



**DEEP Final Report**  
and Recommendations  
to the DWDB



by Social Contract, LLC

# **DEEP Final Report** and Recommendations to the DWDB

# 1. Executive Summary

The purpose of the Delaware Employment Equity Project (DEEP) was to analyze the needs of Delawareans and employers to design effective strategies that increase access to equitable employment opportunities, especially within Delaware’s *Promise Communities*. These efforts were funded through a statewide planning grant made by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA).

The DWDB commissioned several studies to better understand the current state of workforce opportunities, support services, entrepreneurial resources, workforce policies, and community member job skills and interests. The project was broken into six workstreams, largely research efforts, each focusing on different topics ranging from policy to wraparound services. Launched in the fall of 2021, the project commenced with the Business Decision-Makers Survey, capturing insights from over 200 of Delaware’s largest employers. It concluded in the spring of 2024 with the Labor Force & Skills Assessment, which surveyed individuals living and working in Delaware.

The Delaware Employment Equity Project sought to analyze all aspects of the workforce ecosystem and make connections between the Delaware Workforce Development Board (DWDB), employers, entrepreneurs, and the workforce at large, with a focus on Promise Communities. The geographic areas of Promise Communities were updated through the efforts of this project, as discussed later in this report.

The six research workstreams of the DEEP are outlined below:

1	<b>Business Decision-Maker Survey</b> - Zogby/Tech Impact Comprehensive survey of Delaware business decision makers to understand the employment marketplace and the current needs of businesses
2	<b>Equity-Centered Workforce Development Study</b> - United Way Assess the current state of workforce development in Delaware through a comprehensive and equity-focused lens in partnership with UWDE and others
3	<b>Policy Review and Analysis</b> - University of Delaware Analyze current workforce policies to ensure there are no inconsistencies, conflicts, duplications, or ambiguity that promote inequity or increase barriers for individuals and programs in Promise Communities
4	<b>Gap Analysis of Entrepreneurial Resources</b> - Social Contract Assess the landscape of innovation and entrepreneurship assets and identify gaps in access to capital and other resources.
5	<b>Gap Analysis of Wraparound Services</b> - EDSi Assess the landscape of wraparound services to identify opportunities to address employment barriers and connect employers and training programs with wraparound service providers
6	<b>Labor Force &amp; Skills Assessment</b> - Social Contract Assess the skill sets and employment interests of individuals within Delaware Promise Communities

This report summarizes the findings from each workstream, discusses cross-cutting findings that impact equitable access to employment across the state, and presents recommendations for the DWDB based on the cross-workstream analysis.

**The high-level findings provided in this report include:**

- **Finding 1:** Challenges accessing resources and supports related to geography and poverty are persistent across the state.
- **Finding 2:** Gaps detected between priority skill areas required for modern jobs in Delaware and individual skill sets of people living in marginalized communities.
- **Finding 3:** Allocation of resources across the ecosystem has resulted in redundancy and duplication of workforce-related wraparound services.
- **Finding 4:** Silos between and within agencies create bottlenecks and inefficiencies.
- **Finding 5:** Resource disparities create further barriers to access training and employment across the State.
- **Finding 6:** Historic inequities in marginalized communities lead to barriers to access and entry into the workforce ecosystem.

**This report also presents the following strategic recommendations for the Delaware Workforce Development Board:**

- 1. Build a Knowledge Management infrastructure across the Workforce Ecosystem** that considers equitable access to key knowledge and information for all stakeholders, including employers, workforce development staff, wraparound service providers, and members of the workforce.
- 2. Expand and enhance connections between the workforce, community organizations, employers, and workforce development agencies** to support building new, non-traditional support networks, mentorship, and references.
- 3. Support innovative, on-site workforce training programs** that center on eliminating barriers to opportunities and promoting career growth and wealth generation in historically marginalized communities.
- 4. Continue to provide leadership in the revision and re-definition of priority communities.**
- 5. Leverage the data collected through this project** to build directories and databases.
- 6. Support the design of a state-wide workforce research strategy** that includes the implementation of a business decision-makers survey and labor force engagement and assessments regularly.

