELPS PEOPLE ADVANCE IN HIGH-DEMAND CAREERS?

Much of what defines a good job and motivates midcareer workers to make a change are those things that will help them advance.

## PAY AND ADVANCEMENT

While pay is consistently the top characteristic of a good job and a key motivator for change, the actual wage needed and pathways to that wage are less clear.

The living wage in the St. Louis region for one adult with one child is around \$76k (Source: MIT Living Wage Calculator, 2023). Most people agree that the living wage calculation is an indicator of what it takes to get by, not thrive. Entry-level wages in many high-demand careers are below that living wage. However, there are almost always opportunities for advancement.

For midcareer workers to thrive, they need to know what the pathways for advancement look like, not just the starting pay. Many companies are focusing on “total compensation,” highlighting insurance, paid time off, retirement, and other types of benefits. For midcareer workers who have never had benefits before, this is exciting but can also be difficult to decode. When their initial paychecks don’t go as far as they had expected, they are understandably frustrated.

Partners advocate for having these discussions earlier in the recruitment process. They shared that too many workers have been hired, surprised by what entry-level “looks like,” then quit, damaging partnerships and impacting reputations. Clarity around pay, benefits, advancement, and timelines is beneficial for everyone.

## CULTURE AND RETENTION

Culture, arguably even more than pay, is tied to retention. Midcareer workers and partners say that culture plays a key part in determining where to work and whether to advance there or move to another company. Workers are looking for inclusion, respect, belonging, and a sense that they matter to the company.

Companies are implementing policies and leaning into partnerships that help to achieve culture and diversity goals. There is sometimes a disconnect between leadership who sets partnerships in motion and the people who actually hire and supervise.

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**“It would make a difference if we could walk into a place and be comfortable with who we are and show up as our whole self.”**

-Marilyn, Healthcare

Partners say that diversity programs and partnerships are great for getting people in, but caution that if culture doesn't change, those workers will not stay. In workplaces where inclusive culture is not a priority, workers who face harassment or discrimination feel isolated and end up leaving. More structures and unbiased systems are needed to provide accountability, resources, and support.



Partners and midcareer workers report that industries once known for their lack of diversity are changing. New leadership is helping pave the way.

### INVESTMENT IN LEADERSHIP AND TRAINING

Staffing shortages make it difficult for leaders to onboard and support new hires while also making meaningful investments in developing existing talent. For leaders who were promoted with technical skills and seniority but did not receive any additional leadership training, it is even more challenging.



Partners say that investment in midcareer workers and leaders alike is critical for retention and sustainable culture change. Community colleges and others have resources to support customized training and are eager to partner with companies to make a lasting impact.

Midcareer workers say that self-advocacy and continuous learning are key to advancement. Continuous learning is, arguably, a mindset more than formal enrollment in another program but those additional credentials and degrees do create opportunities for advancement. For some workers, the challenges of time and cost persist well after they have started their new jobs. They need flexibility and incentives to help balance their current work with their future goals.

**“Only so much can be taught in class. For new hires to be successful, they need to feel valued, prepared and supported.”**

-Lori Hawkins,  
Senior Program Manager,  
St. Louis Community College

### FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIPS

The importance of relationships may be implied when talking about workplace culture that promotes belonging and connection but there are many types of relationships that midcareer workers, partners, and companies say matter for advancement and retention. Formal and informal mentorship programs, affinity/resources groups, and dedicated “team huddles” are important for creating close connections, particularly in big companies and for underrepresented groups.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

- Double down on a culture of inclusiveness and respect.
- Invest in training for leaders and customized upskilling for employees.
- Provide flexibility and incentives for workers to pursue additional training.
- Champion mentorship and affinity groups.

## SUMMARY

We began this journey asking what motivates people to make a career change and concluded with what helps them continue advancing. The answer is largely the same—relationships. Direct and indirect relationships build social capital, increase confidence, create more equitable access to opportunities, and provide the critical support that makes change possible.

