Ignite Initiative Regional Workforce Training System   EDA-HDQ-ARPGJ-2021-2006964

(1a) Executive Summary. The Ignite Initiative Regional Workforce Training System (IIRWTS) proposes a multi-stakeholder collaborative approach to providing training opportunities for in-demand skills that lead to good jobs and long-term careers. Its primary focus is on the North Dakota/Minnesota bi-state region of Fargo-Moorhead-West Fargo's (FMWF) New American, Veterans, BIPOC, formerly incarcerated, and high school students. These groups struggle with high rates of unemployment, poverty, and barriers that prevent or discourage from enrolling in skill training programs. The IIRWTS addresses these barriers via transportation, housing, childcare and cost wrap-around micro-grants and services.

System Lead Entity, the Chamber Foundation, and Backbone Organizations, Grand Farm, Emerging Prairie, and North Dakota State College of Science (NDSCS), have collaborated to serve three industries with high demand for immediate and future skilled workers: Advanced Manufacturing, Precision Agriculture and Food, and IT/Cybersecurity. 78 employers are in support of establishing the IIRWTS. We expect to train at minimum 900 participants through the IIRWTS via traditional, hybrid, and online courses in the technical and soft skills needed by regional employers. Projected wages for individuals completing training range from $45k-$75k with wage growth potential beyond $100k. Immediate wage and growth depend on industry.

Operating in collaboration with Cass County, ND, the Foundation seeks to develop, design, and implement the region's first regional workforce training system. Using a community-based-participatory-research approach, the IIRWTS proposes an equitable and resilient infrastructure to address our region's workforce crisis. It is a sustainable solution to our pressing workforce need and can be implemented in 10 months after award issuance.

(1b)System Lead Entity and Backbone Organizations

System Lead Entity: The FMWF Chamber of Commerce is a catalyst for growth and prosperity. Located on the border of North Dakota and Minnesota, it is uniquely positioned to provide solutions to workforce issues across the bi-state area. With an extensive history and commitment to the region's economic growth, the Chamber is highly respected across regional and state levels. Its mission of engagement, education, and advocacy extends throughout its network of over 2000 businesses; more than 500 volunteers; its 501(c)(3) nonprofit subsidiary dedicated to workforce development, the Chamber Foundation; and its staff dedicated to identifying, understanding, and meeting community needs.

The Chamber Foundation will serve in the role of System Lead Entity of the proposed system development, design, and implementation of the Ignite Initiative Regional Workforce Training System (IIRWTS). Operating in cooperation with the political subdivision of Cass County, ND the Foundation has direct support of multiple stakeholders[1] and has the capacity to provide the support and structure required by the Economic Development Agency (EDA).

Cass County recognizes the Chamber as unparalleled to convening the community. It networks business, educators, policy makers, nonprofits, community, and regional leaders by hosting over 200 events each year. Also, its established military affairs, agriculture, education, public policy, and workforce committees are composed of key regional leaders. Its convening power is continuously recognized in the area; for example, it was asked to establish the business community's voice and organize socials for the local land-grant R1 presidential candidate search.

The Chamber has a rich history of weaving siloed attempts into a unified approach to the region's needs. In 2016, it spearheaded *Fueling our Future* with the Economic Development

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[1] See Appendix A for letters of support from ND and MN congressional delegation; governors; Cities of Fargo, Moorhead, and West Fargo; employers; nonprofits; West Central Initiative; Lake Agassiz Regional Council

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Council (EDC) bringing the public and private sector together to address large-scale issues. In 4 years, the Chamber fundraised $5 million for immediate and future workforce development.

In October 2021, the Foundation launched the Ignite Initiative, a relational strategy to develop the current and future talent pipeline. The initiative connects educators, employers, nonprofits, individuals, students, and job-seekers to one another through its robust software as a service (SaaS) platform, IgniteFMWF.com.[2] The platform integrates education-employment services, provides workskills training, credential management, regionalized career pathways, and features localized job boards with free access to job-seekers and employers. Users can explore over 859 local careers, learn what skills are required and where to learn them, can see the average and median wage for a job in the region, and are networked to employers in the industry. Employers are provided with reports such as skills assessments and certifications of job-seekers. The platform provides a community-based education-to-local employment pipeline.

Private-public partnerships are the key to sparking innovation in the workforce ecosystem. The Ignite Initiative is at the cutting-edge in stakeholders working collaboratively to increase career opportunity and economic mobility for learners seeking skills for success. It is supported by local K-12 education, higher education, businesses, nonprofits, officials, and the community. 293 employers use IgniteFMWF. In Fall 2022, all 11 Fargo Public High Schools and the Moorhead Career Academy will require students to sign up for it.

In December 2021, ND Governor Doug Burgum[3] publicly identified the Foundation as the lead entity for workforce development. With a dedicated team specifically focused on workforce retention via programs such as FMWF Leadership, Professionals of Color, and Young Professionals Network; creating a systematic and sustainable workforce infrastructure that seamlessly weaves throughout sectors; identifying underserved populations and creating equitable opportunities with those communities; connecting educators and employers to provide robust work-based experiences; and collaborating with the area's 5 universities to retain students post-graduation, the Foundation has the knowledge and capacity to serve as system lead entity.