## 2. Introduction

The Delaware Workforce Development Board (DWDB) secured funding from the Economic Development Administration (EDA) through a statewide planning grant in late 2021 to analyze the needs of Delawareans and employers to design effective strategies that increase access to equitable employment opportunities, especially within Delaware’s Promise Communities. This project was a part of the Delaware Workforce Development Board’s (DWDB) broader mission to make data-informed decisions about the Delaware workforce.

To efficiently execute the project, DWDB hired various subcontractors with expertise and robust track records within each workstream of the project’s focus. Social Contract (SC) was hired as project manager, in addition to their ownership of the Entrepreneur Resources Assessment, to oversee the various work streams and subcontractors. This role ensured alignment with the project’s goals, regular updates to the EDA, and frequent touch points across all subcontractors to share findings and best practices throughout the life of the project. Their role was pivotal in coordinating efforts across multiple stakeholders, including government entities, educational institutions, industry associations, businesses, and community members.

To build out this comprehensive report, the team identified overlapping themes across different reports and sources, extracting relevant examples and findings that underscore these themes. This approach ensured a holistic and nuanced understanding of the workforce ecosystem, highlighting key areas of synergy and opportunity.

A critical aspect of the analysis involved what is referred to as “the Delta.” SC sought to understand the findings and recommendations of each report by conducting a 360-degree analysis of the employment ecosystem. This allowed the team to capture diverse perspectives, pinpoint gaps, and identify best practices that can be leveraged to drive improvement.

In the following sections, the report delves into the findings and insights derived from this analysis, offering actionable recommendations to strengthen workforce development in Delaware. Through a collaborative and data-driven approach, this report aims to foster a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable workforce ecosystem in Delaware.

The following is a glossary of key terms related to this report:

- **Census tracts** - Small, relatively permanent statistical subdivisions of a county or equivalent entity, designed to be relatively homogeneous units concerning population characteristics, economic status, and living conditions. Census tracts typically contain between 1,200 and 8,000 people, and their boundaries are intended to be maintained over a long time to allow for statistical comparisons over time.
- **Ecosystem** - An interconnected network of individuals, organizations, resources, and environments.
- **Employment ecosystem** - A dynamic network of interdependent entities and factors that influence employment opportunities within a region or industry. It includes employers, employees, educational institutions, government agencies, and various other stakeholders, along with the policies, economic conditions, and social factors that impact employment.
- **Entrepreneur** - A person who aspires to or has started a business in Delaware.
- **Equity/equity-centered** - Equity involves fairness and justice in the way people are treated. Equity-

centered approaches specifically focus on recognizing and addressing systemic inequalities and disparities, ensuring that resources and opportunities are distributed in a manner that supports equal outcomes for all, particularly for historically marginalized or disadvantaged groups.

- **Gap analysis** - A method for assessing the differences between the current state and the desired future state of a process, system, or organization. It involves identifying gaps in performance, resources, or capabilities and developing strategies to bridge these gaps.
- **Labor force** - All people who are of working age and are either employed or actively seeking employment. It includes both the employed and the unemployed who are available and willing to work.
- **Marginalized communities** - Groups of people who are systematically disadvantaged and discriminated against, often due to their race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or other characteristics. Marginalized communities typically have less access to resources, opportunities, and power.
- **Opportunity zones** - Designated areas, typically low-income communities, where investments are incentivized through tax benefits to spur economic development and job creation. These zones are established by local governments in partnership with federal programs.
- **Promise communities** - A research-based distinction in Delaware that includes communities that have obstacles keeping them from thriving including poor transportation, family poverty, expensive housing, and few local job options.
- **Workforce development** - A range of activities, policies, and programs designed to create, sustain, and retain a viable workforce. It focuses on equipping individuals with the skills and qualifications needed for employment and helping employers access a skilled workforce.
- **Wraparound services** - Comprehensive, holistic approaches to addressing the needs of individuals, particularly in social services and education. These services “wrap around” the person, addressing various aspects of their well-being, including mental health, physical health, housing, employment, childcare, and education, to provide coordinated and integrated support.

