

Innovations in Community Collaborations

Supporting the Recovery-to-Work Ecosystem
with Economic Development Partnerships



SOUTHERN TIER 8
R E G I O N A L B O A R D

With support from the Appalachian New York counties of Broome, Chenango, Cortland, Delaware, Otsego, Schoharie, Tioga & Tompkins, Appalachian Regional Commission, US Commerce's Economic Development Administration, and New York State Department of State New York State. Technical assistance provided by Thomas Kowalik, EdD, President, Kowalik & Associates LLC, Veteran-Owned-Business, and Dr. Joel Bennett, Organizational Wellness Learning Systems.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Innovations in Community Collaborations

Supporting the Recovery-to-Work Ecosystem with Economic Development Partnerships

In 2020, the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) launched the INSPIRE initiative (Investments Supporting Partnerships in Recovery Ecosystems) to create or expand local recovery ecosystems in supporting workforce entry across Appalachia. The Southern Tier 8 Regional Board (ST8, one of 74 of ARC's Local Development Districts) has made concerted efforts to build a "Recovery-to-Work Ecosystem" by establishing multiple ecosystem partnerships and outreach efforts with workplace leaders. ST8, a small, publicly funded organization (comprising 5-6 government staff and 2-5 contract consultants, with an annual budget under \$750,000), supports partnership development for economic recovery and growth. This report summarizes an innovative Federal-State-Local partnership and collaboration model designed to address our region's substance use disorder (SUD) crisis and align resources to support economic resiliency efforts.

The ecosystem collaborative model—Collaborative Recovery Empowerment of the Southern Tier (CREST)—falls within the context of several years of preceding foundational work by ST8 (2017-to-2021) and was initiated through funding under President Trump's first term. The need for this model is based on two factors. First, the ST8 region has witnessed years of decline in workforce population; a culture of isolation, addiction and health and mental wellness decline; and a lack of resources for substance use disorder and wellness, disproportionate to the rest of New York State. Second, the region has seen significant levels of private sector investment (2023 Tech Hub Designation, Energy Storage & Semi-Conductor Industry), which assumes requisite levels of workforce infrastructure, readiness, sustainability, and well-being.

To date, and as documented here, CREST has successfully progressed across three phases of work: (1) Strategic Planning (2021-2023); (2) Implementation (2022-current); and (3) Expanded Ecosystem Development (2024-current); and has clear outcomes with workplaces and employees served. As a result of the initial ecosystem development project, three additional ARC INSPIRE Recovery to Work projects were launched in the region between 2021 and 2023. A portion of this work may be seen as capacity building, as efforts to reach the most vulnerable population requires longer-term sustainment. Through extensive data collection and interviews with CREST partners, the current report documents Overall Findings, Project Strengths, Challenges, and Unexpected Outcomes. In addition, the team has been able to identify and report on Future Project Changes Based Upon Learning; Areas for Expansion; State Policy Suggestions; Suggestions for Sustaining Outreach; Suggestions for Regional Recovery Friendly Workplace Initiative; and Suggestions for Future Funding.

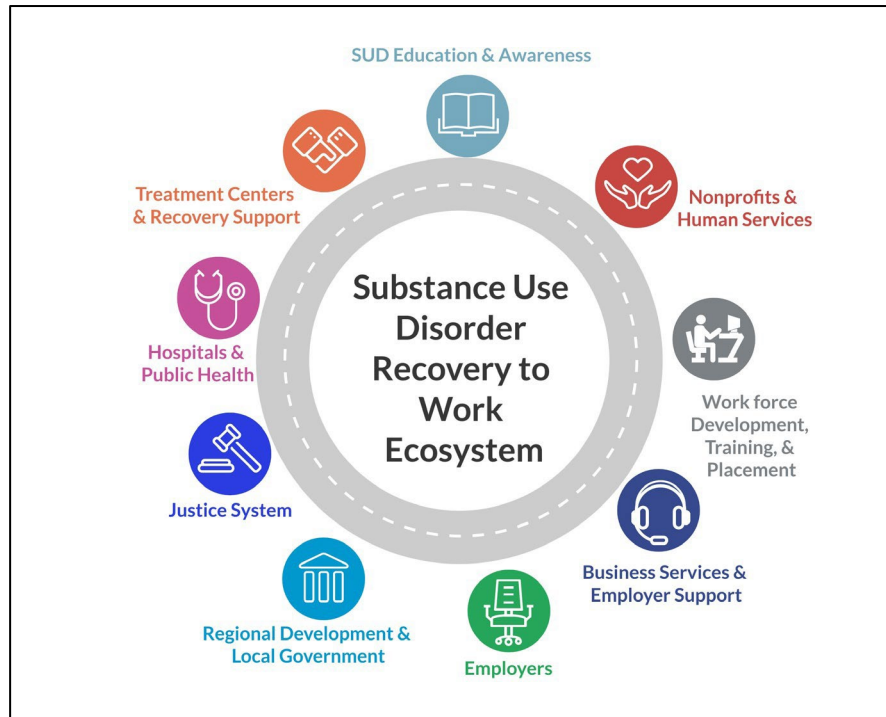
SIGNIFICANCE OF PROJECT

The Southern Tier 8 Regional Board has made concerted efforts over the past five years to lay the foundation of a "Recovery-to-Work Ecosystem" by establishing partnerships across the region and initiating outreach efforts to workplace leaders. The need for collaboration is great, as problems with adult workforce mental health and substance misuse strike at the root of many community development challenges. Data from our region reveal two contrasting facts. First, we have relatively high rates of frequent mental distress, binge and heavy drinking, and opioid-related emergency room admissions. Second, the Southern Tier, or 14 Appalachian NY counties experience a lower mental health workforce capacity (psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists) than the rest of New York and more rural counties in neighboring Pennsylvania. The vast majority of prevention efforts focus on schools and underage children, neglecting adult employees, including those in early recovery and other vulnerable groups. This contrast—a growing problem with a lack of resources—results in an increased burden on employers who struggle with attracting and retaining talent and in dealing with managerial stress due to the mental health crisis. This burden is problematic for small businesses and in rural areas with reduced access to mental health/SUD treatment services.

This report summarizes the development, implementation, and initial outcomes of an innovative Federal-State-Local partnership and collaboration model, designed to address our community's substance use disorder crisis and align resources to support economic resiliency efforts.

Southern Tier 8 Regional Board and partners define recovery as the process of improved physical, psychological, and social well-being and health following a cessation or harm reduction in substance use. We define the "Recovery-to-Work Ecosystem" as the system of relationships between different organizations and functions that have the capacity to work together to help both adult employees and employers create a workplace and community culture that supports individuals with a history of addiction to obtain and maintain healthful employment and contribute to the growth of the community. This includes workers who are just entering the workforce (e.g., young adults), the unemployed, the underemployed, and those working part-time or full-time.