Our region is experiencing significant skilled workforce needs in industries that provide quality jobs with career pathways, a timely alignment with the Good Jobs Challenge. Three industries experiencing immediate and future needs and their Backbone Organizations are below:

Precision Agriculture and Food Backbone Organization: Grand Farm Research and Education Initiative ("Grand Farm"), is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit subsidiary of Emerging Prairie. One of Grand Farm's core functions is to build and maintain the ecosystem of agriculture technology in the defined region. This ecosystem includes industry, higher education, government, and agriculture producers. In 2021, Grand Farm worked with over 50 industry partners, each having substantial talent shortages – primarily in technology fields. Grand Farm works with these partners to understand the specific skills required for these positions, and develops additional skill training through Emerging Digital Academy (EDA) and other outside partners. Grand Farm also works to develop workshops and roundtables on pressing issues in agriculture technology. In 2021, Grand Farm hosted workshops with globally-recognized subject matter experts on sustainability, regenerative agriculture practices, carbon markets, and autonomous systems. Grand Farm often works with agriculture producers to understand their prioritized areas of skill development, bringing industry partners to events and conferences to provide content meeting those needs.

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[2] See Appendix B for more information on IgniteFMWF platform capabilities

[3] FMWF Chamber, 2021. "December 2021 Policy Outlook Series" 1:31:31 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q23TA8A6-TY

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Advanced Manufacturing's Backbone Organization: NDSCS is a comprehensive, associate degree-granting college that delivers learner-focused education via a unique and evolving collegiate experience. It is an established regional and state leader in Career and Technical Education (CTE) and has 43 high school and 195 businesses partnerships. Faculty maintain deep relationships with employers in the manufacturing industry, resulting in $5.9 million of entrusted equipment to be lent to the program in 2021. Its manufacturing curriculum provides learners with industry recognized certificates and ensures its learners are learning the necessary skills to effectively meet employer needs post-graduation.

IT/Cybersecurity's Backbone Organization: Emerging Prairie, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, energizes ecosystems. Emerging Prairie energizes the entrepreneurial space via hosting weekly Morning Brews (formerly 1 Million Cups) and is responsible for hosting the world's largest TedX event in Downtown Fargo each year. One of the core ecosystems Emerging Prairie focuses on is technologists, including IT and cybersecurity. The vehicle of this work is EDA, an immersive, fast-paced skill development program. Currently, EDA has a 20-week software development certificate program, which trains learners in full-stack software development. Learners enter with no formal skills in software development, and leave with a full-time, entry level position. With the support of Grand Farm, EDA is identifying additional curriculums to implement based on prioritized needs of industry; most likely data science, embedded systems and robotics, and cybersecurity.

(2a) Employer Leadership Commitments. Our supportive employers demand the IIRWTS leads to immediate employability. We have secured 78 employer commitments in preparing to develop the IIRWTS (71 verbal support; 3 general support letters; and 4 hiring commitments).[4] Employers with hiring commitments collectively agreed to hire 345 positions. Employers with verbal and general support require secured funding for a hiring commitment. With secured funding we expect excitement and increased employer participation. During system development, the Foundation, Grand Farm, NDSCS, and Emerging Prairie will leverage their networks to secure hiring commitments. We expect participation to snowball via these networks, industry word-of-mouth, and through an awareness campaign in the region.

Also, the Foundation will leverage the IgniteFMWF platform to invite employer accounts to participate in the IIRWTS. McKinsey & Company[5] report badge incentivizes participation. Therefore, each employer will receive a virtual badge reflecting their sectoral partnership and commitment to providing quality jobs. The badge will be visible to all users on the platform.

Our response to this challenge is an invitation to invest in our region and fund our collaborative response to our workforce needs. We are primed to secure commitments during the development and design phases. Employers will then designate a company representative to serve in their respective industry's sectoral partnership. This role is essential for an employer to ensure they are communicating their workforce needs, identifying shifting skill sets, trends, and generally contributing to the employer-education connection. Also, having robust employer participation contributes to the credibility and sustainability of the system we are developing.

Employers will engage in implementation, evaluation, ongoing refinement, and improvement of training programs during design and implementation. These actions serve as a sustainability check to ensure trainees are learning the in-demand skills that set them up for success and that the overall system is contributing to regional workforce needs.

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[4] See Appendix C for employer support letters and hiring commitments

[5] How to Develop Soft Skills, 2019

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We define employer implementation as upholding hiring commitments. We plan to encourage employers to consider equitable implementation via communication in sectoral partnerships. Examples include: inviting parents to bring children to an interview if childcare is unavailable or hosting interviews online via IgniteFMWF to address transportation barriers.

Employers already evaluate training programs, offer suggestions for refinement, and convey improvements to educational institutions. Establishing the IIRWTS moves this process to a central space. An example of this process is the University of Mary's Cybersecurity program. It was developed via an iterative process of research, discussions with subject matter experts, and evaluated with over 50 regional employers. Likewise, Workbay's subscription-based trainings hosted on IgniteFMWF have been rigorously evaluated by sector specific national advisory councils and are recognized by groups like the National Association of Manufacturers.

(2b) Other Stakeholders and Partnerships

Cass County Commission. Located in ND, the Commission is governed by a board of five commissioners each elected to four-year terms. It oversees the economic growth engine for ND, with the county responsible for 20% of ND's GDP and 25% of its population. It serves as co-applicant with the Foundation.

Core Educational Partners and their Roles. All educational partners have agreed to general roles and responsibilities[6] and specific roles are discussed below.

University of Mary is a private institution that serves over 4700 adult learners via its main campus and 7 locations in ND. It serves as a core educational partner due to program alignment, commitment to student success, and experience in working with our target populations.

Its student support center provides services tailored to its students. For example, it has a fully staffed military student services division designed to support veterans, active military, and their families. The office is a national leader in the recruitment, retention, and graduation of military affiliated students. It is led by a retired Brigadier General with 34 years of service, a veterans affairs specialist, and military tuition advisor. Also, the University has an established Culture Team on staff that provides transitional support for its New American learners. These teams are experienced in assisting students in leveraging resources and can provide additional opportunities beyond the IIRWTS' micro-grants for wrap-around services.

