



Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act 2026 State Plan Modification

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rhode Island's 2024-2028 Combined State Plan and its 2026 Modification reflect the Administration's vision for an integrated workforce, education, and economic development system while also serving as a federal compliance document for the United States Departments of Labor and Education under the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). The Combined State Plan outlines the principles, goals, and strategies that will guide workforce, education, and training programs in the state of Rhode Island over the next four years.

Rhode Island's economy has demonstrated meaningful resilience over the past several years, maintaining per capita income in the top third of all U.S. states and sustaining GDP growth through an increasingly complex global environment. After recently reaching historic lows, Rhode Island's unemployment rate has risen gradually over the past two years, underscoring the urgency of the work ahead. Automation and artificial intelligence are no longer emerging forces but present realities, already poised to potentially influence industries and the nature of work across every sector of the economy. The cost of living and concerns about future uncertainty continue to pose some risk to Rhode Island's economy and workforce. As a result, we are redoubling our focus on building an industry-driven economy that delivers a strong and talented labor force to employers to power their growth, and allows individuals, no matter their present economic circumstance, to receive the resources and supports necessary to propel them into high-wage jobs and improve the economic condition of themselves and their families.

Present economic conditions demand a coordinated, system-wide response that ensures Rhode Island's workforce development infrastructure is meeting workers and employers where they are. The state must fully utilize the talents, skills, and experience of all Rhode Islanders, with particular urgency for communities and occupations at greatest risk of being left behind. This effort requires an all-hands-on-deck approach that brings together industries, employers, community-based organizations, postsecondary institutions, training providers, workforce boards, and other partners to develop industry-driven and person-centered solutions to our collective workforce challenges.

Through concentrated efforts that promote collaboration and partnership across sectors and systems, and by leveraging federal and state funds and resources; the vision, mission, strategies, and goals laid out in this Plan can be actualized in a way that moves Rhode Islanders into better-paying jobs, while significantly increasing the state's economic competitiveness and powering the growth and success of Rhode Island employers. The state has made some key changes and revisions to increase programmatic collaboration, improve the reach and capacity of the workforce development system, increase and enhance community and business engagement, and enhance the participant experience within core and partner WIOA programs.

Rhode Island believes that shared ownership of the 2024 WIOA State Plan is critical to its success. To that end, the state board utilized an intentional and dynamic community engagement plan that included interdepartmental State staff, businesses, local workforce development boards, and community-based organizations. During implementation of the plan, Rhode Island will continue to welcome and invite input and perspective as we collectively strive to strengthen and elevate the statewide workforce development system.

Vision Statement: The Governor’s Workforce Board of Rhode Island envisions an industry-driven economy that delivers a strong and talented labor force to employers to power their growth, and allows individuals, no matter their present economic circumstance, to receive the resources and supports necessary to propel them into high-wage jobs and improve the economic condition of themselves and their families.

State Goals and Strategies: The partners will collectively use the following strategies to support Rhode Island’s vision of an integrated and effective education, workforce and job training system at the state and local level:

GOAL 1: Continue to utilize demand-driven, sector-based strategies to develop pipelines of skilled workers that meet employer workforce needs and support the state’s economic development priorities.

Strategy 1.1 – Continue to invest and support growing industry and sector partnerships, with a focus on manufacturing, shipbuilding, and defense, among others.

Strategy 1.2 – Work with state and local boards on integrating Title I and Title IV training and career services funds into sector partnership activities and providing access to employer-driven activities to Adult and Dislocated Worker clients, Youth clients, and Vocational Rehabilitation clients.

Strategy 1.3 – Increase information sharing and communication between business outreach arms within all partner programs, and the state economic development agency, so that all business-facing staff across the workforce development system is knowledgeable of the services and employer resources available among from all partner programs.

Strategy 1.4 – Explore an employer outreach and information campaign regarding the opportunities and manageable challenges of hiring and retaining populations with barriers to employment.

Strategy 1.5 – Remain engaged in ongoing statewide efforts to promote competency-based hiring to maximize opportunities for untapped talent to succeed in the labor force.

GOAL 2: Advance career pathway strategies to provide education, training, employment and support services for current and future workers, particularly those with barriers to employment and/or economic mobility.

Strategy 2.1 – Building on the progress made during the previous plan period, identify additional opportunities for uniform statewide definitions and consistent standards of quality across the workforce development network.

Strategy 2.2 – Contextualize adult education programs for workforce demands, including AI literacy and skill development, and connect participants to post-secondary/industry credentials and/or employment.

Strategy 2.3 – Conduct analysis of statewide Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, youth work experiences and other work-based learning programs to ensure alignment with the state’s largest and/or growing industries.

Strategy 2.4 – Implement continuous (and, whenever possible, joint) professional development and customer service training for staff from all partner programs to elevate internal expertise and professionalism and to build a growing and shared knowledge base across programs.

Strategy 2.5 – At the program administrative level; conduct regular information exchanges regarding existing/new training, education, and career service resources within each core and partner WIOA program.

Strategy 2.6 – Expand Registered Apprenticeship programs and participation, including on-ramps to apprenticeships through pre-apprenticeships, CTE alignment, and work-based learning.

GOAL 3: Align policy and leverage existing structures and resources so that government is networked and coordinated to achieve efficiencies and effectiveness throughout the workforce system.

Strategy 3.1 – Require each local workforce area to demonstrate success in community engagement and outreach including, but not limited to, partnering with community-based organizations, community leaders, and others to increase the awareness and availability of services beyond the One Stop location and within the community.

Strategy 3.2 – Work with relevant state agency partners to provide clear and uniform guidance regarding the impact of service-related income and post-placement earnings on public assistance programs. Increase the level of interagency communication regarding the impact of employment and earnings on eligibility and benefit levels, in an effort to avoid the “benefits cliff.”

Strategy 3.3 – Complete a comprehensive analysis of each core and partner programs’ service-related terms and definitions to see where there is uniformity, diversion, and opportunities for greater alignment.

GOAL 4: Use data to inform policy-making decisions, guide investments and evaluate performance to maximize return on investments.

Strategy 4.1 – Wherever possible, transition program and performance reports into user-friendly online dashboards for the public to access, including leveraging of AI data tools.

Strategy 4.2 – Encourage cross-agency/cross-program performance review and analysis for all WIOA programs at the state and local board level.

Strategy 4.3 – Adopt system-wide outcome measures for service levels within communities of need.

Strategy 4.4 – Explore additional ways to capture the Return on Investment (ROI) of the workforce system, including wage increases and attainment of credentials of value to employers, in order to promote the value of the system and all programs within it.