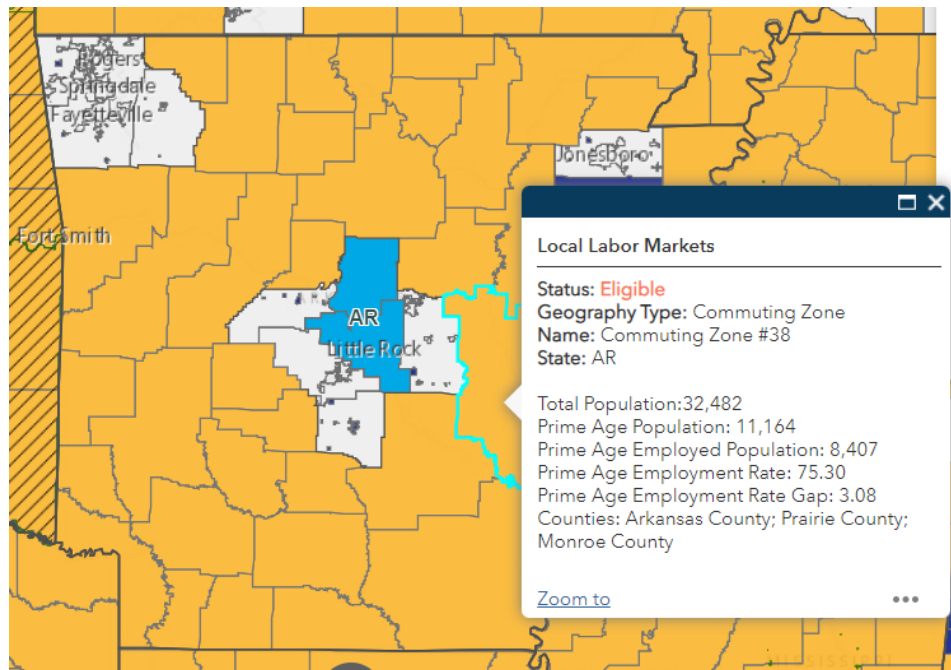
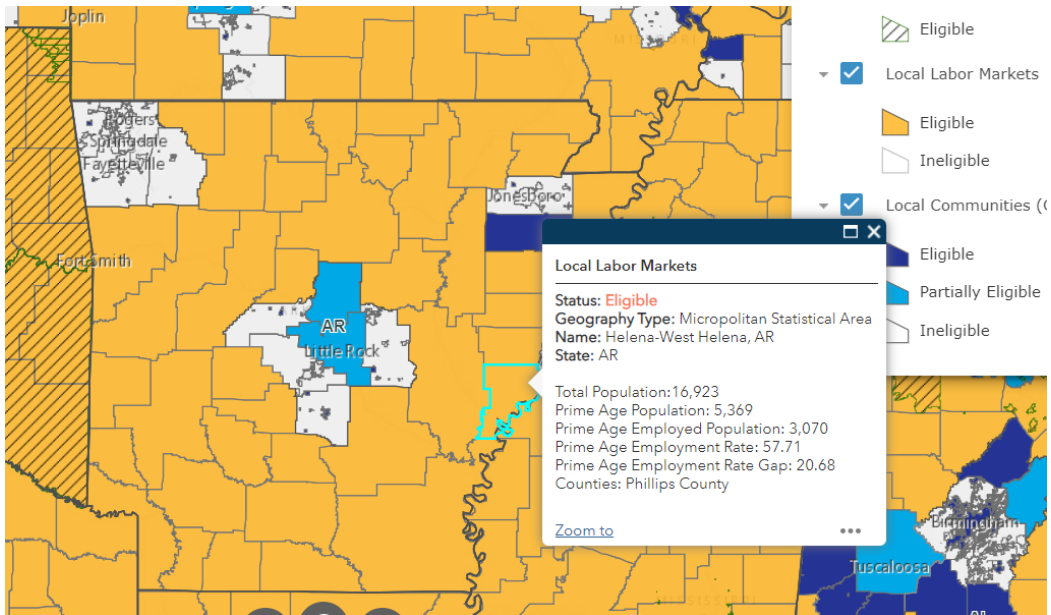


Alliance for Rural Impact Project Narrative Working for Southeast Arkansas

Eligibility Requirements



Figures Above. Utilizing the Mapping Tool, we have demonstrated that the proposed project will be completed in areas eligible for funding. Namely, we will be focusing on Phillips County and Arkansas County, Arkansas, as well as some of the immediate surrounding areas. The screenshots below demonstrate the Local Labor Markets are eligible for funding.