It will further serve in this role via offering their 50 credit Cybersecurity program. This course is available via industry certificate, degree, and micro-credentialing.[7] It will also offer soft skill training through their workforce development courses.[6] These stackable training courses include the soft skills identified as being essential across our three identified industries.

NDSCS is the nation's second oldest two-year institution. It has two locations, a commuter campus in Fargo and its main campus in Wahpeton, ND. It offers robust certifications, degrees, and diplomas in traditional career and technical studies. The CTE curriculum included in the IIRWTS has been developed in tandem with regional employers and undergoes educator-industry feedback twice annually. All programs result in certification and/or associate degrees and include soft skills.

NDSCS' student success center provides tailored support to students and is able to assist trainees in leveraging resources to provide opportunities beyond the IIRWTS' wrap-around services. Also, NDSCS has an established dual-credit program with 43 high schools to provide a shorter and clearer time to degree. It will contribute to recruitment efforts via these partnerships. NDSCS will include 20 programs that serve all focus industries.[6]

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[6] See Appendix D for educational general roles, responsibilities, and partner agreements

[7] See Appendix E for IIRWTS curriculum

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Emerging Prairie Digital Academy serves as an educational partner with its coding boot camp program. This immersive 20-week program develops learners with no prior coding experience into full-stack developers. Its approach is focused on small cohorts, one-on-one time with instructors, exposure to local industry professionals, and relies on project-based learning. An advisory council continuously evaluates and updates the curriculum to meet local needs.

IgniteFMWF and Workbay. IgniteFMWF, the Foundation's learning management system, will serve as an education partner with Workbay, a contracted partner. Workbay is passionate about educating and developing adult learners. It provides industry recognized and credentialed courses across various sectors. Courses are available online in a browser or mobile app, downloadable, available in English and Spanish languages, and meet the ADA standards for accessible design.

Workbay will develop specialized courses available to IgniteFMWF's subscription: Food Talent Pipeline, Manufacturing Your Future, and Cybersecure-IT.[8] Also, its Fundamentals of Workforce Skills will be refined to include third and fourth level soft skills training that meet the depth and breadth of careers within each sectoral partnership.

IgniteFMWF will provide business wrap-around services and serve as a vehicle in connecting trainees to employers after program completion. IgniteFMWF will host synchronous job fairs and interviews for trainees and employers, and asynchronously host a local job board that identifies committed employers with a designated virtual badge. Trainees will have a *trainee* or *completed* badge supported by their industry sectoral partnership to identify their participation to employers. The badge will also be attached to a participant's resume created on IgniteFMWF.

Nonprofit Partners. FMWF has over 1600 nonprofits, many who serve our target populations. We will submit a rigorous RFP during system development to contract a goal of 1-2 nonprofit partners per target population. Nonprofits must be able to demonstrate recruitment and outreach to one or more of the target populations, assist in providing wrap-around services to trainees and help identify, develop, and provide wrap-around resources to employers. Two nonprofits that serve for example purposes only are the F5 Project and the United Way. The F5 Project works to provide basic needs such as housing to the formerly incarcerated. The United Way works with New Americans in the region and works to reduce poverty associated with this group.

(3) Regional Description

The FMWF region is situated along the border of ND and MN and serves as the primary point of connection between the two states. The recent U.S. Census reports a population of approximately 248,594 people with 149,776 (60.2%) total employed. From 2010-2020, the population increased 6.7% and by 2025, it is projected to grow by 19,544 (7.9%).

The average pay of full-time employed people is $64,400. Gross regional product is $13.4 Billion ($89,467 per employed person). The poverty rate, defined as less than $26,200 annual pay, is 1 in 9 people (5.8%). The region has grown in racial diversity and has a highly educated population due to its five institutions of higher education.[9]

A pressing challenge to the region's workforce is reaching untapped talent pools to meet its growing skilled labor shortage. For example, MN estimates it loses $1.3 billion annually due to untapped talent in the New American population alone. Our overall unemployment rate is low, hovering around 2%, yet within many underserved groups, rates are more than 10%. Matching

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[8] See Appendix E for IIRWTS curriculum

[9] See Appendix F for Racial Demographics Infographic and Educational Attainment Infographic

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underserved populations with employers to address the labor shortage seems like an easy solution; yet many groups experience barriers to upskilling and employment (see section 5c).

The system development, design, and implementation of the IIRWTS will primarily focus on 4 target populations (see section 4e) who experience barriers to training and/or high unemployment rates in our region: New Americans, BIPOC, Veterans, and formerly incarcerated; and will also target high school students. Our proposal aligns with the West Central Initiative and Lake Agassiz Regional Council's CEDS.[10]

Focus Industries: Information Technology and Cybersecurity contributes $3 billion per year to ND's GDP. There are 22,000 people employed throughout the state across 3,000 businesses -- including Microsoft Corporation's second largest campus. This sector is expected to grow over the next 10 years by 20-30%. Due to the investments of broadband access throughout ND, this industry has spread into rural communities. This is accomplished through the availability of remote work and web-based applications. MN employs 251,000 in IT fields. The IT field contributed to $31.1 Billion per year of GDP for MN across the state.

Specific to the region, 24.6% of all jobs are in this industry. Diversity is low when compared to national averages. In 2020, collective earnings were $364.6 million and GRP was $815.5 million. The average regional industry wage is $118,464, a skewed number due to several corporations located in the area. Most entry and mid-level positions range between $45k-$85k.

The need for skilled workers in the region is high. ND Jobs Service reports over 250 openings in February 2022 and EMSI reports show an average of 218 job posts per month compared to the national average of 74. As this industry continues to grow, the need for skilled workers will increase. Please refer to Appendix H for projected job growth needs by 2030 throughout the industry.