### 3. | A Note about Delaware’s Promise Communities

This project centers on building the Delaware Workforce Development Board’s awareness, knowledge, and understanding of the current state of the Delaware workforce ecosystem and its impacts on some of the most marginalized communities in the state, also known as Promise Communities. This designation was developed by the United Way in 2013 to identify zip codes across the state that house individuals who face systemic obstacles and barriers to accessing education, healthcare, employment, and other essential resources.

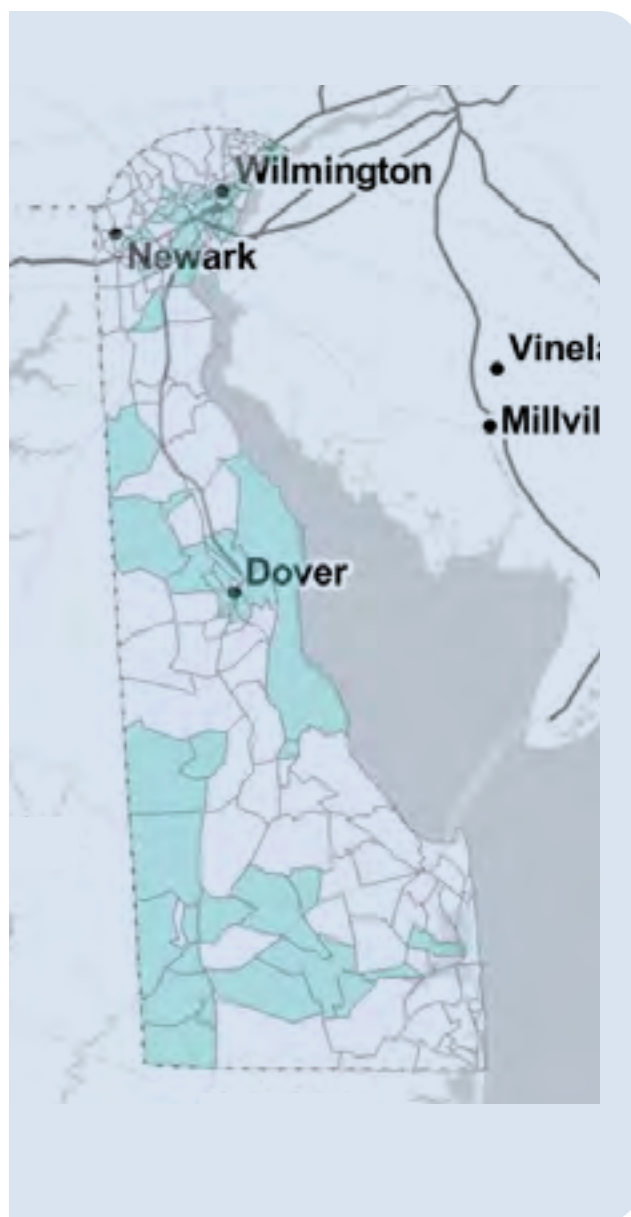
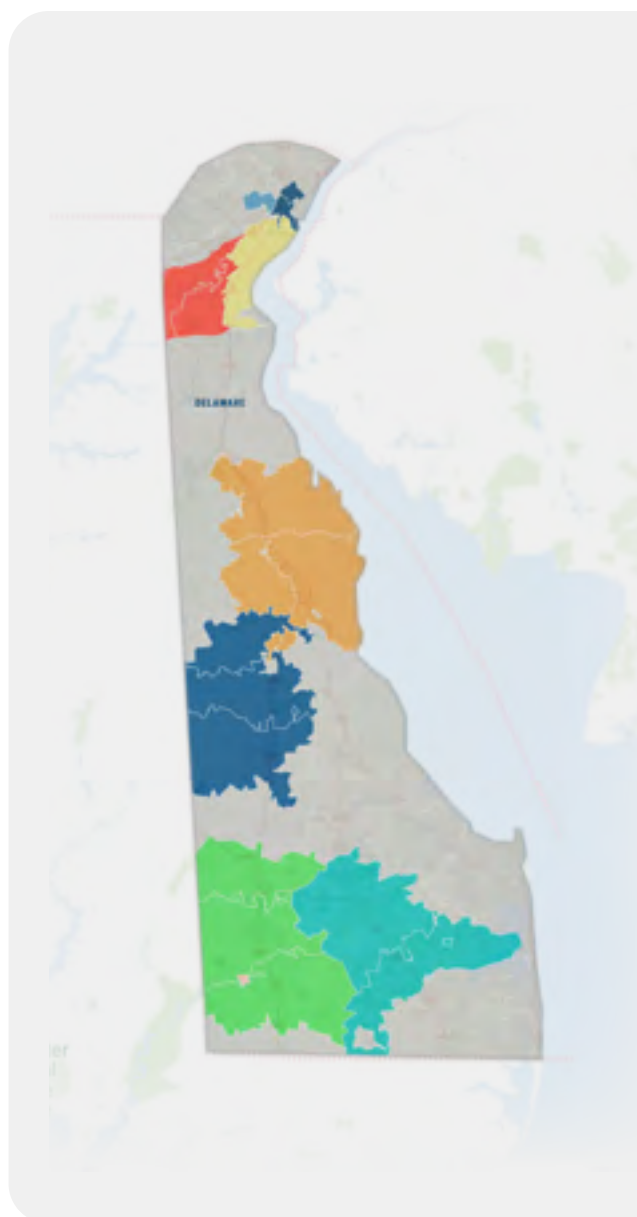
#### **Promise Communities are defined as those underserved communities in which:**