About ARI. The Alliance for Rural Impact (ARI) is a nonprofit organization headquartered in the heart of the Mississippi Delta region, a vast area of our nation that has endured years of persistent poverty, out-migration, and economic distress. It is here that ARI began our mission to provide community and economic development resources to the communities that have struggled for decades, with the overarching goal of lifting up those around us to better reach their full potential. Our team has worked in rural community and economic development for decades. Over that time, we have learned what works and what does not. ARI was founded to be different than others in the field, bringing a fresh and customized approach to a system that is often cookie-cutter and generic.

Our Team. ARI has pulled together a team of nationally renowned experts to assist in the development of a Recompete Strategy. This includes:

- Rural LISC: a national organization that believes in forging partnerships with rural communities to create great places to live, work, visit, do business and raise families.
- Jobs For the Future (JFF): a national nonprofit that drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all.
- Newry Corp: a nationally renowned organization focusing on innovation and growth strategies utilizing the latest technology.
- Thrive Nonprofit Consulting: a Memphis team of anthropological researchers who infiltrate hard-to-reach communities to identify barriers, challenges, and opportunities.
- Community Partners: In addition to the professional partners above, ARI has developed a team of community partners who will participate in the planning process, including representatives from Phillips Community College-U of A (serving Phillips and Arkansas Counties); Phillips County government; City of Helena-West Helena; Arkansas County Government; Port of Helena Harbor; and numerous employers from throughout each county.

Our Understanding of the Region and Its Need. In August of 2022, the Alliance for Rural Impact (ARI) began forming a collaborative team to address workforce challenges in Phillips County, Arkansas, as part of the Rural LISC Rural Works program. Since that time, ARI has conducted outreach to learn more about the needs of Phillips County employers, workers, leaders, and residents. An initial report was then developed outlining the findings, as well as recommendations for potential action items and next steps.

Rural Works is an initiative of Rural LISC, a national organization that believes in forging partnerships with rural communities to create great places to live, work, visit, do business and raise families. Rural Works was formed to leverage the momentum of rural communities to reimagine and redevelop the workforce systems that impact their communities. It is the culmination of Rural LISC's 24 years of experience leveraging philanthropic and federal programs that seek to increase the capacity and the scale of community development organizations to respond to the needs of rural workforce ecosystems.

Primary data was collected through over 100 direct interviews with local leaders, employers, workers and citizens of all ages. This type of qualitative research yielded information that was anecdotal and opinion-driven in nature. It also reflected the current conditions of the community based on the issues foremost in the minds of the citizenry at the time. In addition to primary research, the ARI team conducted a substantial amount of secondary research utilizing data from several sources, including US Census, Bureau of Labor Statistics, ESRI reports and more.

The results of the qualitative and quantitative data collected and analyzed by the ARI team found six overarching areas – or “themes” – to be prevalent in the Phillips County area: Education; Infrastructure; Leadership; Health; Scenery; and Workforce Support. These themes include areas where Phillips County has positive attributes and programming, as well as areas of challenge. In some cases, the challenges are significant and restrain Phillips County’s ability to make progress.

