

## 1 RELEVANT ELIGIBLE AREA

The Columbus Metropolitan Statistical Area (CMSA), spans multiple, contiguous high-poverty communities in GA and AL. In accordance with (IAW) the Recompete Eligibility Mapping Tool and Eligible Service Area List Template (*Appendix A*), the Columbus GA-AL Local Labor Market is “Fully Eligible”. The CMSA includes seven counties and has a Prime-Age Employment Gap (PAEG) of 8.23%. Grant funds will serve the entire CMSA and specifically target high-need communities with particularly high PAEG. United Way of Chattahoochee Valley (UWCV) will lead the Pilot Program and has the expertise and capacity to administer federal funds. As a “Nonprofit organization, acting in cooperation with the officials of a political subdivision of a State or other entities” UWCV is an “Eligible Entity” located in, representing, and acting on behalf of the Eligible region. Regional leaders authorize UWCV to represent them and act on their behalf on this program. The Letters of Support file includes letters signed by the Executive Director of the River Valley Regional Commission, the federally designated economic development district, and Mayors of CMSA’s largest cities: Columbus, GA and Phenix City, AL.

## 2 RECOMPETE PLAN ELEMENTS

### 2.1 UNDERSTANDING OF REGIONAL CONDITIONS AND NEEDS

#### 2.1.1 Indicators of Persistent Economic Distress in The Community

Across the CMSA, the poverty rate is 20%, with rural Stewart County at 31%; the child poverty rate is 27.4% and as high as 39% in one county; and 49% of children live in single parent families. The CMSA median income is \$52,014, 30% less than the national median income, the average hourly wage is 19% below the national average, and it is home to the metro area with the highest Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) rate in the state (22% in Columbus).

Persistent economic distress is evident throughout the region. According to the Economic Innovation Group, the CMSA’s average distress score is 63, with 5 counties having scores of 68 to 97.2 out of 100. While the entire CMSA has a majority minority aggregate population, the poverty rate for predominantly black communities is a staggering 33.8%, over four times higher than predominantly white communities. South Columbus (zip code 31903 in Muscogee County and the poorest zip code in GA) is 76.2% black and 10.2% Hispanic. Muscogee County is the largest population within CMSA and contains two of its most significantly distressed areas: South Columbus and North Highland. South Columbus (31903) has a median income of \$23,227, poverty rate of 42%, a distress score of 91.9, non-working adults make up 39.5% of the population, and 26.2% of county adults do not have a high school diploma.

#### 2.1.2 Conditions Contributing to Economic Distress and Barriers Affecting PAEG

**Manufacturing/Textile Job Loss.** In the target neighborhoods of South Columbus and North Highland, there was a strong tie to manufacturing and service industries, particularly textile mills, which once employed 20,000 CMSA residents. Losing over 60% of these jobs between 1980 and 2020 disproportionately impacted these communities. Many families with adults working in mills for multiple generations and the industry loss caused a dramatic paradigm shift that minimized employment options due to lack of education, training, and relevant experience.

**Fort Moore Force Reduction.** The 2015 Fort Moore force reduction cut approximately 3,000 military positions, resulting in the loss of 5,100 additional supporting jobs. This severely impacted impoverished neighborhoods reliant on military-related service jobs.

**Lack of Support Services.** Access to childcare, transportation, and adequate, affordable housing are significant systemic barriers contributing to the PAEG. With nearly 50% of children residing in single parent households, the prime age population’s childcare needs and resultant employment

barriers are significant. Within the Columbus Mill District, which includes the North Highlands community, 55% of households do not own a car, creating a major barrier to employment. Residents in these most impoverished areas are literally “too poor to work.”

**Minimal Population and Stifled Economic Growth.** Minimal population growth in the CMSA is a bleak indicator for future prosperity. The Southeastern U.S. experienced explosive growth between 1970 and 2013. GA’s population increased by 117.0% while the Atlanta region nearly tripled. Conversely, the CMSA’s population increased by just 24.0%, ranking 58th out of the 61 Southeast metro areas. The resultant workforce limitations perpetuated reduced opportunities as it discouraged companies from creating local jobs. Much of the CMSA population growth is attributed to natural factors as opposed to immigration.