- 28.9% of the children live in poverty;
- 44.9% of residents are considered low-income;
- 37.3% of the children are proficient in reading by 3rd grade;

- 18.2% of the population age 25 and over have a HS diploma;
- 10% unemployed; and
- 66.5% receive some form of public assistance.

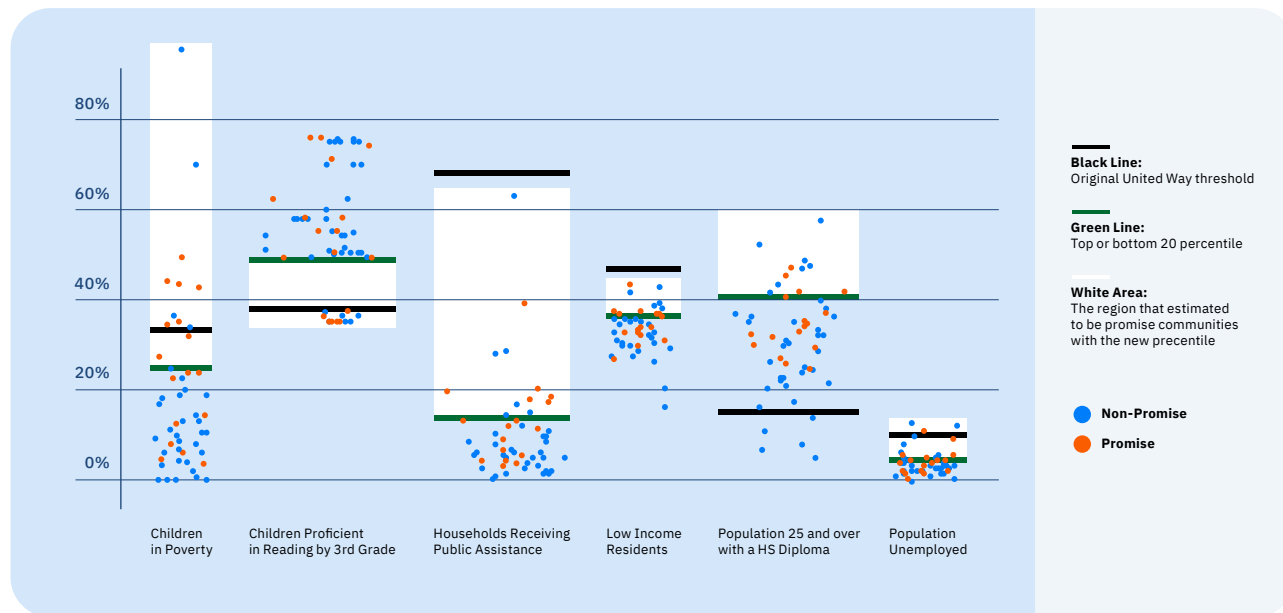
As part of this project, the DWDB worked with the Data Innovation Lab at Tech Impact to deepen its understanding of marginalized communities across the state, analyzing census-tract level data related to educational attainment, levels of poverty, and unemployment, among other key indicators, to identify neighborhoods and communities that are most underserved. This led to a reimagining of the definition of a “Promise Community”, for the DWDB which can lead to a review of priority communities for investment to combat inequity.