The diagram below shows the various organizations and functions that comprise the ecosystem. It should be emphasized that gainful employment can reduce relapse risk by providing structure and income, and that different groups—working together—can help prevent relapse.



ARC Investments Supporting Partnerships in Recovery Ecosystems

In 2020, ARC launched the INSPIRE initiative, Investments Supporting Partnerships in Recovery Ecosystems to create or expand local recovery ecosystems in supporting workforce entry across Appalachia. From 2020-2024, ARC has awarded nearly \$11.5 million in 39 projects across the 13 states. This evaluation includes the progress of the \$1.4 million investment in the Southern Tier's district in developing workforce initiatives to support dedicated individuals in recovery and small business resiliency.

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DESCRIPTION OF THE FEDERAL-STATE-LOCAL PARTNERSHIP

Defining the Appalachian Regional Commission Partnership

Southern Tier 8 Regional Board is the Local Development District (LDD) for the [Appalachian Regional Commission \(ARC\)](#), a Federal-State-Local Partnership established in 1965 to address economic distress & severe economic disparities across the rural Appalachian areas of the 13 states (of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia). ARC's leadership includes the governors from each of the 13 Appalachian states and a Federal Co-Chair who is appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate.



In New York, the **Department of State** (NYS DOS) is the official agent for the ARC, through the [Division of Local Government Services](#), which administers the ARC program, supporting Local Development Districts ([Southern Tier 8](#), [Southern Tier Central](#) & [Southern Tier West](#)).

The LDD Organization:

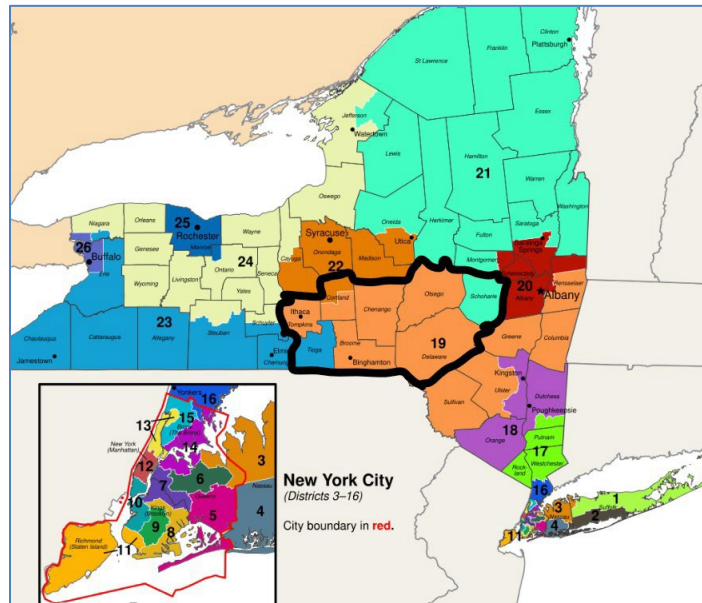
Southern Tier 8 LDD serves the counties of Broome, Chenango, Cortland, Delaware, Otsego, Schoharie, Tioga & Tompkins, home to approximately 580,000 residents in 5 small cities, 54 villages and 129 towns. The 8 counties are part of 14 in "Appalachian NY", known as the "Southern Tier" and the (2023 federally-designated) "New Energy New York Tech Hub". This LDD is ARC's 7th largest in geographic size, and 14th in population (of the 74 LDDs in the 13 states of Appalachia).

Southern Tier 8 Regional Board is a small publicly funded organization (5-6 govt staff & 2-5 contract consultants, annual budget under \$750K) that supports partnership development for economic recovery and growth. The governing body, or "Board" is comprised of 3 representatives, appointed by each County. Over the last 30 years of economic decline and rural dis-investment, the Board and partners have most consistently focused on community recovery efforts.

The Region's Congressional Representation:

Each year, ARC's annual funding level is proposed by the President, with a budget to be determined by the annual appropriations from the US Congress. While ARC receives its core funding from the federal government, local, state, and private sector partners are required to match federal investments.

Southern Tier 8 LDD District service boundary



Following the 2020 census, new Congressional Districts were defined in 2022. The LDD's service area crosses 4 unique Congressional Districts.

The District is currently served by the following representatives in the 119th Congress:

NY19: **Josh Riley**, D (since 2025)

NY21: **Elise Stefanik**, R (since 2022)

NY22: **John Mannion**, D (since 2025)

NY23: **Nick Langworthy**, R (since 2025).

ECONOMIC RATIONALE

Have public investments made a difference for the Community?

Healthy industry-led economic growth requires community support and public investment, such as infrastructure, workforce, and housing development. For the first time in decades, private sector investment is measurable. Such investment from the private sector assumes requisite levels of workforce infrastructure, readiness, sustainability, and well-being.

Over the last 5 years, the Southern Tier 8 Regional Board has been a key partner in bringing **\$89 million of investment** to the region with economic development projects and **\$87 million for broadband infrastructure**. The region has a federal **1 to 1 match rate** (that means for every dollar of federal funding, there must be a dollar of local &/or private investment to match that public investment). Recent public investments & performance measures from completed projects are provided on the LDD's website [here](#).

NEW & GENERATIONAL INDUSTRY INVESTMENT:

- 2022 US Commerce's Economic Development Administration (EDA) Regional Challenge Award \$113 million investment in New Energy New York (1 of 21 in USA)
- 2023 EDA Tech Hub Designation for the 14 counties of Appalachian NY or "Southern Tier"
- Energy Storage & Semi-Conductor Industry Investment is being recognized in New York State and the Southern Tier, including:

Industry Leader	Investment
Toyota Material Handling	\$15,000,000
Menlo Micro	\$50,000,000
BAE Systems	\$65,000,000
IM3NY	\$180,000,000
Micron in Clay, NY	\$50,000,000,000

- ✓ Micron's investment in Clay, NY is expected to bring additional state-wide supply-chain and workforce investments across the State , with the help the Governor's Office of Semiconductor Expansion, Management, and Integration (GO-SEMI).

Why did the Regional Board become engaged in the Recovery-to-Work Initiative?

#1 Reason: Because the Regional Board recognized the community challenges of population loss, community isolation and addiction, and lack of local healthcare and wellness support for the employer and employee.

Factor #1: **Population (Workforce) Loss**

Loss in employment, while neighbors are growing.