**Isolation and Disconnection.** Within the region’s most impoverished communities, residents are not cohesively “connected” to the greater community. While difficult to quantify, impacts and evidence are clear. Service and amenity “deserts” severely limit access to healthy food, healthcare, childcare, transportation, and social services. Mistrust of the government, and barriers to leaving the neighborhood restricts accessibility of holistic opportunities.

**Barriers To Education and Training.** The CMSA education system is not adequately preparing K-12 students for follow-on education, and/or employment. Within the Muscogee County School District (MCSD) only 44% of high school students tested at or above proficient level for reading, while 27% tested at or above that level for math. High school students in Phenix City and Russell County, AL fare worse, averaging 23% reading proficiency and 21% for math.

### 2.1.3 Targeted Populations and Anticipated Change.

Grant funds will serve the entire CMSA and specifically target the following impoverished and high-need communities and counties with excessive PAEG rates: two communities identified as especially high need: North Highland and South Columbus (zip code 31903, the poorest zip code within GA); and six of seven counties have a combined Economic Distress Score of 71.4. Within these areas, grant funds will support the following targeted population: People living near or below the poverty line; Non-skilled labor force; technical college students challenged by work/life/school balance and associated costs; Prime age parents unable to enter the workforce due to lack of childcare; Four-year university graduates leaving for better jobs elsewhere; external workforce and employers that, if incentivized, may relocate and invest locally

**Anticipated Changes.** Pilot grant funds and other financial and in-kind support will enable the CMSA to expand and advance proven highly-collaborative, neighborhood-embedded, and industry-driven PAEG reduction initiatives. Anticipated improvements and changes include:

- Prime age vocational and life skills training, embedded in distressed neighborhoods, will increase transition for PAEG population into sustainable jobs with living wages.
- Increased collaboration between educators and industry will better align local workforce skills with near term and future employment opportunities.
- Expanded breadth of, and participation in technical, trade, and support training will increase availability and diversity of local skilled workforce to meet local industry needs.
- Emphasis on Advanced Manufacturing skilled trades will lay a foundation for future jobs.
- Increased childcare availability, accessibility, quality, and affordability will enable PAEG parents to enter the workforce, including those with non-traditional hours.

## 2.2 STRENGTH OF STRATEGY AND QUALITY OF POTENTIAL INVESTMENTS

### 2.2.1 Research/Experience Used to Select/Prioritize Interventions and Predict Impacts

UWCV convened a Pilot Program Task Force, comprised of members from multiple agencies,

organizations, industry, and target communities, that contributed significant time and thought leadership in support of project development. The Task Force conducted a Needs Assessment to prioritize Phase 1 Strategy Analysis and solidify a Phase 2 Implementation Plan. To select the most beneficial and achievable interventions, the Task Force analyzed causes of CMSA's high PAEG and identified viable intervention candidates for further Phase 1 analysis. Many team members are embedded in the distressed neighborhoods they support and interact with residents daily. Program champions compiled input from local residents and personal experience to analyze needs and barriers they witness firsthand. Using surveys, focus groups, data mining, and interviews, the Task Force analyzed PAEG-related metrics addressing demographics and barriers highlighted in Section 2.1, and job opportunity and qualifications data. Findings identified target populations and services to best address CMSA's high PAEG.

### **2.2.2 Interventions Needed to Address Persistent Economic Distress**

With grant funding as a catalyst for change, Phase 1 efforts will address the myriad of factors creating barriers to sustainable employment. We will leverage highly successful, yet significantly under-resourced vocational initiatives with holistic and life-changing impacts for moving under-/unemployed prime age participants in underserved and impoverished communities into long-lasting careers and growth paths. Fundamentals of our approach include bringing support directly to where it is needed; facilitating transition among programs and into the workforce; and ensuring support keeps pace and aligns with local industry needs.

The Pilot Strategy will define the Implementation Phase's roles, responsibilities, commitments, tools, and measures of success for a seamless continuum of support emphasizing accessibility, participation, and success to reduce PAEG in target regions. This strategy will align education and workforce to ensure individuals of all ages are equipped with the skills to participate in the workforce and secure jobs, facilitating a path to economic mobility. Scalable programs will support larger and broader populations through expanding community investment.