Focus Industry: Precision Agriculture and Food. FMWF is located at the heart of the Red River Valley, a region of agriculture with historic foundations. This creates a unique opportunity for industry in the area to contribute to the future of farming. Agriculture was the first industry cluster of ND -- in 1804. Across ND, 39.3 Million acres (89%) of land in the state is farmland. In 2017, $8.2 billion worth of agriculture products were sold. Agriculture has grown from a traditional industry to one that interfaces with Technology and Innovation – industries that intersect to advance agriculture through digital avenues at all stages from farm to plate to fork. In MN, there are approximately 68,822 farms spread over 25.5 Million acres (45.8%) of land. The Minnesota Department of Agriculture reports $17 Billion in sales per year.

Specific to FMWF, diversity is low when compared to national averages. In 2020, collective wage earnings were $597.5 million and GRP was $994.3 million. The average regional industry wage is $108,512, most likely higher due to including ag-tech. Specifically referencing the ND side, the state reports average wage is $50,138 slightly higher than the state's $46,781.

The need for skilled workers in the region is high. As of February 2022, ND Jobs Service reports over 300 current openings. In the past year, EMSI reports show an average of 300 job posts per month compared to the national average of 154. As this industry continues to grow, the need for skilled workers will increase. Please refer to Appendix H for projected job growth needs by 2030 throughout the industry.

Focus Industry: Advanced Manufacturing. MN and ND both consider advanced manufacturing one of the largest industry sectors in the region. MN advanced manufacturing contributes to 14% GDP, and is the largest sector in the state with $52.7 Billion produced per year. MN also has 8,200

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[10] See Appendix G for letters authorizing CEDS alignment from the two regions we operate across

people employed in advanced manufacturing throughout the state. ND advanced manufacturing contributes to 7.28% of total GDP. A total of $4.16 Billion was output in 2020. Advanced manufacturing contributes to 6.3% of employment in ND.

Specific to FMWF, advanced manufacturing is in the top 5 industries. The unique positioning of Fargo receiving a foreign trade zone designation in 2005 has led to the growth of manufacturing corporations and increased commercial activity in the area. The industry is low in racial diversity compared to national averages. In 2020, collective wage earnings were $746.6 million and GRP was $1.3 Billion. The average regional wage in this industry is $72,055.

The need for skilled workers in the region is extremely high. EMSI reports a thin supply of labor, the FMWF region has 9,941 workers while other similar sized metros have 11,625. As of February 2022, ND Jobs Service reports there are 1,064 current openings. This industry has an average of 243 job posts a month compared to the national average of 213. Please refer to Appendix H for projected job growth needs by 2030 throughout the industry.

(4) Impacts of a Regional Workforce Training System.
Funding from the Good Jobs Challenge will support the system development, program design, and implementation of the IIRWTS. The Chamber has a rich history of identifying siloed approaches and bringing partners together for a unified approach that yields lasting impacts. The Good Jobs Challenge requires this type of expertise and provides the greater FMWF region an opportunity to establish a regional workforce training system. We are prepared to incorporate existing training, collaboratively identify and respond to regional skill gaps, develop new training programs, and launch implementation of our IIRWTS in 10 months.

Our primary objective is to establish an equitable regional approach to workforce development training that provides participants with quality jobs and career advancement. The IIRWTS addresses 3 challenges facing the region: 1) upskilling untapped talent to meet labor shortages; 2) streamlining workforce training; and 3) skilling the future talent pipeline.

To ensure we develop a nuanced understanding of multi-stakeholder needs, preliminary groundwork was rooted in a community-based participatory research approach, or CBPR[11]. This method advocates for shared power across all members of a system, requires honest communication, feedback, and legitimizes lived experience.[12] CBPR is a successful and desired approach when working with underserved and marginalized populations[13], ensures equitable partnerships[14] via co-creating knowledge, and is a sustainable approach for long-term community solutions.[10] The Foundation is experienced in using CBPR to establish trust, infrastructural partnerships, ensure equitable outcomes, and co-create grassroot community solutions that enact meaningful change and will use CBPR throughout establishing and implementing the IIRWTS.

(4a) System Development, Program Design, and Program Implementation[15]
System Development is estimated to take 5 months to complete. It has 7 objectives:

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[11] Minkler & Wallerstein (2008) Introduction to Community-Based Participatory Research; Jagosh et al. (2015) A realist evaluation of community-based participatory research

[12] Tremblay et al. (2018) Understanding community-based participation through a social movement framework

[13] Currie-Mueller et al. (2016) Building a communication infrastructure using a culture-centered approach

[14] Wallerstein (2020) Engage for equity

[15] See Appendix I for visual representation of our envisioned system

1. **Establish the IIRWTS.** We will workshop and finalize our conceptual IIRWTS framework. The current framework relies upon the same process in each industry. Members of our target populations will be recruited through contracted nonprofit partners. The nonprofit partner will work closely with a backbone organization's *Career Navigator* (CN). The CN will assist in providing a needs-based intake survey that addresses wrap-around services and asks an individual, "What services would help you be successful during your training program?" and will work with our nonprofit partners to secure necessary wrap-arounds. CNs will also collect participation information for internal data analysis, ensure the participant is signed up for an account on IgniteFMWF, and make connections to an educational navigator (EN).

ENs are housed within our educational partners and serve to help individuals navigate enrollment, how to be successful, and be available to answer questions throughout an individual's experience, and provide general educational support. ENs and CNs will work closely together to ensure participants have the support that is needed to develop skills to complete their program and serve as a safety net for retention.