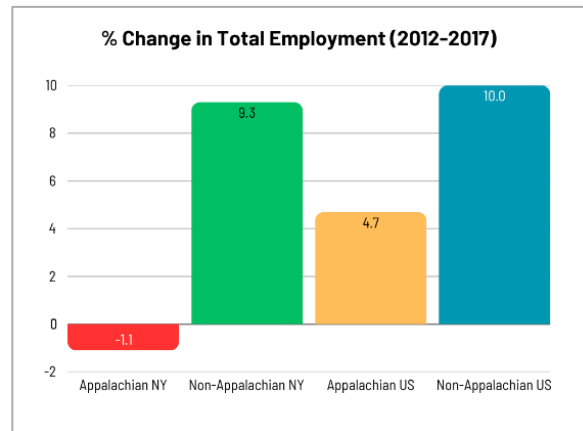
Southern Tier -1.1%

vs. NYS +9.3% growth

and USA +10% growth.

Working Age population loss -9.6% (2010 Census)

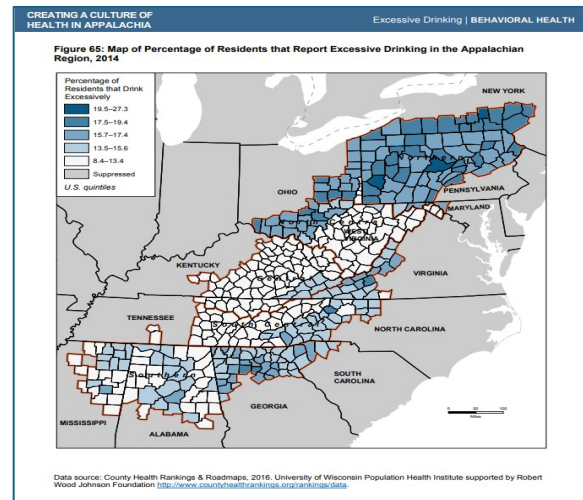
"Industrial Make-Up of the Appalachian Region: Employment and Earnings, 2002-2017", ARC



Factor #2: A culture of **isolation, addiction and health & mental wellness decline** (25 years of population exodus, friends, family, job, church, organizational community loss) with a opioid overdose rates higher than NYS average (as reported in Broome & Cortland Counties, 2018).

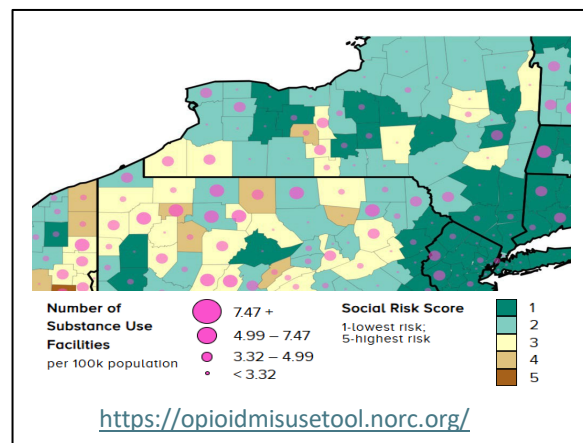
"Health Disparities in Appalachia" August 2017,

[Page 131](#)



Factor #3: Less **SUD and wellness resources** in the Southern Tier, lagging behind surrounding communities in New York and neighboring rural Pennsylvania.

NORC (National Opinion Research Center).



NOTE: These factors continue to remain, at relatively the same level of concern (in 2025) as when first identified.

Building Community Collaborations & Ecosystem Development

The LDD's Ecosystem Development Goal:

Southern Tier 8 Regional Board invested in this initiative to both support the Recovery-to-Work ecosystem, and also strengthen community capacity by introducing local, state and federal partners, defining community needs, clarifying shared goals and roles, and identifying multiple strategies. These efforts assisted our first group of project partners to take the lead on subsequent projects and programs to maintain continued support for ecosystem development. The LDD defined the community needs, developed partnerships, and led a 5-partner sub-recipient collaborative effort to support the ecosystem development.

TIMELINE of LDD's Ecosystem Development:

March 2017: Executive Director Jen Gregory appointed for the LDD's Regional Board.

October 4, 2018: ARC Federal Co-Chair Tim Thomas asked the LDD to help ARC address the recognized opioid and drug crisis (under President Trump's first term 2017-2021).

October 19, 2018: Staff started research of the local opioid impact and mapped ecosystem local resources.

November 28, 2018: With the goal to increase growth for the emerging energy storage industry and define local industry assets, the LDD hosted the first Industry Summit, convened multiple sector partners, and built community collaborations (conducted in 10-inch snowstorm with >200 people; 70% private sector).

December 2018: To understand the need for medical care in the community and disaster preparedness (following 2003-2011 flood events), NYS DOS and the LDD prepped for a Department of Defense Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) Medical Mission for Summer 2019 in Homer and Norwich, NY.

April 10, 2019: Southern Tier 8 Regional Board, with Southern Tier Central, hosted an Active Recovery Listening Session for the community, with 48 in attendance.

May-October 2019: the LDD hosted an Industry Summit for Agriculture (5/23) and helped applicants develop 9 ARC economic development projects, for a total of \$928K. Assisted Homer and Norwich in IRT Medical mission (July 6-22).

January 14, 2020: Southern Tier 8 Regional Board submitted an application to the Development District of Association of Appalachia (DDAA) for technical assistance (extension of staff to assess current ecosystem and develop strategies to support the Recovery-to-Work Ecosystem).

March 17, 2020: DDAA's Cohort Learning Academy for [Building an Effective Recovery-to-Work Ecosystem](#) launched.

September 3, 2020: Phase 2: ARC announced first funding opportunity INSPIRE (Investments Supporting Partnerships In Recovery Ecosystems)

April 1, 2021: Southern Tier 8 was 1 of 30 INSPIRE awards across 10 states with \$579K ARC Investment to pursue the Recovery-to-Work Initiative, with the initiation of Collaborative Recovery Empowerment of the Southern Tier (CREST).

ECOSYSTEM DEVELOPMENT | PHASE 1

Phase 1: Strategic Planning

As the SUD treatment and mental health providers were new ecosystem partners to the LDD, a planning effort was necessary to understand the local needs, partnerships, and potential community development strategies.

With the help of DDAA and [The Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness](#), community partnerships and ecosystem development strategies were defined to ensure clarity and alignment for stakeholders:

1. Recognize the workforce challenge to increase employee retention & reduce stigma in the workplace and therefore, community.
2. Train & upskill the recovery workforce for employment (and increase self-sufficiency)
3. Build community hope and wellness opportunities for the employer and resilient employee (those in recovery).



Although one or two economic development partners had previously collaborated, and treatment and prevention efforts had followed linear program models, this new approach of working across the entire ecosystem introduced a level of collaboration that was unprecedented in the Southern Tier.