As a stakeholder in the St. Louis region workforce, you are in a position to make a difference. For your organization, for your industry, for midcareer workers and their families.



### BE FLEXIBLE

Embrace creativity and flexibility in your approach to training, scheduling, structuring work, and partnerships. Forget how you've always done it and listen to the needs and experiences of those you want to engage—midcareer workers, industry leaders, training providers.



### COMMUNICATE

Communicate with other stakeholders to create streamlined, effective solutions. Ask questions, give and receive feedback, be a consistent voice in conversations. Use your voice to change perceptions, promote equity, and strengthen relationships of all kinds.



### CONNECT

Connect with other stakeholders to reduce student costs, balance work/school expectations, and create win-win-win scenarios. Prioritize opportunities for students to connect and support each other. Assign coaches and/or mentors; be proactive, make direct connections to resources.

### COMMIT

Commit to investments in people, culture, and structures that promote equity and access—from transportation and childcare to robust leadership training and upskilling for midcareer workers.

Invest in relationships by assigning mentors and coaches, promoting peer support, affinity and resource groups at every stage of training, hiring, and advancing midcareer workers.

# METHODOLOGY

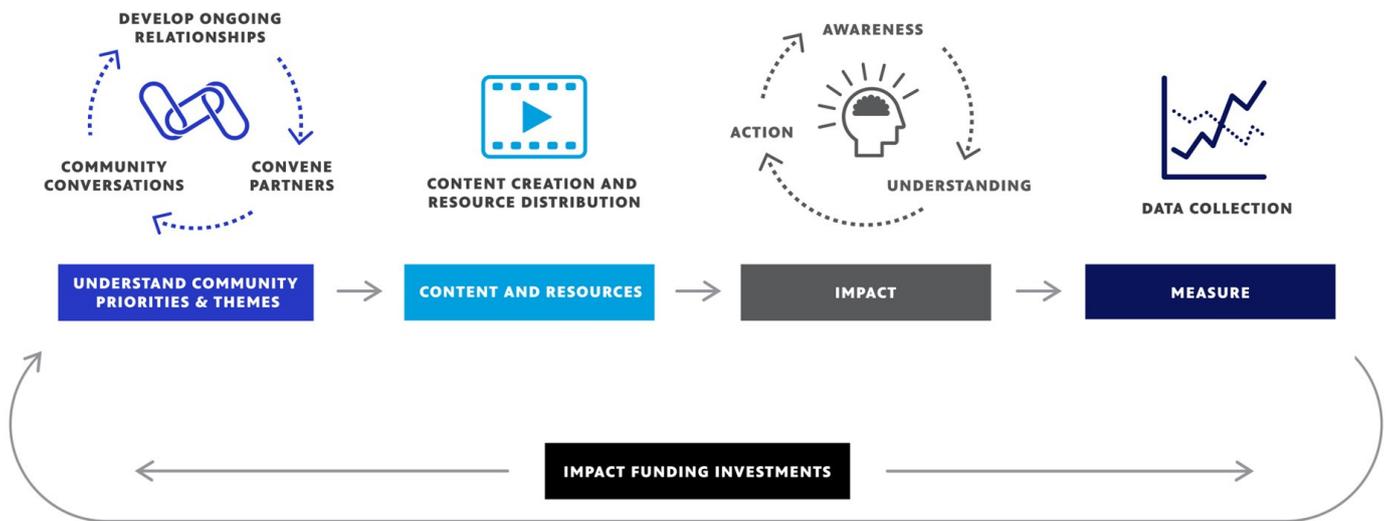
## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Nine PBS anchors its work in what’s important to the community through our Model for Community Engagement. This model ensures that “community engagement” has real meaning, signifying conversation, collaboration, and outcomes. This model has been central to this project and provided a guide for facilitating conversations, creating content, and measuring impact.



