

B. The Strengths and Weaknesses of Workforce Development Activities

Provide an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the workforce development activities identified in (A) above.

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As part of the State Planning process, participating core and partner programs were asked to identify strengths and weaknesses of their programs, as well as for the workforce development system as a whole. Several themes emerged from that discussion. These themes, which are common across all (or most) programs, are discussed below. The specific strengths and weaknesses of individual programs are discussed in more detail in subsequent sections of this plan.

Strengths

The primary strengths identified in our activities analysis were program administration, alignment, and partnership. Currently, all the WIOA Title I-B programs, as well as the UI, Trade Adjustment, and Veterans' Outreach programs are administered by the Idaho Department of Labor. The Carl D. Perkins, postsecondary workforce training, and WIOA Title II (Adult Education) programs are administered by Idaho Career & Technical Education (ICTE). Both ICTE and the Idaho Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, which oversees Title IV programs, are under the administrative umbrella of the State Board of Education. Idaho's State Board of Education also offers a unique advantage as one of two states in the nation with K-20 governance under a single board.

Having the core WIOA programs—as well as several of the optional partners—clustered within a few agencies makes it easier to streamline planning and policy alignment and promote robust referral processes at the State level. Additionally, the Idaho Department of Labor, Idaho Career & Technical Education, and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation enjoy strong, positive, and constructive working relationships, which have contributed and will continue to contribute to the State Planning process.

All of these agencies are represented, by their senior leaders, on the Idaho Workforce Development Council. In addition, partner agencies such as Idaho Health and Welfare, the Idaho Department of Commerce and the State Board of Education hold seats on the Council.

Weaknesses/Challenges

We have identified three major weaknesses/challenges for Idaho's Workforce Development System. The first is in regard to staffing, the second is in regard to serving rural communities, and the third is in regard to connecting programs with employers and industries.

Several of our core and partner programs identified staff turnover, staff training, and staff retention as issues—especially those programs which provide direct services like education and counseling. Attracting, training, and retaining high quality, qualified staff can be difficult in a stagnant funding environment, as well as in a state like Idaho where wages are lower on average. For example, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors are required to have Masters degrees, but the

pay is not always commensurate with the education and training requirements. The State's professional-technical programs have experienced difficulty filling vacancies for teachers, as they are required to have both pedagogical and technical expertise and may have to take a pay-cut when moving from a career in industry to a career in teaching.

Attracting and retaining quality staff can be especially difficult in rural communities. The pool of local applicants is limited, with many qualified candidates seeking employment elsewhere. The pay is often low, and insufficient to bring in qualified labor from outside the community.

In fact, rural communities present a number of challenges for our workforce programs. A great deal of research links rural communities with higher instances of poverty and unemployment, lower education levels, and a generally higher need for services. In Idaho, these communities face the additional challenge of isolation, and are often separated by geographical barriers such as mountain ranges or large distances with few transportation options. As a result, bringing services to these communities can cost more, while at the same time serving fewer people. The majority of programs cited rural services as a major challenge.

Finally, several programs, other than those administered by the Department of Labor, noted that they have a difficult time connecting in a meaningful way to employers at both the state and local level. With an increased focus on employer engagement, employer satisfaction, and employment outcomes for participants, it is vital that all the WIOA core programs, as well as partner programs, have the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with employers. Idaho's Workforce Development Council was reorganized in late 2017 to increase the presence of and partnership with employers and industry associations. The reorganization was implemented in direct response to this weakness in Idaho's workforce development system, as identified by an independent, industry-led task force appointed by the Governor in January 2017. While work is just underway to build and deepen these relationships, it is expected that by the next state plan update, employer engagement will be a strength in Idaho, not a weakness.