ECOSYSTEM DEVELOPMENT | PHASE 2

Phase 2: Implementation

Collaborative Recovery Empowerment of the Southern Tier (CREST) Project

Purpose: Enhance workforce support services for people in recovery and for employers who want to hire people in recovery as part of a high-quality workforce. CREST prioritizes "Workforce Readiness" for the underemployed recovery workforce seeking to obtain employment and maintain recovery and also "Workplace Wellness" for employers in small businesses seeking to maintain a talented workforce.

Collaboration Partners:

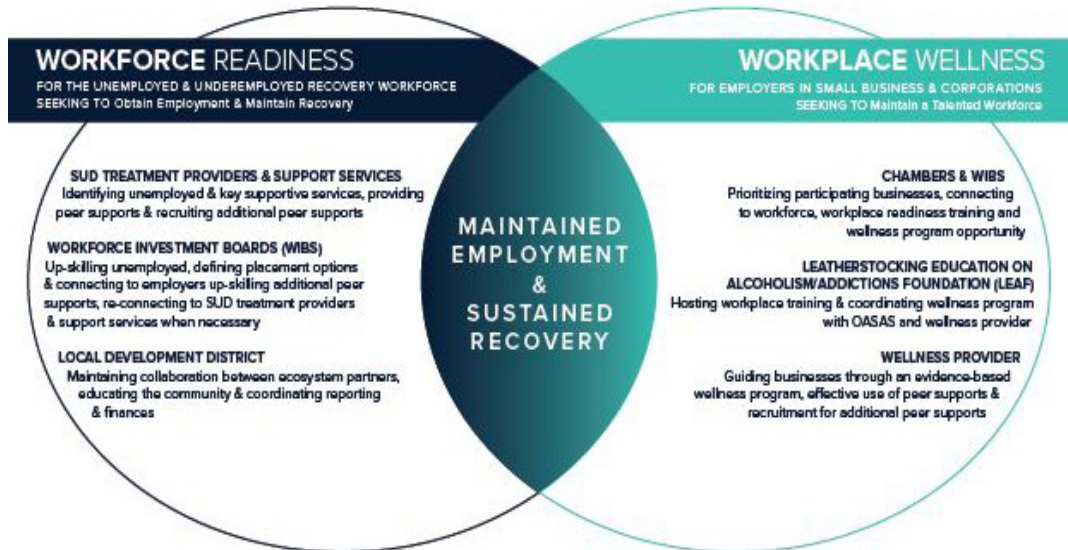


- **Broome-Tioga Workforce NY**
- **Greater Binghamton Chamber**
- **LEAF** (Leatherstocking Education on Alcoholism/Addictions Foundation)
- **The Family & Children's Society**
- **The Council of Tompkins County**

These partners were supported through contracted expertise from Veteran-Owned **Kowalik & Associates** and a nationally-recognized provider of evidence-based workplace prevention, **Organizational Wellness and Learning Systems (OWLS)**.

Partner Responsibilities & Collaborative Capacity Building:

1. Establishing working agreements (recipient & sub-recipient) with the understanding of partner language, roles & federal processes consistent with federal fiscal guidance.
2. Engaging businesses & conducting evidence-based surveys to develop customized workplace solutions and host business training sessions.
3. Developing wellness programs and building a local team to maintain the initiative.
4. Upskilling the recovery workforce & matchmaking employees with recovery-friendly employers.

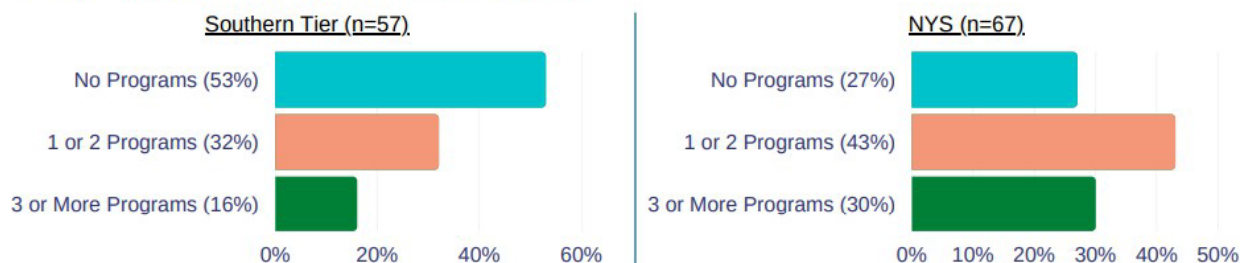


Quantifying the cost to local businesses

ARC's investment allowed the partners to work with Organizational Wellness Learning Systems (OWLS) to demonstrate the economic value of a collaborative resiliency building effort. Early in the project, OWLS conducted a multi-county survey of workplace leaders, focusing on the Southern Tier. Several publications resulted from this effort. Highlighted findings are presented below.

- As compared to the rest of New York State, there are limited resources in the Southern Tier Region to help the local workforce with mental health issues. Workplace leaders and managers from the Southern Tier are almost twice as likely to report that they have no type of wellness program, compared with other rural counties in New York.

NUMBER OF WELLNESS PROGRAMS CURRENTLY OFFERED:



- b. However, when introduced, respondents find wellness programs valuable in addressing employee well-being, which has a direct impact on the businesses' financial health.
- c. On average, managers and leaders within small businesses (less than 100 employees) reported: (a) losing more than \$25K each year in productivity time dealing with stress, health, and mental-health related issues in their workforce; and (b) an estimated loss of \$108K to the organization each year because of employee stress and health-related issues.

Economic Estimates of Lost Time and Productivity (Survey Results)

Lost Time & Productivity due to mental health- related exposures*	Small Businesses (less than 100 employees)	Medium and Large Businesses (100 or more employees)
Managers & Supervisors Average Annual Cost Per Business	\$25,134	\$41,996
Employees Average Annual Cost Per Business	\$108,313	\$3,400,000

*Stress, burnout, mental health concerns, lack of sleep, fatigue,
general health concerns, alcohol misuse, other drug use.

Bennett, J. B., Chan, A., Abellanoza, A., Bhagelaj, R., Gregory, J., Dostal, J. M., & Faringer, J. (2022). More vulnerable, more to gain? A pilot study of leader's perceptions of mental health programs and costs in small workplaces. *American Journal of Health Promotion*.

WORKFORCE READINESS: for the unemployed & underemployed recovery workforce seeking to obtain employment and maintain recovery.

Collaboration & Partner Engagement Efforts:

SUD treatment providers and peer support teams identified individuals in recovery and established workflow processes to introduce the individuals with workforce investment boards to assist with up-skilling, transportation costs and additional unique wrap-around services to find employment.

Intentional and consistent engagement was necessary to support the recovery workforce.