#### **2.2.2.1 Project 1: CTC and CVCC Career Launch Program Expansion and Mobilization**

Columbus Technical College (CTC) and Chattahoochee Valley Community College's (CVCC) Career Launch Programs (CLP) are powerful facilitators of career entry, advancement, and success in the CMSA, particularly for impoverished and PAEG populations. They are the only local not-for-profit colleges offering workforce education and skill training that enable employment or career advancement with little to no out-of-pocket expenses. Their combined record for job placement or continuing education is unmatched in the college service area, with a 2023 job placement rate of 99.6% and an in-field job placement rate of 94%.

Pilot grant funds will address the schools' Career and Technical Education (CTE) for their Advanced Manufacturing Programs. They teach foundational skills and industry-recognized credentials required for successful employment in a cutting-edge industrial facility, including engineering, electronics, mechatronics/robotics, and quality control processes. The programs' objective is to modernize and scale Advanced Manufacturing CTE through a range of grants and industry-based efforts that strengthen teaching and learning to improve student engagement and outcomes, while inspiring student interest in manufacturing careers.

A critical component of the Advanced Manufacturing program is preparation and deployment of two Mobile Labs to increase training accessibility to impoverished and remote neighborhoods. While the draft design, development and pricing plan are complete, Pilot grant funds will enable plan refinement and Implementation grant funds will enable Mobile Lab purchase and execution. The Mobile Labs can be moved to sites throughout the area, including economically depressed

communities and high schools with vocational programs within the CMSA. It will allow students to train where they are, including rural areas, emphasizing rapid completion of job-ready Advanced Manufacturing skills. A portion of the funds will be used to employ Mobile Lab Advanced Manufacturing skills instructors and expand evening and weekend training.

To date, 264 students were enrolled in CTC and CVCC Advanced Manufacturing programs during 2022-2023. Of those, 99.6% secured employment with in-field job placement at 94%. Success will be based on enrollment in the program, completion of the program, and job placement in Advanced Manufacturing positions. The schools anticipate that 315 individuals will be trained in Year 1 with an expected increase of 15% per year up to 650 annually. They anticipate 95% or more of the individuals who complete Advanced Manufacturing training programs in the Career Launch Lab will be employed upon completion of the training.

#### **2.2.2.2 Project 2: Define Approach to Expand Apprenticeship Preparation Program**

The SafeHouse Ministries Workforce Development program promotes employment and job security by offering training to CMSA individuals with employment barriers. The target population are people in recovery, adults who are homeless and/or at risk of homelessness, and persons returning from incarceration. This demographic requires an intensive approach to gain a second start to break the cycle and are seeking to transition productively into the community.

Programs include Electrical, HVAC and Construction tracks that facilitate local employment and prepare individuals for On-the-Job Training (OJT) and a subsequent career. Curriculums are developed with local employers to meet local workforce needs. Soft skills training is offered through a partnership with Goodwill Industries (Goodwill) and Better Work Columbus.

This SafeHouse program embodies the cross-domain synergy we seek to amplify through funding. Collaboration between Goodwill, Better Work Columbus, and local employers highlights the need for embedded services to ensure access for the underserved and impoverished community. Since its inception in 2021, this program has provided training to underserved persons seeking a sustainable future and instilled increased confidence through learning/mastering a skill. Of 84 participants attending 11/21–12/22, 73% were hired locally.

With Pilot Grant Funds, SafeHouse will develop a plan to increase participation in each program by 40% (180 participants in 2024) with an anticipated 80% of those securing employment upon completion. Two new 2024 programs, plumbing and welding, will be added. Target initiatives include developing a pre-apprenticeship tracking program to monitor program success and adding a computer lab to facilitate online training/learning, and computer skills instruction classes to take advantage of increased home-based job opportunities.

#### **2.2.2.3 Project 3: Define Approach to Expand Truth Springs Trade School**

The highly successful Truth Springs Trade School is a 10-month job training program operating in the targeted North Highland community. It pays chronically un/underemployed adults as they gain the education, skills, and experience required to secure full-time employment. Students are paid up to \$9.00/hour for 40 hours a week and receive no-cost childcare during program participation and after graduation, minimizing barriers to participation while maximizing incentives (pay, childcare, attainment of skills).