After program completion, a training participant is invited to attend specific IIRWTS virtual job fairs hosted on IgniteFMWF to directly connect with employers who have committed to hiring and interviewing. Job fairs will be scheduled at varying times of the day and evening to accommodate participants who have constraints on their time. Further, job fairs will be recorded and available for playback on IgniteFMWF.com. Participants will also have access to IgniteFMW's active job board, which features regional job openings.

Trainees are identified on IgniteFMWF with an industry sectoral partnership supported trainee badge that is linked to their account upon enrollment in a program, and a virtual badge designating completion of their program. Similarly, employers will have a virtual badge identifying them as IIRWTS committed employer leaders and providers of quality jobs.

2. Develop iterative sectoral partnership processes. The system lead entity and backbone organizations will continue to recruit appropriate stakeholders for each industry. As sectoral partnerships become robust, backbone organizations will spearhead developing standard processes of meetings communicating needs, feedback, and evaluative methods.

3. Issue an RFP for nonprofit partners and develop relationships with their organizations. We will be issuing a rigorous RFP process to enlist 1-2 nonprofits who serve each of our target populations. We will be looking for nonprofits who demonstrate capacity and experience in outreach and recruitment; will assist in providing wrap-around services to trainees; and help identify, develop, and provide wrap-around services to employers.

4. Develop a plan to leverage additional funding. We are establishing a long-term solution to our workforce needs in the region – one that requires additional funding beyond what we have currently leveraged. We will develop a strategy to leverage additional funding through financial or in-kind support and begin to seek those avenues once a plan is established.

5. Develop outreach and recruitment plans. We will establish a strategy for awareness campaigns and recruitment. Using the Chamber's in-house Communications team, we will develop a strategy that will effectively market the IIRWTS.

6. Finalize process for delivering wrap-around services. In our preliminary research, we were able to identify several barriers that prevent our target populations from enrolling in education or training programs (see section 5c). In our preliminary framework, we have identified some approaches that will mitigate these barriers. During the development phase, we will be able to receive feedback from stakeholders who serve our target populations as well as representatives from our target populations to finalize our process for providing wrap-around services.

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7. Identify wrap-around services for employers. In preliminary research, we identified several employer-based needs that prevented hiring and retention of employees. For example, some employers are unsure how to navigate cultural differences or unaware of federal benefits available for employing a formerly incarcerated individual. Through qualitative survey methods, we will identify the top 10 topics employers would like additional information for.

Program Design is estimated to take 5-9 months to complete. It has 7 objectives:

1. Complete gap analyses to determine missing industry needs. To ensure the IIRWTS is addressing the in-demand skills that employers need most in the region, we will complete gap analysis research in each of our focus industries. Through general survey methods, we will ask employers to identify the skills that are required in their organizations, the skills they experience challenges with finding in employees; and the skills they are in need of the most. We will then cross reference skills with information from the U.S. Department of Labor and its programs to ensure required skills are represented in curriculum included in the IIRWTS.

2. Develop curriculum that meets identified needs from gap analyses. We will respond to any regional skill training gaps identified during our gap analyses by working with our educational partners to develop training to address employer needs. Any materials developed during this time will be evaluated and refined via the iterative sectoral partnership process developed during the system development phase.

3. Develop curriculum that meets skill needs identified during preliminary research. Soft skill development was an area of opportunity revealed during preliminary research. Soft skills are essential for employability and are often identified as skills that employees struggle with[16] and can be especially challenging for some of our target population groups. Several of the training curriculum included in the IIRWTS includes fundamental soft skills training. Yet, adult learners are often in need of soft skills that extend into third or fourth level skilling. In our framework, we have supplemented soft skills through our educational partner, the University of Mary and with basic soft skill courses on IgniteFMWF. During program design, we will contract with Workbay to develop the soft skills content identified as needed the most across our 3 focus industries to provide a robust accessible catalog that serves our target populations and future participants.

4. Develop wrap-around services for business partners. We will begin to build out trainings from the top 10 topics employers identified as learning more about during the previous phase. Acknowledging that some material may already be available, we will identify at least 5 topics to develop original content collaboratively with our nonprofit partners. Materials will be developed for in-person and online trainings hosted on IgniteFMWF.

5. Develop a documented process that matches employer skill needs to training materials. In conducting our gap analyses we will compile a document of what skills are necessary in each industry and industry role in the region. We will then match that document with existing syllabi and curriculum design documents from the training programs included in the IIRWTS. This will create a regional industry database of necessary skill sets, where they can be developed, how they are developed, and provides a foundation for educators and employers to work from.

6. Secure employer commitments to hire. Prior to system development, we secured several verbal employer commitments (see section 2a) who communicated upon funding and system development they would provide hiring commitments. Once the IIRWTS is established, we plan

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[16] McKinsey & Company (2019) How to develop soft skills; US Chamber of Commerce Foundation (2018) Bridging the Soft Skills Gap; Pierce (2019) What Employers Want; U.S. Department of Labor (2022) Soft Skills

to meet with our verbal committed employers and secure their hiring commitments. Simultaneously, we will begin to systematically approach the largest employers in each industry for commitments and leverage the Chamber, Grand Farm, Emerging Prairie, and NDSCS' extensive networks to increase our employer commitments to hire.

7. Secure letters of commitment for leveraged funds. Upon enacting our developed strategy to leverage additional financial and in-kind support, we will secure letters of commitment to support the design and implementation in addition to existing leveraged in-kind and financial support and EDA funding.

