



Testimony on Rural Community Development
Presented to the Senate Majority Policy Committee

By Kristin Hamilton
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Good afternoon, Senator Laughlin and members of the Pennsylvania Senate Majority Policy Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Kristin Hamilton, Executive Director, for Develop Tioga.

Develop Tioga is a non-profit, Pennsylvania Certified Economic Development Organization (CEDO) serving Tioga County, Pennsylvania. Our organization is focused on community and economic development efforts through the attraction of new business and industry, and the retention of existing businesses. We serve as a connection to resources that help start, expand, and promote businesses and enhance the quality of life in our communities.

Tioga County, along with rural counties across Pennsylvania and the country, is faced with key workforce challenges that must be addressed.

Prior to Covid, Tioga County held discussions and economic summits that united business, education and community leaders to identify our area's strengths and the key issues facing our area. There was one resounding topic they all agreed on – workforce challenges were impacting current and future businesses and must be addressed. A Workforce Development Workgroup was formed to review the challenges and identify possible solutions.

Available Workforce

We knew at that time that about 30% of Tioga County's eligible workforce was not working for a variety of reasons, and that we were seeing a slight, gradual decrease of our population. The impacts of Covid, including the benefits of state and federal subsidies for potential workforce participants, is believed to have significantly increased the workforce challenges and shortage of available employees.

Employers frequently reported current employees and potential employees turning down work for reasons believed to be associated with benefits they would be able to access if they were not working. That combined with a slightly decreasing population created extra challenges for our businesses.

One key group that was identified as a potential to work with for our businesses was our current student population, approaching a "grow your own process".

Workforce Development – "Grow Your Own"

In January 2022, BLaST Intermediate Unit 17 was working on new options for career and workforce development. They asked for a county to volunteer in their area to partner on a Pennsylvania Department of Education PA Smart grant application. We stepped up to partner and began the process of a partnership with our school districts, business and community leaders, and workforce development partners.

ACT Work Ready Community – Pennsylvania’s First

We reached out to ACT to include them in the local efforts and began to explore the ACT Work Ready Community initiative, a nationwide, measurement proven effort. This initiative unites business, education, and workforce for partnerships for success. Becoming an ACT Work Ready Community focuses on key groups of potential workforce participants including the categories of “emerging” and “reentering” workforce members. It also brings the National Career Readiness Certification (NCRC) training and testing to our area, along with profiling of jobs employers need filled. NCRC scores are utilized to help best match job seekers and positions that employers are trying to fill.

The PA Smart grant is providing the key funding to start the process of becoming a certified ACT Work Ready Community. Coordinated efforts and funding will be needed to keep moving the process forward.

On April 20, 2023, Tioga County, PA became the first Pennsylvania County to be publicly recognized for taking key steps towards becoming a nationally recognized ACT Work Ready Community.

Site Promotion – Site Selectors Award Higher Consideration

Nationally, site selectors will award an automatic 10 extra points to any site they are considering that is certified as an ACT Work Ready Community. Other rural areas across the country have had success in retaining and recruiting businesses as an ACT Work Ready Community.

Other Key Factors – Housing, Child Care, Transportation & Fiscal Literacy

As we work with our area employers on addressing workforce challenges, employers and job seekers have consistently highlighted other key factors that must be addressed along with workforce training.

We have recently convened two county-wide focus groups to address issues related to workforce development. Business and community leaders, non-profits, elected officials and stakeholders were invited to participate. Each meeting resulted in agreement that to be successful with workforce development for our area it is critical to address the following needs and develop proactive approaches to address the following:

- accessible broadband,
- affordable and attainable housing,
- safe and affordable childcare,
- transportation,
- and fiscal literacy.

Housing & Community Needs Taskforce

As a result of the focus groups, a Housing & Community Needs Taskforce is being formed. A public call for participant applications is being prepared to solicit interest in serving on the taskforce.

Dedicated Funding for County-Wide Community & Economic Development

Coordinated, proactive discussions among business and community leaders, elected officials and workforce development partners; along with progressive, and strategic plans are vital for the success of rural communities' economic success.

Pennsylvania currently is a state that lacks dedicated funding streams to strengthen local community and economic development coordination, planning and service efforts. We respectfully request further consideration of possible options to strengthen county-wide coordinated resources for community and economic development.

Thank You

Hearings like this are important in keeping the focus on vital needs for the community and economic development of rural communities and counties.

On behalf of Develop Tioga and rural Pennsylvania communities, we thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your consideration of these comments. We would be pleased to follow up on any questions.