The first 8 weeks, students learn work fundamentals and complete GED classes and professional certifications with CTC. Students complete 8-months of OJT with partner agencies in skilled trades such as construction/demolition, child development, culinary arts, or urban farming. Each year, students renovate/build at least 1 home in the impoverished neighborhood for a low-income family. Before graduation, students receive tailored career guidance and help securing a job.



Each program phase is integrated with adjacent programs, industry, and local residents. To date, 95% of participants secured jobs and 83% stayed employed at least 18 months. As with SafeHouse's Program, individualized attention and accessibility within the served community are critical. Grant funds will enable analysis of the approach to expand within the neighborhood and to other high-need CMSA neighborhoods. With adequate Implementation grant funds, Truth Spring anticipates it can achieve the following goals: 80% of students will complete the initial 8-week training program; 100% of students who complete the 10-month program and do not have a high school diploma or equivalent will receive their GED or will be in the process of completing their GED by the end of the program; 60% of students will complete the full 10-month program; 85% of students will secure employment within 1 month of graduation; 85% of students will earn more per hour following program completion; 80% of graduates who secure employment will still be employed 6 months following graduation; and 75% of graduates who secure employment will still be employed 12 months following graduation.

#### 2.2.2.4 Project 4: Combat the Childcare Crisis

CMSA childcare accessibility, quality, and affordability with reduced childcare facilities, worker shortages, and rising costs, has emerged as a crisis and a major contributing factor to the PAEG. With approximately 8,000 manufacturing jobs within the CMSA and 49% of children living in single parent households, childcare acutely impacts PAEG, especially for shift workers. The impact is greatest in communities of high economic distress where the lack of transportation and licensed neighborhood-based childcare providers make it nearly impossible to secure quality childcare. Rising costs and long waitlists further exacerbate the situation. Feedback from community service providers reveal an untenable situation forcing impoverished families to choose between spending up to 40% of their income on childcare, entrusting their children to unlicensed childcare solutions, or having one prime age member of the household not work.

Grant funds will support analysis to assess current childcare gaps and projections, understand the economic impact of closing this gap, and identify evidenced-based solutions and incentives for industry and other partners to invest in solutions. The resultant childcare action plan that will:

- Develop a well-trained, supported, valued and competitively paid childcare workforce
- Ensure safe and quality facilities are developed and renovated to expand childcare programs, particularly in communities where childcare is scarce, or family demand outpaces supply
- Ensure all families have access to childcare that meets their needs, preferences, and supports their children's holistic developmental needs and goals
- Seek support for innovative childcare pilot initiatives, such as guaranteed paid time off for a discrete number of emergency childcare situations or free care for childcare workers

#### 2.2.2.5 Project 5: Job Readiness and Jobs For Life Expansion

Better Work Columbus collaborates with dozens of local resources to provide training, support services, and connections to help low-income prime age adults find meaningful and sustainable work. Their Jobs For Life 11-week program addresses specific needs and barriers within the target neighborhood. Better Work gains community trust and brings training resources to the neighborhood, provides a meal for participants, offers childcare while parents attend class, and provides access to financial coaching. Students are paid for classroom participation and are eligible for raises. Jobs For Life balances essential skills (communication, conflict resolution, and appropriate behavior) with job readiness skills (career exploration, interview techniques, relationship skills, and financial education). Students graduate with a documented vocational plan, updated resume, expanded network of relationships and opportunities for job connection. The

program has graduated 19 students since 2022. Of the 10 spring of 2023 students, 8 graduated, with 6 employed within 3 months. 78% of graduates not employed continue to stay engaged and work on goals toward employment, stability, and economic opportunity.

To reduce PAEG on a larger level, Better Works will use Pilot grant funds to increase current site participation and expand to other impoverished neighborhoods. Better Work will develop a comprehensive Expansion Plan addressing three critical areas: Identify all expansion costs, such as facilitator and student pay. Expand the scope of skills being taught, to include the cost of equipment and curriculum. Define mechanisms to attract and incentivize sustainable industry participation and investment, such as community investment groups; transportation and childcare providers; design win-win partnerships with quantifiable or qualifiable ROI.