- Education. From pre-K to post-secondary education, opinions were abundant on the state of education in Phillips County. Data also shows that education is an area needing improvement.
- Infrastructure. Infrastructure at the most fundamental level is lacking in Phillips County, especially in Helena-West Helena. Those interviewed consistently raised the issue as problematic to the future of the community.
- Leadership. Perhaps the most pivotal challenge faced in Phillips County is with its leadership. There is significant distrust in the effectiveness of local leaders at both the city and county levels. This is leading to some feelings of hopelessness and apathy among the residents.
- Health. The overall health and wellness of the Phillips County citizenry is consistently problematic. Whether it’s a lack of access to healthcare services, or a prevalence of chronic disease, residents of Phillips County know that their health is suffering as a result of the existing conditions in the community. Life expectancy in Phillips County reflects these conditions, as people living in the county are likely to die nearly ten years before the national average.
- Scenery. This word is one we heard a lot, in both positive and negative ways. It seems to encapsulate what we might otherwise call “quality of life.” In some instances, the “scenery” of Phillips County is very positive: natural beauty, Mississippi River, outdoor recreation opportunities, etc. In other cases, the scenery was a negative: nothing to do, blight, lack of entertainment, fatalism about the community as whole.
- Workforce Support. Phillips County’s labor participation rate is much lower than the national average. In order to better understand why people are not entering the workforce, interviewers asked pointed and open-ended questions about the issues – both real and perceived – surrounding working conditions. Though it is not the only issue holding existing and potential workers back, the lack of support in the community is definitely a factor.

The work done to date targeted Phillips County, Arkansas. However, the surrounding areas face many of the same issues and challenges. Part of our scope for the Recompete planning process will be to expand to Arkansas County and areas in the immediate vicinity in order to gather information to focus intervention paths for the most impact.

Existing Assets. Southeast Arkansas has assets that can be capitalized and improved upon to create better pathways to workforce readiness and participation. The region as a whole is significantly distressed, with high poverty rates, low educational attainment, and little local capacity. However, there are bright spots, such as Phillips Community College-University of Arkansas (PCCUA). This institution provides training and education services at campuses in Phillips and Arkansas Counties, drawing students from around the region to its highly successful programming. PCCUA offers workforce/skills training in: HVAC (EPA 608 Certification); Construction; Advanced Manufacturing; Welding; CDL Truck driving; and OSHA Forklift certification. A new program for 2024 will include Heavy Equipment training that includes Bulldozer, Backhoe and Excavator.

PCCUA also offers two exceptional programs that could be expanded: 1) the Transitional Training Opportunity Program (TTOP); and 2) the Ready for Life Program. These programs are designed to provide skills and opportunity to those affected by incarceration. The TTOP provides those who have been incarcerated with skills in health and nutrition, personal finances, professional attire, resume writing, interview skills, work ethic, stress management, time management, and leadership development. Additionally, participants can earn 21 hours of college credit and a Certificate of Proficiency in Manufacturing, HVAC or Construction. The Ready for Life program provides the same types of training to those family members of incarcerated persons. These two programs have the potential for reaching many more than they are currently, as limitations on space and staff mean that only about 20 people per semester participate. There are currently 50 people on the waiting list, and that is without significant promotional efforts.

Other assets in the area include, but are not limited to:

- Port of Helena Harbor: a 4,000-acre industrial park and slackwater harbor located on the Mississippi River at Helena-West Helena.
- Delta Circles: a nonprofit organization looking to advance equity, entrepreneurship, and innovation to change the trajectory of Black women and rural communities.
- Delta Magic: a nonprofit organization in Helena serving as a connector and resource guide for community members with an overarching goal of changing the narrative about the communities in the Delta region.
- Thrive, Inc.: a nonprofit organization headquartered in Helena-West Helena and formed to encourage creativity, placemaking, rebranding of rural communities, and youth engagement.

Identified Potential Interventions. Based on the input gathered through interviews and analysis of data, the ARI team developed a series of possible solutions that could be deployed to improve working and living conditions in Phillips County. Each solution relates to the six

themes of Education, Infrastructure, Leadership, Health, “Scenery,” and Workforce Support. Furthermore, each set of solutions was broken into subcategories around four areas of need: Worker Recruitment; Worker Retention; Worker Readiness; and Worker Engagement and Productivity. The potential solutions were presented to the Advisory Committee for review, discussion, and prioritization. The results of this exercise framed the development of an initial action plan. Tasks, timelines, milestones and resources for implementation are not included at this stage, but will be added as each potential strategy is analyzed as part of the Strategy Development process.

Goal 1. Increase ability to attract new workers to Southeast Arkansas.