Program Implementation is estimated to occur at least 10 months after initial funding. We have 7 objectives during this phase:

1. Recruit underserved workers from our target populations
2. Deliver skills training
3. Provide wrap-around services to trainees
4. Provide wrap-around services to businesses
5. Place workers into quality jobs
6. Collect metrics and analyze data
7. Ongoing evaluation of training system

(4b) Alignment with the EDA's Investment Priorities
Recovery and Resilience is built upon four primary adaptive pillars: economic development, social capital, information and communication, and community competence.[17] It requires reducing inequities, engaging the community, connecting and linking organizations together and social support. The proposed IIRWTS framework reflects each pillar, addresses barriers to training, serves as a connector, engages the community and includes social support for all stakeholders..

Economic development is key to creating good jobs. FMWF's industrial diversification provides a foundation for a resilient economy. Focusing on multiple growing sectors ensures the system is steeped in economic diversification and is adaptable should an industry retract.

Resiliency simultaneously increases and demands a community's social capital. The IIRWTS has preliminary and established buy-in from employers and local governmental support and is spearheaded by well-respected organizations. Its flexible social infrastructure is essential as research overwhelmingly indicates the engine of resilience lies in social infrastructure[18]. Having the right network in place to recruit participants and place them into quality jobs increases the IIRWTS' reputation and creates a scalable model that can include other industries in the future.

Information sharing and communication are key for resiliency.[19] Intentional systems built on trust, interactions, communication, and shared responsibility[20] thrive in certain and uncertain times. At IIRWTS' core is adaptability to employer needs, making it resilient to external forces.

Last, community competence is important. In using CBPR, the barriers to enrolling underserved populations in skill training became understandable. Increasing communal competency yields an opportunity to equitably introduce credentialing to our target populations

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[17] Norris et al. (2008) Community resilience as metaphor, theory, set of capacities, and strategy for disaster readiness

[18] Aldrich (2015) Social Capital and Community Resilience; Zellner, Hock, & Welch (2012) Building resilient communities

[19] Longstaff & Yang (2008) Communication management and trust: Their role in building resilience

[20] Goldstein (2012) Collaborative resilience; Ozawa (2012) Planning resilient communities; Paton (2017) Disaster Resilience

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that was previously inaccessible. Establishing the IIRWTS pipelines competent and skilled individuals into growing industries and contributes to the area's economic growth and resiliency. *Equity* is built into the foundation and throughout the IIRWTS. All core organizations serving in the roles of system leadership have demonstrated their commitment to equity within their own organizations and the community. Further, in using a respected method to establish equitable community programs and partnerships, the IIRWTS' foundation in CBPR ensures that barriers for participants and employers are addressed and all stakeholders' voices are heard.

In working with community invested stakeholders, the development, design and implementation of the IIRWTS addresses the inequities existing within the region that may not have been known without using CBPR. For example, a common experience shared from the New American community is the difficulty in securing employment following education. Many expressed confusion in being qualified but unable to secure an interview. This particular need is addressed via planning to secure hiring commitments during system development, establishing virtual badges that reinforce skill competency to employers, and hosting job fairs and interviews on IgniteFMWF following IIRWTS completion. Also, incorporating training, materials, and resources for employers on navigating cultural differences at work, or becoming a diverse and inclusive employer help in mitigating this barrier and help employers hire and retain employees.

Collaborating with community partners to address barriers to training and education in adult learners exemplifies a commitment to equity in preparation to developing the IIRWTS. People are successful when their needs are met and when they have options. Having access to educational partners in multiple locations and networks means we can develop opportunities in communities and locations that are the most convenient for members of our target populations.

Also, we were intentional in considering the needs of future trainees. We chose to provide online, hybrid, and in-person programs for each industry. COVID-19 revealed inequities in our society; there are individuals who may not be able to or are uncomfortable to attend in-person classes. Yet, they may desire to be involved in skill development. Further, time constraints of adult learners with families or current employment may impede someone from committing to synchronous location and time-based training.

Last, equity is reflected by including soft skills training with transferable skills across our focused industries. Trade, consulting, and academic research reveal employers will not hire or retain people with soft skills deficits.[21] Including soft skills exhibits an equitable approach to training and sets participants up for success in the career - especially individuals who may have been removed from society or not involved in the workforce for an extended duration of time.

Workforce Development. The IIRWTS establishes a regional approach to our pressing workforce issues. We have identified 3 established and growing industries with high demands for current and future workers. In our proposal, we identified connecting multiple stakeholders to address regional needs to develop, design, and implement our preliminary workforce system. Incorporating hiring commitments guarantees individuals are placed into quality jobs.

Manufacturing. The Advanced Manufacturing industry in the FMWF is hurting from a thin supply of labor and the need to skill the current workforce. The IIRWTS' commitment to the advanced manufacturing industry by identifying underserved talent pool, crafting a pathway for credentialing, and securing hiring commitments during the system development phase ensures manufacturers to have an available workforce to expand their businesses and outputs.

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[21] Majid et al. (2019) The importance of soft skills for employability and and career development; Lambert (2021) Top Skills for 2021; McKinsey & Company (2019) How to develop soft skills; McKinsey Global Institute (2018) Skill Shift

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Technology-Based Economic Development. A focus industry of the IIRWTS is the region's growing IT/Cybersecurity sector. Training workers in this industry supports the startups and established tech companies in the region. The FMWF area is colloquially referred to as "the silicon prairie" due to a rich startup incubator, investment in technological infrastructure, and Microsoft's second largest campus headquarters. Focusing on this industry supports our businesses that propel our region forward with innovation. Emerging Prairie serves as Backbone Organization for this industry and is an intentional connection to the region's entrepreneurial network. It is responsible for establishing the FMWF's entrepreneurial infrastructure and established the first co-working space in ND and brings entrepreneurs together each week via 1 Million Cups/Morning Brew.