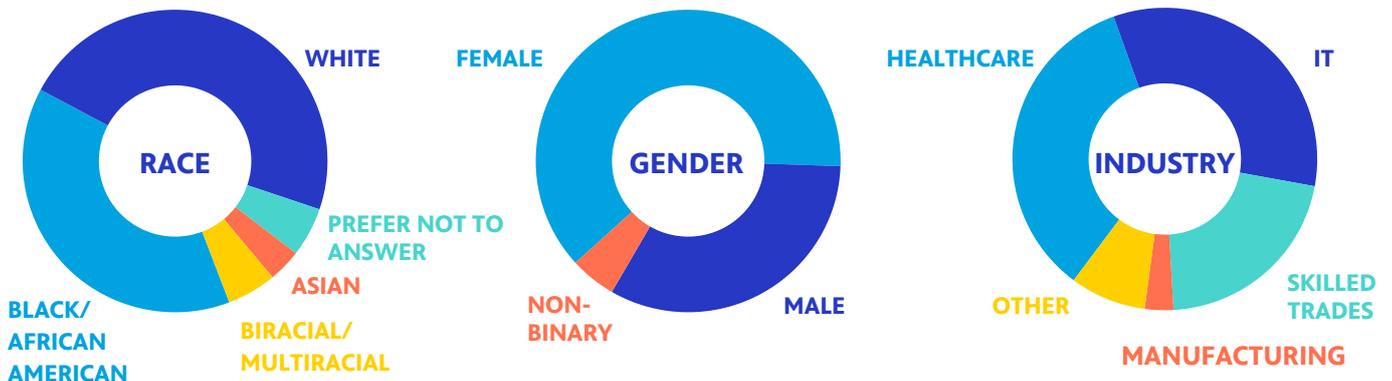
## Model for Engagement

Nine PBS facilitates at scale a community conversation that creates change.  
© Nine PBS



## MIDCAREER FOCUS GROUPS

April 2021 - September 2023. To be eligible, participants had to be over the age of 27, not have a four-year degree, and be either currently enrolled or recently completed a program to upskill/reskill in healthcare, skilled trades, manufacturing, or IT. Focus group participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were invited by Nine PBS partners, given options for in-person or virtual engagement, and provided a \$25 incentive after completing a short follow-up survey. Participant ages 27-65; 5% veterans; 11% self-report having a disability; from 39 unique zip codes.



# THANK YOU TO OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS WHO CONTRIBUTED THROUGH DISCUSSIONS AND SURVEYS

## Discussions:

ABNA  
ADB  
Ameren  
BJC Healthcare  
Boeing  
Concordance Academy  
Construction Forum  
Craftsmen Industries  
CyberUp  
East Central College  
Employment Connection  
Generation  
Hiring Our Heroes  
Jefferson College  
LaunchCode  
Lincoln County Department of Economic Development  
Mineral Area College  
Mission: STL  
Missouri Department of Corrections  
Missouri Department of Probation & Parole  
Missouri Women in Trades  
Missouri Works Initiative's Building Union Diversity  
Rung for Women  
Spire  
Starkloff Disability Institute  
St. Charles Community College  
St. Louis Community College  
St. Louis County Job Center  
St. Louis University Transformative Workforce Academy  
Streib Company  
The Vetwork  
True Manufacturing  
V15able  
Verizon  
World Wide Technology

## Surveys:

Nine PBS Community Surveys, November 2021, July 2022, and July 2023  
Partner surveys (respondents not previously listed)  
Big Brothers Big Sisters  
Bi-State  
Boys and Girls Club of Greater STL  
CCDI  
Clark Fox Family Foundation  
Connections to Success  
Carpenters Joint Apprenticeship Program  
East St. Louis School District 189  
Family and Workforce Centers of America  
Gateway GIS  
Gateway Region YMCA  
Goodwill - Excel Center  
Homegrown STL  
Madison County Employment and Training Department  
Missouri Chamber of Commerce  
Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
Missouri Department of Social Services  
NPower Missouri  
Parkway School District  
Savvy Coders  
St. Clair County Intergovernmental Grants Department  
StemSTL  
St. Louis Internship Program  
St. Louis Job Corps  
STL Youth Jobs  
The Little Bit Foundation  
Washington University  
YouthBuild



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