- Objective 1.1. Increase wages and benefits for workers across sectors.
- Objective 1.2. Identify opportunities to develop new attractions for all ages
- Objective 1.3. Expand availability of TTOP and Ready for Life programs

Goal 2. Ensure more existing workers stay in their jobs and in Southeast Arkansas for work.

- Objective 2.1. Increase wages and benefits for workers across sectors.
- Objective 2.2. Develop opportunities for workers to quickly advance (increased pay, increased skills, increased responsibility).
- Objective 2.3. Create a program for workers to receive downpayment and home improvement assistance.
- Objective 2.4. Develop additional childcare opportunities for working parents, considering the need for a variety of shifts.
- Objective 2.5. Provide additional transportation opportunities for workers.

Goal 3. Increase worker readiness at all levels in Southeast Arkansas.

- Objective 3.1. Develop/expand apprenticeship programs starting in K-12 systems to guarantee local employment above entry level upon completion.
- Objective 3.2. Increase STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Math) curriculum in K-12 and post-secondary programs.
- Objective 3.3. Increase participation in workforce and skills training programming available through PCCUA and others.
- Objective 3.4. Identify industry needs for future workforce readiness and design programming to meet those needs.

Goal 4. Improve existing worker engagement and productivity.

- Objective 4.1. Increase amount and flexibility of paid time off.
- Objective 4.2. Provide flexible hours, shifts, and/or remote work schedules.
- Objective 4.3. Create jobs for the future – allow transition of existing workers to skill-based positions using new technology, automation, advanced manufacturing processes, etc.

Goal 5. Make significant improvements in infrastructure throughout Southeast Arkansas.

- Objective 5.1. Ensure each property (residential, commercial, industrial) is provided with adequate and safe water and wastewater systems.
- Objective 5.2. Improve communitywide storage, transmission, treatment and retention infrastructure to national standards.
- Objective 5.3. Improve transportation system by repairing existing roads and sidewalks, adding bicycle/pedestrian routes.

- Objective 5.4. Increase access to public transportation options.
- Objective 5.5. Revitalize downtown district to house new businesses, provide residential opportunities, and provide a central community space for cultural activities and other events.

Work Plan: Activities to Undertake for Planning Process. The following outlines the activities to be undertaken during the Strategy Development process (18-24 months).

1. **Initiate Strategy Development Process.** The Alliance for Rural Impact (ARI) staff will serve as the project lead and Recompete Plan Coordinator. This role will be shared by Executive Director Jamie Wright (lead) and Director of Operations Jennifer Watkins (support). The Planning Team will be convened in person (and via videoconference where necessary) to talk through the scope of work, timeline, milestones and reporting schedule. This will include ARI and all partnering organizations with a role and identified deliverable.
2. **Hold Initial Community Leadership Team Meeting.** ARI will convene a larger meeting via videoconference to introduce members of the Planning Team to the leadership of the participating communities. An overview of the process will be provided.
3. **Deep Dive Outreach to the Communities.** ARI's partnering organization, Thrive Nonprofit Consulting, will conduct outreach into the region and its communities to learn more about the barriers and challenges to workforce participation. This work will especially target lower income populations and neighborhoods in order to gain a better understanding of issues facing those citizens.
4. **Outreach to Major Industry.** ARI's participating partner, Newry Corp, will conduct outreach to the major employers in the region to learn more about the current and future needs for workforce, especially related to advanced technology and innovation systems that are or will be deployed. Newry Corp will synthesize findings from the interviews and create recommendations on the primary and secondary opportunities to impact employers and the PAEG in the region.
5. **Marketing.** One issue that has arisen is the ability to message to hard-to-reach populations in the area. ARI will prepare and release an RFP immediately upon award for the development of a marketing plan as a component of the Strategy.
6. **Intervention Identification and Vetting.** Once initial outreach is completed, ARI will work with our national partners – Rural LISC and Jobs For the Future – to pull in relevant data, examples of solutions from other regions, and feedback from industry experts on potential interventions. These will then be ranked for consideration by the community leadership team.
7. **Recompete Strategy Development.** Finally, ARI will develop a Recompete Strategy that identifies 3-8 projects with estimated costs, management scenarios, potential outcomes, and timelines for completion. This Strategy will be presented to the community-at-large for review Community Leadership Team for ultimate approval.