(4c) Expected Outcomes and Support EMSI data reports on average the FMWF region lists 3,000 manufacturing, 2,600 IT/Cybersecurity, and 3,600 agriculture jobs annually. With projected growth in these industries over the next 5 years, the number of available jobs for workers are plentiful. NDSCS, which has several training-to-employer agreements in place in select programs, reports placement rates of over 90% of responding graduates. For example, their agriculture program placed 22 graduates in 2021 and 27 in 2020 with $40-$72k in net pay.

With funding from the EDA, we expect to be able to provide training with wrap-around service micro-grants at least 300 individuals per year. Using NDSCS data and accounting for scale, we expect to place at least 270 (90%) participants into good jobs across industries via secured employer commitments. For example, an early employer leader, Razor Consulting Services, has committed to hiring 100% of interviewed trainees in the IT/Cybersecurity sector with a total need of hiring 215 positions in the next 3 years. Likewise, Healthy Food Ingredients has committed to doing the same and will hire over 300 positions in the next 3 years.

Relying on existing data from EMSI, NDSCS, and ND Jobs Service, we expect trainee participants to be placed in good jobs projected wages of $45,000-$75,000 with wage growth potential beyond $100,000. Employers who have provided hiring commitments or verbal support commitments will hire for full-time employees and offer benefit packages.

To ensure our outcomes are achievable and can be scaled beyond initial implementation, we will leverage our available resources during system development. We have preliminary identified curriculum from our educational partners to include in the IIRWTs. We will leverage these resources to develop additional curricula needed for regional skill gaps to effectively train individuals with the skills necessary to be placed into good jobs.

Likewise, we will continue to leverage system lead entity, backbone organizations, and core educational partner networks to secure hiring commitments. With several early employer commitments (see section 3a) we have begun to lay the foundation for robust sector partnerships. During development we will reach out to non-employer organizations such as nonprofits and human services organizations.

We will be able to measure our expected outcomes via collecting data from trainee graduates. Nonprofit contractors will collect data on job placement, wages earned, and wage growth at 6, 12, and 24 months post job placement. Backbone organizations will collect data from employers in their respective sectoral partnerships regarding the number of hired graduates, benefits included, and average wage growth of employees. Using this data we will be able to analyze the success of the IIRWTS and ensure employment retention continues to reflect the EDA's definition of good jobs.

(4d) Achievability The IIRWTS is achievable because it builds upon existing work and the strategy of the Foundation's Ignite Initiative. It brings existing resources together, identifies gaps, and will provide solutions for those gaps. Its preliminary groundwork is rooted in CBPR - a

successful approach with a track record of contributing to positive community change. Using this method, we are able to see a complete picture of the challenges that need to be addressed to be successful, such as understanding barriers for our target populations and employers.

The IIRWTS is built on an existing multi-stakeholder relationships that will grow with implementation. IIRWTS groundwork provides an opportunity for a quick-turn around from development to implementation. Previous and current ongoing work has been recognized regionally and its approach to providing equitable training pathways has been recognized by the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives and the Lumina Foundation.

(4e) Expected Impact. The IIRWTS focuses on 5 target populations: New Americans, BIPOC, Veterans, formerly incarcerated, and high school students. With the exception of high school students, these groups are disproportionately affected by high unemployment compared to the region. In addressing the barriers to training for these groups, we expect the IIRWTS to have a direct impact on skill development, good job placement, wage earnings, and career pathways.

Also, we expect to have a direct impact on our 3 focus industries that are in need of current and future skilled workforce. With an initial goal of training 300 individuals per year, we expect to directly place 90% (270) of individuals in good jobs. We expect to have a direct impact on the expected 71 employers who will partner with the IIRWTS and 5-10 nonprofit groups we will contract with. With providing an equitable path to training-to-employment, there will be indirect effects on GRP in the region and the poverty rate within target populations.

New Americans. In January 2021, Lutheran Social Services of ND, the primary organization that serviced refugees and New Americans in the region permanently closed. In its absence, regional data is limited. The EDC reports 16,146 New Americans live in FMWF, in total they represent 7.4% of the population in Cass County and 4.8% in Clay County. Data from the ND Department of Commerce reveals unemployment amongst New Americans to be 8.1% compared to the region's hovering 2%. The United Way of Cass-Clay reports 2,145 New Americans lack English language proficiency to gain access to essential services which often contributes to poverty. Pre-COVID federal reports reveal 20.3% of ND and 15.4% of MN New Americans live in poverty - numbers most likely exacerbated by COVID.

BIPOC: Our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color population represent nearly 16% of the region's population. Across the state of ND there are 87,623 BIPOC individuals – 39,755 located in FMWF. Unemployment rates amongst this group are significantly higher than the region (Black/African 7.3%; American Indian 11.5%; Hispanic 4.4%; Pacific Islander 16.1%). Collectively in this group, the unemployment rate is 14.3% – 7 times higher than the region's hovering 2% and the poverty rate is 12.6%, nearly double the region's 5.8%. Only 4.9% of members who experience poverty have a high school education or higher.

Veterans, Active Military, and Families: There are 12,080 veterans in the region representing 6.5% of FMWF's, 26% of ND, and 4% of MN's total population. 27.6% of our veteran population have a high school diploma. ND reports there are over 7,500 active duty and 4,500 National Guard or reserve service members. In the last 12 months, 6.7% of our veteran population was below the poverty level. Our veterans transition from military service with a myriad of skill sets but face barriers in finding civilian employment without certification from a non-military institution. Faced with cost barriers to enrolling in training programs or transitioning skills to a new career, our veteran population will benefit from an training-to employment system in the region.