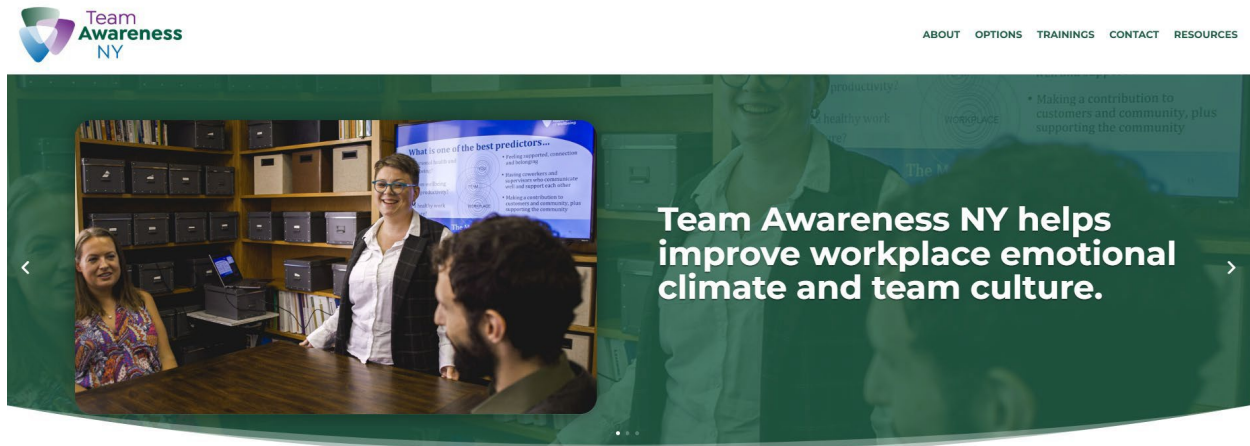


WORKPLACE WELLNESS: For employees in small businesses & corporations seeking to maintain a talented workforce

The partnership investment allowed LEAF (local provider of substance misuse prevention) and OWLS to build a local certified team to provide workplace wellness programs across the region. Team *Awareness NY* includes 60-to-180 minute workshop training in personal and team resilience, social capital, health consciousness, and manager/leader resilience.

Importantly, the workplace wellness program developed through this collaboration was informed both by (a) pre-existing evidence-based programming, and (b) significant input from local stakeholders representing different agencies within the "Recovery to Work" ecosystem. Specifically, OWLS, LEAF, Kowalik & Associates and the CREST Collaboration partners helped to identify and conduct semi-structured stakeholder interviews with directors or managers from Chambers of Commerce, Workforce Development, County Health, Healthcare, and Municipalities. The design and structure of the regional survey (noted above) was also informed by input from local business leaders.

Although it will take time to measure community impact, the support was launched to benefit the individual employee and the employer's productivity and economic stability with <https://teamawarenessny.org/>. This website includes links to videos and an online advocate training available for public use and dissemination.



Community Resources Developed (Public Domain Documents):

1. [Communication and Engagement Strategy to Support Recovery-to-Work Ecosystem \(includes A Strategic Marketing Planning Worksheet\)](#)
2. [Workplace Well-Being: A Real Strategy to Increase Your Business Productivity](#) [white paper prepared in collaboration with LEAF, OWLS, ST8, and Leadership Alliance (Greater Binghamton Chamber of Commerce & The Agency)]
3. [Evidence-Based Mental Health Costs to Small Workplaces: More vulnerable, more to gain? A pilot study of leader's perceptions of mental health programs and costs in small workplaces.](#) (Peer-reviewed paper published in American Journal of Health Promotion)
4. [Toward A Public-Private Collaboration: Listening to Leadership's Needs for Mental Health, Substance Use and Opioid Solutions](#) (article published by Public Sector HR Association (PSHRA))
5. [How to Leverage Your EAP for a Mentally Healthy Workplace: What Leaders Need to Know and Do](#) (Benefits Magazine; article published International Federation of Employee Benefit Plans)

COMMUNITY IMPACT OF CREST AND COLLABORATION:

The initial ARC INSPIRE investment was completed on time and under budget. The CREST project was completed on schedule and with 5 sub-recipients and increased local efficiencies, \$138K under budget.

Increased Employment and Workplaces Improved During the initial CREST project:

- ✓ 177 individuals were supported and 63 sustained employment
- ✓ 67 workplaces were served with partner services
- ✓ Partners exceeded estimated goals (of serving 75 people in recovery & 25 businesses).
- ✓ Through the delivery of workplace wellness programs, trainers were able to reach individuals in recovery, struggling with recovery, and who had family members who were struggling with recovery.
- ✓ Pre-to-post ratings by participants revealed improvements in healthy coping skills, perceptions of social support, and communication skills.
- ✓ In addition, trainers were able to reach employees who may be at risk of alcohol misuse and pre-post results with this subsample indicated improvement in ability to regulate excess alcohol use.

Unexpected Positive Outcomes

It is important to note that collaborative efforts can result in unexpected, positive, and emergent outcomes by virtue of the increased communication that results from bringing different stakeholders together. In addition to the survey and interviews, ST8 also held workshops that introduced the workplace wellness programs early on in the project and to local community service providers. This included a workshop in Binghamton and in Ithaca. These workshops were held in conjunction with meetings amongst CREST collaborators.

As a result of regular meetings such as these, a director of Workforce Development in Cortland County reached out to their partner in Broome County because they had received word of a plant closure. The Cortland director was interested in providing both wellness and transition support services to over 200 employees who had been or were to be laid off. In response, and because of the collaborative system set up through CREST, ST8 was able to coordinate efforts with LEAF, OWLS, and Cortland Works to bring four workshops to serve over 100 employees over two days of training. [A separate report is provided that documents this effort.](#)

Maintaining Outcomes:

The LDD's capacity building efforts continue to support the Recovery-to-Work Ecosystem Development for expanding outcomes:

- ✓ **BUILDING the FOUNDATION:** Southern Tier 8 Regional Board created new systematic partnerships with national wellness experts, prevention and education organizations, new treatment providers, and workforce investment boards.
- ✓ **SCALING SERVICES:** From the launch of the LDD's CREST project, three additional projects were supported by ARC INSPIRE to increase the Recovery-to-Work Ecosystem Development services across the Southern Tier.
- ✓ **CHANGING CULTURE/OUTREACH:** The LDD continues to support this initiative to reduce stigma, advocate with policy leaders and encourage participation in the community change. LDD and CREST partners showcased the recovery ecosystem work at conferences such as at:
 - the New York State Coalition to Prevent Addiction and Support Recovery in Employment (PARSE; 100+ attendance, December 2023)
 - the New York State Battery Energy Storage Conference (400+ attendance, October 2024), and
 - the Upstate Rural Infrastructure Conference (125 attendance, November 2024)
 - Program promotion and networking for local wellness partners (April & May 2025).
- ✓ **CONTINUED PROJECT DEVELOPMENT:** for 2025 ARC INSPIRE investments, Southern Tier 8 staff offered technical assistance for the following initiatives:
 - FOR-NY for "Recovery Ready Workplace of Broome County" to support a "Recovery Friendly Workplace" certification program, and establish partnerships with the Broome Tioga Workforce Board and region's Manufacturing Extension Partnership AM&T
 - Service in Unity for "Bridging the Gap: Empowering SUD Individuals Through Employment" as a local disruptor in the employment-employee model, and establish a partnership with Ithaca Area Economic Development Workforce team.