## **2.3 EQUITY, INCLUSIVITY, ACCESSIBILITY, AND DIVERSITY**

### **2.3.1 Equitable Benefits Sharing and Engaging Underserved Communities in Pilot Plan**

As described in *Section 2.1.3* and throughout *Section 2.2*, every target area, every target participant, and every included program directly represents and seeks to support the most impoverished, underserved, and distressed members of the CMSA community. Every element of our Pilot Program Strategy and subsequent Implementation is designed to help level the playing field for those who have, for whatever reason, been marginalized. With sufficient expansion of the programs described in *Section 2.2*, the CMSA can minimize PAEG and overcome inequities that contribute to and result from community and demographic disparity.

### **2.3.2 Equity Goals and Approach to Hold Team Accountable**

The Pilot Program lead organization, UWCV, defines and dedicates themselves to maximize attainment of equity goals. UWCV strives to be a model of diversity and inclusion engaging a diverse group of partners to find solutions to complex issues. When considering strategic partnerships, disciplined attention is given to factors such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender while analyzing problems, looking for solutions, and defining success. Every program represented by the Pilot Grant either heavily prioritizes or exclusively supports the underserved population. Great emphasis and investment are focused on providing support where it is needed to preclude a range of barriers. As we solidify Implementation Plans during the Strategy Phase, we will articulate specific goals pertaining to demographics, poverty, and other barriers. Maximized equity will continue to be our driving objective.

## **2.4 REGIONAL ASSETS AND ABILITY TO ALLEVIATE PERSISTENT ECONOMIC DISTRESS**

The area boasts a particularly vibrant and community-centric philanthropic and non-profit sector, but coordination challenges and persistent barriers to access for underserved families severely restricts and minimizes the use and benefit of services. UWCV has the capacity to unite and better leverage these disparate resources. *Section 2.6* describes local resources, and how these assets currently support and will continue to support the programs and partnerships highlighted within our recompete strategy. *Section 2.1.3* and *Section 2.2* describe agile, industry-aligned plans to leverage local assets to combat persistent economic distress and minimize the PAEG.

## **2.5 TARGETED GEOGRAPHIC APPROACH**

### **2.5.1 Specific Targeted Service Area and Selection Rationale**

The target geographic areas and target population and demographics are identified and rationalized in *Section 2.1.4*. These include the most persistently distressed communities within the CMSA and target individuals most at risk of imminently joining, or currently a part of, the PAEG population. Programs will triage participants through multiple stages to maximize support to those most likely to break through the existing barriers and experience equitability and success if provided accessible, appropriate, and affordable support.

### **2.5.2 Anticipated Types of Recompete Funding Impact Over Time**

Educators and vocational organizations will expand collaboration with businesses, remain agile to adapt to evolving workforce requirements, and will maintain a pulse on evolving technologies, tools, best practices, certifications, and other requirements. They will continue working with the city governments of Columbus and Phenix City, the Columbus Development Authority, the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce, the River Valley Regional Commission, Fort Moore, and the Chattahoochee Hub for the Innovation and Production of Semiconductors (CHIPS 4 CHIPS) to anticipate introduction of new industries and their inherent needs. Industry will work with educators and vocational organizations to tailor curriculum, training tools, and methods.

Emphasis will shift to earlier development of skills and exposure to regional opportunities to help formulate career trajectories early. Education and vocational training will be tailored to ensure graduating seniors either transition to certification, degree, and other educational programs or are equipped to make a livable wage. Internships, job sharing, and OJT initiatives will show immediate results and will decrease PAEG as today's students approach prime age. Similarly, support needs, including childcare and transportation, must be anticipated to address industry, housing, and other economic development considerations.

### **2.5.3 Anticipated Types of Jobs Created, Filled, and Retained Over Time**

Initially we will prepare the target demographic for currently available and anticipated near-term position vacancies in electrical, HVAC, construction, welding, demolition, childcare, information technology, culinary arts, automotive manufacturing, and aeronautical manufacturing. As we create more jobs locally, we will align training lockstep with industry. Anticipated job types include advanced manufacturing positions dependent on a background in mechatronics and robotics, as well as industrial maintenance positions requiring certification on Program Logic Controls and vacuum technology, potentially within the semiconductor industry.

## **2.6 PARTNERSHIPS AND POTENTIAL COMMITMENTS**

UWCV is located within, represents, and acts on behalf of the CMSA with a staff addressing barriers that perpetuate poverty and PAEG. It has earned a reputation for exceptional volunteer, community, and strategic leadership in collaboration with an extensive and continually growing network of partners. With more than 40 employees, UWCV leads several cross-sector programs that actively engage over 500 multi-disciplined partners who collaboratively enact solutions to support shared goals and strategies, primarily addressing poverty, training, and employment.