Formerly Incarcerated: Regional data on our formerly incarcerated population is not available. However, examining state figures and national data reveal this population to represent a large portion of the overall population, struggle with unemployment, and would benefit from a direct

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training-to employment opportunity. Nationally, this target population faces structural barriers, like discrimination. Unemployment is 27% - 5 times higher than the national rate and higher than the overall unemployment rate in the U.S. during the Great Depression.[22]

Both ND and MN are recognized as having extremely high incarceration rates, higher than many international democracies. Prison Policy Initiative reports ND incarcerates 583 per 100,000 people and cycles 13,000 through its jails per year. In MN, 342 per 100,00 people are incarcerated and 69,000 people cycle through jails per year. Currently there are 2000 incarcerated individuals and 6000 under judicial supervision in ND. Over 25% of the population of ND resides in Cass County; we can assume there are thousands of individuals with a past criminal record in the region. **High School Students:** In 2021, there were 11,000 high school students across Cass and Clay Counties. According to the U.S. News and World Report, Fargo has 11,520 K-12 students (25.2% economically disadvantaged/9.6% English language learners; ELL) Moorhead has 7,189 students (31.6% economically disadvantaged/6.4% ELL), and West Fargo has 11,432 students (22.6% economically disadvantaged/7.9% ELL).

While the above numbers report on K-12 totals, the picture it provides is useful. At least a quarter of students are economically disadvantaged across the K-12 system. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports in December 2021, the unemployment rate was 2.1% for the area. The high number of disadvantaged students in conjunction with low unemployment rate, informs the need to establish a regional training program that considers existing and future barriers to learning, such as cost, that pipelines future participants into good jobs.

In both ND and MN, high school students are prepared to be college, career, or military ready by graduation. High school students align nicely with the IIRWTS and provide a steady pool of trainees. The IIRWTS provides training opportunities for students following graduation or via NDSCS' dual-credit program that will place them into good jobs.

(5) Funding Request and Program Design and Implementation

We have determined a need of $10,745,520 to implement the region's first employer-driven regional skills training system focusing on 3 essential industries across a bi-state area. We request EDA funding of $9,621,600. Breakdown of the above request and leveraged in-kind and financial funds are explained in detail in the budget narrative.

Included in the budget are in-kinds that include office space and resources, platform licensing, and platform support. EDA funding would support creating 1 new position for each sub-awardee (4 in total) and would provide new positions and support the lead applicant. We have designated a new staffing position that is focused on tracking and analyzing key metrics of the IIRWTS. These metrics include but are not limited to: # of workers participating in program broken down by key demographics; # of workers who complete program broken down by key demographics; # of workers placed into jobs broken down by key demographics; average wages of job placements; average wage growth of job placements; retention of workers placed; amount spent on wraparound services; Total average cost spent per worker. Additional metrics can be tracked using the IgniteFMWF platform, see Appendix J for in depth information.

(5b) Anticipated Projects. Included in the budget are projects we will need to develop and support throughout the lifetime of funding. Our planned projects include developing new training curricula for any identified training gaps, these costs are included under the sub-awardee contractual line item. Our planned business wrap around trainings for the topics businesses identify as wanting

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[22] Prison Policy Initiative

information in is included in partner support and implementation. Further we will need do develop an outreach campaign that promotes the IIRWTS and aids in recruitment of trainees. This will primarily be planned during system development and adjusted as needed.

(5c) Barriers, Wrap-Arounds, and Sustainability

During preliminary research, we identified the primary barriers that present a challenge to our target populations from enrolling in skill training programs: transportation, language translation, housing support, childcare, and cost. We have allocated up to $5,000 per program participant to apply to the barrier/s that limit success. Participants will complete a "need-based" survey with a Career Navigator prior to enrollment. The navigator will communicate the data with the backbone organization and lead system entity, and will help navigate planning for services with a nonprofit partner. Payment for wrap-around services will be taken care of by the system lead entity and paid directly to the service provider (e.g. cost is an identified barrier, the Foundation pays the Education partner).

We will finalize our strategy to fully mitigate barriers during system development in tandem with our nonprofit partners. However, we have anticipated micro-grants to address transportation barriers with gas cards, car payments/mileage reimbursements, or public transportation credits. Tuition barriers will be addressed with payment to the training program. We anticipate providing housing support via utility and rental assistance; further, possibly partnering with nonprofits that provide housing. Last, we understand childcare is a barrier in cost and availability, we will be able to help offset childcare costs with our wrap-around service micro-grants and plan to continually explore innovative avenues that help meet the region's limited availability. Last, we know childcare and transportations issues may prevent individuals from attending scheduled, in-person classes. Therefore, we were intentional to leverage IgniteFMWF to provide training online in each of our focus industries to address these barriers.

Sustainability. The IIRWTS demonstrates sustainability via participant pipelining, scalability, employer partnerships, business wrap-around services, and future opportunities.

1) Stable pipelining. We have included a continual pool of potential trainees, high school students. This ensures the IIRWTS is able to develop both current and future workforce.

2) Scalability. The IIRWts can accommodate the projected growth of the region and incorporate new industries that may experience workforce needs.

3) Strong employer partnerships. We have strong employer partnerships that will continue to be strengthened by placing quality workers with the necessary technical and soft skills into quality jobs. Employer partnerships are essential to sustain the IIRWTS.

4) Business wrap-around services. Providing services focused on employer topics provides an incentive for employer participation beyond employee pipelining.

5.) Future Opportunities. The FMWF region is extremely philanthropic. With the Foundation serving as lead applicant, the IIRWTS is eligible to participate in regional donation matching programs. This means any funding leveraged is twofold. As previously referenced, during system development, we will develop a strategy for leveraging additional funding to ensure sustainability of the IIRWTS and will provide our strategy prior to program design.

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