ECOSYSTEM DEVELOPMENT | PHASE 3

Phase 3: Expanded Ecosystem Development

As the CREST team engaged additional partners throughout their planning and implementation phase, the ecosystem grew and additional organizations pursued ARC INSPIRE Investments

Investments & Progress in the Southern Tier (2021-2024):

2021-2024: **\$500,000 FOR-DO Friends of Recovery of Delaware and Otsego Counties, Inc. Rural Recovery Development Opportunities and Career Services** to help with wraparound services, peer support with additional workforce investment boards.

December 2024: Project Completed under budget (\$438,205)

GOALS:

108 workers >>>>
20 >>>>
businesses

RESULTS:

354 workers served
134 businesses
served

2022- 2025 **\$378K LEAF (Leatherstocking Education on Alcoholism/Addictions Foundation) North4Inspire (N4I)** project to help those in recovery with wrap-arounds services in small businesses.

April 2025: \$105,584 requested

GOALS:

40 workers >>>>
40 small>>>>
businesses

Preliminary RESULTS:

yet to measure
yet to measure

2023-2025- **\$498K Broome Tioga Workforce Ready for Work** To work with the justice system and help those with re-entry March 2025: \$134, 371 requested

GOALS:

30 workers >>>>
12 businesses >>>>

Preliminary RESULTS:

yet to measure
yet to measure

OUTCOME OF INVESTMENTS

As a result of the initial ecosystem development project, three additional ARC INSPIRE *Recovery to Work* projects were launched in the region from 2021-2023. In 2024, all four projects, totaling a \$1,401,789 ARC investment, were reviewed. The general purpose of each project was to address the Substance Use Disorder Crisis through Recovery to Work programs. Although the focus of each project was unique, similarities included structural design, collaborations among multiple community partners, and a desire to reduce the stigma attached to Substance Use Disorder (SUD) among employers and communities throughout the region.

Overall Findings:

1. Southern Tier 8 hosted the first project, to bring together unique ecosystem partners in treatment and workforce development for the first time in the region and introduce ARC's goals and support. This model was the first in larger-scale partnership and sub-recipient projects, where the LDD coordinated contracts, sub-recipient Memorandum Of Understandings, and project reporting; business engagement; regional and state partnership resources; and expanded support for additional recovery-to-work project development.
2. Each of the four projects reviewed has achieved projected outcomes or, for those projects still incomplete, were in the process of meeting stated goals and objectives.
3. Relationships and trust among participating agency partners were strengthened.
4. While SUD stigma was reduced with some municipal leaders within the communities these projects served, the addiction use and homelessness rates increased during this time period (related to the global pandemic) and one treatment facility closed. Hence, while the ecosystem development launched, the need for assistance increased.
5. The time and resources necessary for capacity building were underestimated for all project partners. Many partners had little or no experience with ARC time- tracking, data gathering, or reporting requirements. This lack of knowledge required all agencies to invest more heavily than anticipated in administration to assure proper reporting and record-keeping. This was particularly evident for ST8, as it managed the prototype project and assisted other agencies.
6. Although these projects have been successful in completing anticipated performance measures, reducing stigma, and developing a collaborative model across ecosystem partners, it is understood that a region-wide cultural shift will take considerable, regular investment of time, talent and resources. Bringing about the desired change in culture, attitudes and behaviors will require regular, sustained investments. The LDD appears to be seeking a critique from ARC which will include guidance on next steps and long-term goals to continue to support this ecosystem development.

Most Notable Findings As Expressed by Project Partners:

Strengths

1. **National and Statewide Recognition:** These projects, starting with CREST, received national exposure. The methods and processes utilized by these projects, combined with measurable findings and evidence-based success, have resulted in a number of publications and numerous presentations at conferences. This allowed outcome data and project success to be disseminated throughout ARC regions and nationally. Leaders from the LDD, LEAF, and Kowalik & Associates shared insights at the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) conference in Washington, DC on March 14, 2023. They presented project development ideas, partner engagement & outreach methods, and a summary of the local project with lessons learned and workforce successes. The Development District Association of Appalachia (DDAA) named the LDD Executive Director, Jen Gregory, as a "Thought Leader in Ecosystem Development" and asked her to serve as a Recovery to Work Ambassador with DDAA's Learning Academy. In addition, she was able to speak directly with ARC Federal Co-Chair Gayle Manchin, and other ARC grantees who have reached out for advice and guidance.
2. **Collaboration among Partners:** Collaboration has increased the level of trust and communication among diverse partners. Through collaboration, all project teams were able to create broader awareness of, and respond to, the need for these types of programs and engage stakeholders through numerous methods.
3. **Developed, Tested and Modeled Unique Partnerships:** The unique partnership structure of the CREST project was hugely successful and provided a model for future projects. The connections made between Workforce Development, treatment providers, Chambers of Commerce, and others seemed to work well. New relationships between business community and service providers created a strong foundation for other programs and projects success. One key to success was having the right people at the table.
4. **Empowering Training Programs Delivered to Employers:** The excellent evidence-based workplace training offered through these projects empowered businesses and employees to cope with ongoing stressors and enhance methods for tapping into their own resources to help themselves.
5. **Working with Courts:** Partners believed the emerging relationship with the Binghamton City Adult Treatment Court was a unique strength of the BTWF Ready for Work project and felt strongly that the Court would be a feeder for both treatment and workforce referral. Partners were pleased that the Court is reaching out and building relationships to other agencies dealing in recovery. The implementation and reporting processes that the BTWF staff learned during the CREST project, also helped them in a following EDA Regional Challenge award to serve one of the most distressed neighborhoods in Appalachian NY.