Many long-standing, actively involved UWCV partners understand and commit to their specific role within the collaborative structure. Each shares the goal to amplify the voices of those being served, focus services in local communities, and equip individuals to enter or re-enter the workforce in a meaningful and lasting way. Collaborative partners represent a cross-sector of local public, private, philanthropic, non-profit, and civic organizations, in conjunction with members of the target population and recipients of current social services.

The Letters of Support file represent a fraction of our active coalition. Many signatories are directly committed to executing the Strategy and Implementation Grant projects and have proven their commitment to invest in selected projects through financial and in-kind support. All signatories have a history of supporting and investing in local initiatives. UWCV will formalize commitments, investments, and participation among existing partners while strategically recruiting new partners that represent evolving requirements and opportunities. Partnerships will clearly define expectations, cost-sharing or in-kind investment agreements, and plans for long-term sustainability. Measures of success will include level of involvement by local community residents, leaders, and advocates; grassroots organizations embedded in the target communities;

and industry representatives that understand current and future employment needs and are willing to invest in preparing and supporting that workforce.

The following summarizes Regional Partners, their Type of Commitment, and their Critical Role.

**Technical Schools/Colleges:** CTC and CVCC, critical partners, have long-standing collaborative arrangements with local grass-roots community-based non-profit workforce development organizations and industry partners, several of whom are listed within this application. Technical Colleges play a critical role facilitating the continuum of support services for a skilled workforce through sustained, meaningful employment. They maximize their agility to align target skill areas and training methods with industry's requirements and community needs.

**Vocationally Focused Non-Profits:** Key nonprofits partners with an emphasis on holistic and vocational support for impoverished communities experiencing high PAEG have and will continue to play critical roles in support of this grant program. Key Pilot Program participants/ leaders are described in *Section 2*, and also include Goodwill. Each has invested in initiatives in CSMA's most impoverished and high PAEG areas.

**Industry and Community Investment Partners.** Leveraging industry involvement and investment (financial, training, staff time, curriculum development, equipment) will account for an increasingly significant source of funds and support for initiatives to minimize PAEG. Industry partners that have committed financial and in-kind investments include W.C. Bradley Co., Bradley-Turner Foundation, Goodwill, KIA, Pratt & Whitney, Kysor Warren, Batson Cook, McCauley Propeller Systems, Panasonic Energy, Georgia Power, Oneda, Starrett-Bytewise, Synovus, Auxilia Additive Manufacturing, and the DNA Textile Group. Also, major benefactors and supporters include the Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley (CFCV), a local philanthropy catalyst with \$300M in assets and Columbus 2025, charged with implementing the collaborative plan for a more prosperous region and supported by the Development Authority of Columbus, GA. Partners have historically contributed to local services, invest in community development, and support education and vocational direction to align the workforce to work. The reliance on and value of industry partners will grow during both phases of the Pilot Project.

**Ft Moore and Military Veterans:** Coalition members include senior leaders currently serving at Fort Moore and recently retired Army general officers, facilitating close relationships with not only the DoD, but also Ft Moore, which transitions 2,000+ soldiers/year to civilian life.

**Four Year Universities:** Troy University and Columbus State University (CSU) are CMSA's cornerstone of higher education. They provide access to resources in their state university systems, partner with their respective community colleges/technical colleges, and sponsor and support a myriad of public and private partnerships enabling regional prosperity, the execution of good governance, support for local school systems, and improving quality of life.

**Local School Systems:** Muscogee County, Russell County, and Phenix City school systems have coordinated college preparatory and vocational pathway programs with Troy University, CSU, CTC, and CVCC that promote an employment continuum approach. Their leadership collaborates to expand space, programming, access, and workforce development, creating complementary facilities and programs and enabling students to seamlessly transition across levels.

**Government and Policy.** Columbus and Phenix City governments and County Commissions will support efforts to secure federal, state, and local government funds for vocational, transportation, and childcare programs and support initiatives to influence and incentivize industry paradigm changes. We will work with local GA and AL workforce investment boards to support the project.