Challenges

1. **Ecosystem Understanding:** Several partners struggled to understand how their individual efforts blended with other project partners efforts to create the intended impact of the workforce development projects. Representatives from agencies in different sectors of the ecosystem had to learn the languages (and agency acronyms) of different sectors of the community, e.g., economic development, recovery, workforce development, chambers. Each sector had unique acronyms and different ways of looking at treatment, recovery, and workforce development.
2. **Coordinating Different Agency Agendas:** It appeared agency staff have difficulty thinking beyond their traditional spheres of influence. At times, it was difficult to align different agendas of different partners. This was partly due to lack of staffing and resources within agencies themselves, such that it was sometimes difficult to prioritize focus on CREST.
3. **Project Administration:** Much time was spent on administrative details for each project, e.g., data gathering, reporting, hiring. Several agencies suggested that ARC provide training to their finance and project management personnel to reduce the amount of time spent learning ARC systems and requirements.
4. **Staff Hiring:** The hiring process within projects was slow and difficult. County and state requirements, plus a limited qualified candidate pool made it difficult to hire staff in a timely fashion.
5. **Staff Retention:** Due to staff turnover in key positions during the life of some projects, it was challenging for agencies to fill personnel holes which made it difficult to sustain momentum.
6. **Insufficient Staffing on Project Core Teams:** Staff turnover and sicknesses demonstrated the need to expand project teams to include two deep from each partner agency or obtain a commitment that the agencies would keep a second person knowledgeable about the project so if someone left there would be no loss in project performance.
7. **Questionable Role of Chambers of Commerce:** In some projects, Chambers appeared to not meet expectations of other project partners in performing their partnership role as a key economic development agency. It was suggested that Chamber staff receive training on their role when joining a venture like this and a clear agreement be prepared to ensure Chambers provide the leadership expected within the small business community.
8. **Maturing and Traditional County Leadership:** The maturing age of people in leadership positions in local government, agencies, and the private sector seemed to play a critical role in this rural region. This appeared to contribute to community and employer stigma regarding the recovery to work initiative. Some county representatives didn't understand the *continuum of recovery* concept. For example, they had not been educated on, or understood that, recovery from addiction often requires multiple efforts and includes periods of relapse. Accordingly, although this project helped reduce stigma and increase acceptance, long-term cultural change will be impacted by the views of

leaders in senior leadership positions.

Unexpected Outcomes

1. **The Power of Building upon the Success of CREST Project:** All projects were able to build upon the previous success generated by the CREST project and it paid great dividends.
2. **Improved Collaboration among Partner Agencies:** As a result of these projects, signed MOU and Business Associates Agreements have laid a good foundation and created a framework for working together now and into the future. The collaboration between like-minded agencies has resulted in several other collaborations and plans for others in the future.
3. **Great County Government Support:** A very positive and unexpected outcome was receiving support from leadership within select counties which bodes well for program expansion and sustainability.
4. **Project Vulnerability to Staffing Changes:** Although some staff turnover was inevitable and expected, the magnitude of the impact was not anticipated. When there was only one staff member engaged in a project from each agency it created a vulnerability impacting project performance. Mental health and SUD Treatment partners experienced a 30% increase in client needs during the global pandemic (project period). This caused a strain on the workforce, resulting in high turnover with all levels of staff. The large impact of losing a longtime agency executive director and the loss of an entire agency's staff was not expected.
5. **Steep Administrative and Reporting Learning Curve:** Lead agencies for projects and partners had previously worked in grant funded projects and it was unexpected that they would need to learn new and different reporting requirements. The ARC project requirements for reporting needed more detail than originally planned.
6. **Slow Funding and Reimbursement:** Some partners expressed surprise and dissatisfaction with slowness of the funding and reimbursement process.

Future Project Changes Based Upon Learning

1. **Hire Staff More Quickly:** It appeared project leaders felt it was extremely important to try to get staff on board faster. Partners indicated they would initiate staff hiring processes earlier or establish contracts to hire people more quickly and seamlessly.
2. **Make Strong Efforts to Keep Staffing Consistent throughout the Life of the Project:** It appeared to be essential to keep staffing consistent throughout the life of the projects. The loss of a single staff member, particularly if leading the project, hampered success greatly.
3. **Consider Starting With Larger Teams:** Feedback indicated there is much to be said for small, high functioning teams. However, it has to be balanced by having enough people to do the work. Some partners recommended starting with a larger team. Others suggested keeping the core team size the same, but obtaining

commitments from those individuals to keep at least one additional person on staff as backup. By involving more staff from the beginning of the project it would decrease disruptions to lack of staffing resources.

4. **Provide Training to Key Agency Partner Staff:** During the CREST project, ST8 had to constantly monitor and coach partner agency staff. In the future, the ARC or the lead agency might be encouraged to provide more training and assistance to agency finance people.
5. **Structure Meeting Schedules and Agendas Differently:** The CREST project was a textbook in excellent management and meeting techniques. One possible improvement suggested was to establish a two tier meeting schedule for partner meetings. One set of meetings could focus on specific topics with subcommittees, e.g. addressing workforce issues, treatment issues, and marketing and communications issues. These meetings could be followed by a second set of meetings consisting of the whole group to conduct decision making.
6. **Develop a Plan for Data Collection from the Project Start:** All partners expressed the need to better anticipate reporting requirements from the start of the project and to develop a system to collect data making reporting much easier.
7. **Establish Financial Incentives for Employers Hiring People in Recovery:** Working with small and medium sized employers demonstrated the important role that hiring incentives could play when encouraging businesses to hire people in recovery. Adding financial incentives would boost project performance and assist with the placement of more people.
8. **Request Additional Targeted Funds:** With additional funds, agencies expressed they would hire additional staff who could support this type of project and reduce vulnerability to staff turnover. Workforce Development indicated they would provide more extensive wrap around services.
9. **Increase Level of Storytelling:** The power of storytelling became evident during these projects. It was suggested that in the future, individual stories, particularly those stories of people in recovery might be helpful.

Areas for Expansion

1. **Project Replication in Other Small Localities.** Project partners suggested that these projects could be replicated in other counties within the ST8 region. Under these projects several counties have already been collaborating, and the concept could be expanded further.
2. **Replicate Project for Nonprofits and Human Service Agencies:** The focus of these projects was to serve primarily for-profit businesses but it would be great to have a similar program for nonprofits, schools, and human service agencies.
3. **Support Transportation Services:** Transportation was and continues to be a

challenge in the rural areas served by these projects. It was difficult for participants to make transportation arrangements to get to treatment providers and to a place of work. Individuals may not have had the financial ability to own a car and the loss of drivers licenses made it difficult for participants to succeed. One possible expansion would be to work with taxi and transportation services to provide reliable and consistent transportation within rural areas.

4. **Support Projects to Serve Individuals with Dual Issues:** Behavioral Health Services in Norwich announced it is expanding into an integrated outpatient services license program. It will expand the number of individuals with dual issues who are eligible to be served. This is an area that needs additional funding and would continue to reach individuals in recovery.

State Policy Suggestions

1. **Modify Incentives for Employers:** New York State has a stackable tax credit for hiring people in recovery. It was suggested key policy changes were to: (1) make it easy for employers to hire and obtain tax credits and (2) correct the definition of recovery. The credit application started out as a 2-page form. It now appears the application consists of a 12-page form and has defined people in recovery as only people who went through a treatment program. Both changes have created hurdles for employers.
2. **Establish More Flexible Hiring:** Office of Addictions Services and Supports (OASAS) review was necessary for staff hires within one of the partner agencies. It would be helpful if OASAS had greater understanding of the limited workforce available in the local, rural communities. Making adjustments to hiring requirements would be helpful to make hiring easier. All County, State, and Agency hiring requirements need to be more flexible to make it easier to hire qualified individuals and shorten the timeframe for staff replacements.
3. **Reduce NYS Administrative Requirements:** Although New York is progressive compared to other States, there seemed to be a need to reduce administrative requirements for hiring and reporting. There appeared to be a natural opportunity to partner these types of programs with NYS programs, but the administration and paperwork for State programs was prohibitive and difficult, especially for private businesses. Also many agencies didn't have administrative capacity to deal with NYS requirements. In the future, companies need better partners who can help with administrative requirements.
4. **Assess NYS Reporting and Reimbursement:** Throughout these projects, agencies were heard complaining that OASAS reporting and reimbursement was difficult.
5. **Increase Funding for Incentives:** Agencies felt providing funding incentives is critical for businesses to incentivize hiring individuals in recovery. Additional incentives would expand full wrap-around services including housing and travel to those who are hired.

Suggestions for Sustaining Outreach

1. **Increase Staffing and Utilize Peers More Effectively:** If possible, it would be beneficial to hire and maintain a permanent person to conduct needed capacity building, outreach, and delivery of the workplace well- being training. Also, utilizing peer engagement specialists when possible would strengthen services and expand outreach.
2. **Individualized Outreach:** Agencies suggested that they establish a process to reach businesses and organizations by being more intentional in approaching strategic individuals and stakeholders, as was successful with stakeholder interviews conducted by LEAF and OWLS. This as opposed to sending blanket emails. Using a more personal approach, with training from OWLS, was more successful than previously used methods.
3. **Hire a Promotion and Marketing Manager:** FOR-DO recently hired a promotion and marketing manager and have experienced excellent results. The agency suggested that, based upon their success, other agencies might begin doing Podcasts, YouTube commercials, digital billboards, social media, and website development. These advertising methods seemed to reach a larger percentage of the region's population than more traditional marketing approaches.
4. **Continue Relationship Building:** A lesson learned by partners in these projects was the importance of outreach to and relationships with other like-minded agencies. Nearly all project partner agencies plan to continue community outreach and establish relationships with other county agencies to expand their reach to area companies.
5. **More Personal Outreach by Partners:** Based upon experiences during these projects, it appeared outreach must be more intentional and more personal. Some agencies, perhaps including the Court, plan to reach out to companies that have not historically been part of their outreach plan.
6. **Partner with Others:** For agencies that cannot afford a full-time outreach position, consider partnering with the Chamber of Commerce as they look at talent and leadership development. Expanding the Chamber's Leadership Series to include topics such as Recovery to Work sensitivity, inclusivity in the workplace, hiring those with disabilities, would strengthen Chamber programs and assist other partners with their outreach efforts.
7. **Improve Messaging:** Based upon experiences during these projects, partners determined the need for more storytelling. Messaging to small businesses might change to include more testimonials and individual stories. It was more effective than general communications and marketing. Adding the human element was a great idea and provided a model to go forward.

Suggestions for Regional Recovery Friendly Workplace Initiative

1. **Follow Statewide Initiatives and Leadership:** Partners suggested employers should be given an opportunity to apply for and receive guidance on being designated a "Recovery Friendly Workplace" with evidenced based metrics.
2. **Continue to Raise Awareness:** All partners suggested increasing educational offerings to reduce stigma. They recommended helping to educate the broader community by utilizing social media and television, in addition to the Team Awareness wellness programs.
3. **Hire a Promotion and Marketing Manager:** FOR-DO recently hired a promotion and marketing manager and are rebranding the FOR-DO name. By adding Chenango County to their service areas as a result of this project, the agency is attempting to include Chenango County. Since there is name recognition in their previous service area, the agency has decided the name will be the same but to modify its brand. In addition to rebranding, FOR-DO suggested that, based upon success, agencies begin doing Podcasts, YouTube commercials, digital billboards, social media, and website development. These advertising methods reach a larger percentage of the region's population than more traditional marketing approaches.
4. **Follow Statewide Initiatives:** Several partners suggested building upon and cooperating with statewide initiatives (e.g., PARSE). They also suggested reviewing successful models implemented by other States.
5. **Provide Financial Incentives to Employers:** It was suggested to help businesses and offer financial awards to those employers that assist with transportation, necessary clothing, access to internet, and expanded supports to employees. All partners suggested there was still a need to address the stigma of hiring those in recovery. More businesses seemed to be more accepting but much more work remains. Companies appeared to have put policies in place but in some businesses, the company policies have not filtered down to effect culture changes within workforce.

Suggestions for Future Funding

1. **Develop Creative Funding Programs:** Partners suggested establishing a program and funding like a Block Grant (which incentivizes hiring low income people). Establish a similar program to reach the recovery workforce might prove very useful.
2. **Establish a Fund to Encourage Employers to Sponsor a Volunteer:** A unique suggestion from the Binghamton City Adult Treatment Court representative was based upon observations that people must do community service during the Court sentence period. Providing funding for employers to sponsor or take on a volunteer would act similar to a funded transition program, like apprenticeships. With this type of assistance, individuals in recovery have a greater chance of being hired fulltime or receive a recommendation to other employers.
3. **Incentives for Employers:** There seemed to be a need for funding for a more focused funding as incentives for employers. These funds could target programs with specific industries and reach different industry sectors and the trades.
4. **Fund Projects to Build Capacities and Scale up Size and Scope of Projects:** The projects covered by this review, did not address all the opportunities available. The need remains to build capacity within certain industries, trades, and unions. These initial projects successfully tested the feasibility of creating traction with early adopter industries. The need exists to go after higher risk industries and replicate the project as well as scale up project size and scope.
5. **Fund and Improve Rural Transportation:** Work with Taxi and transportation services to provide reliable and consistent transportation within rural areas.
6. **Funding for Treatment Providers:** Treatment providers continue to serve ever larger numbers of clients on limited funding. Funds could effectively be utilized for: (1) hiring more peers; (2) providing continuing education for treatment professionals who are required to receive annual training; and (3) projects serving "dual occurring" disorders and integrating outplacement services. Also, funders must acknowledge the real problem in this region is that far more people are suffering from alcohol than opioids and there is little to no funding for this primary problem in our region.