The map on the left below illustrates the original “Promise Community” designations made by the United Way, and the updated map by Tech Impact on the right:



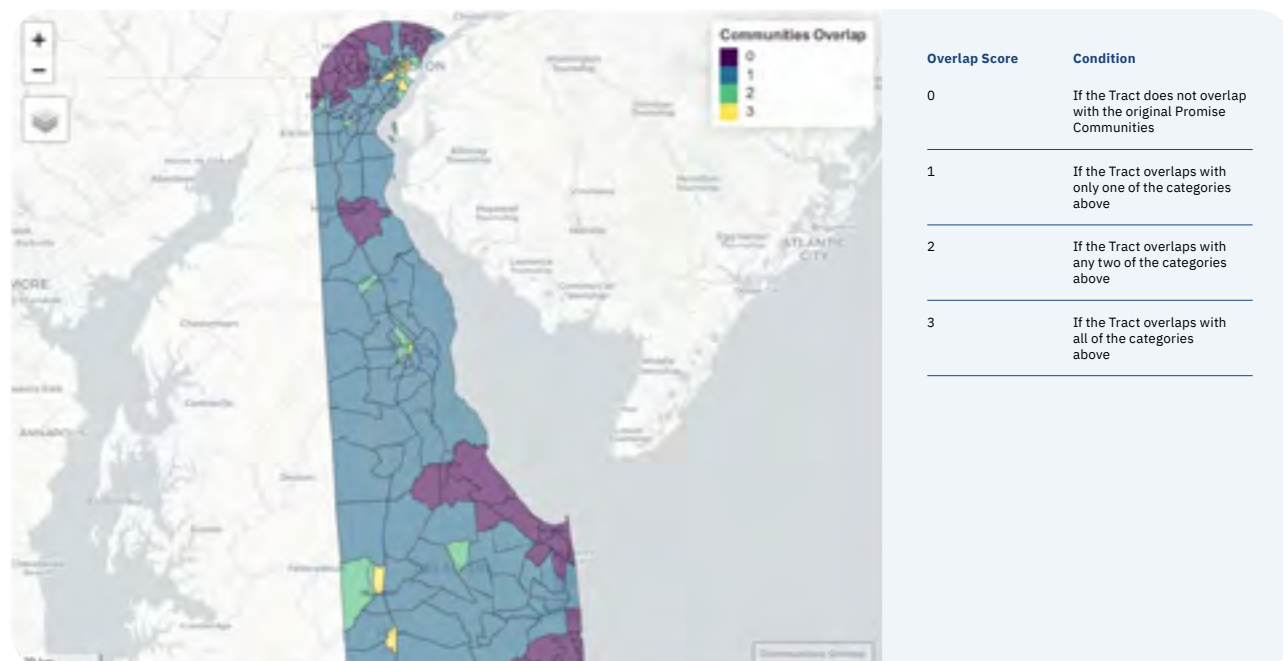
While there is overlap between the two maps, the Promise Zones give a more precise and up-to-date identification of specific communities that experience inequities across the state that could be strategic zones of intervention for workforce and other initiatives seeking to build the economic and social well-being of people across Delaware.

### 2019 Promise Community Variables with Thresholds



### 2019 Promise Communities Overlaps

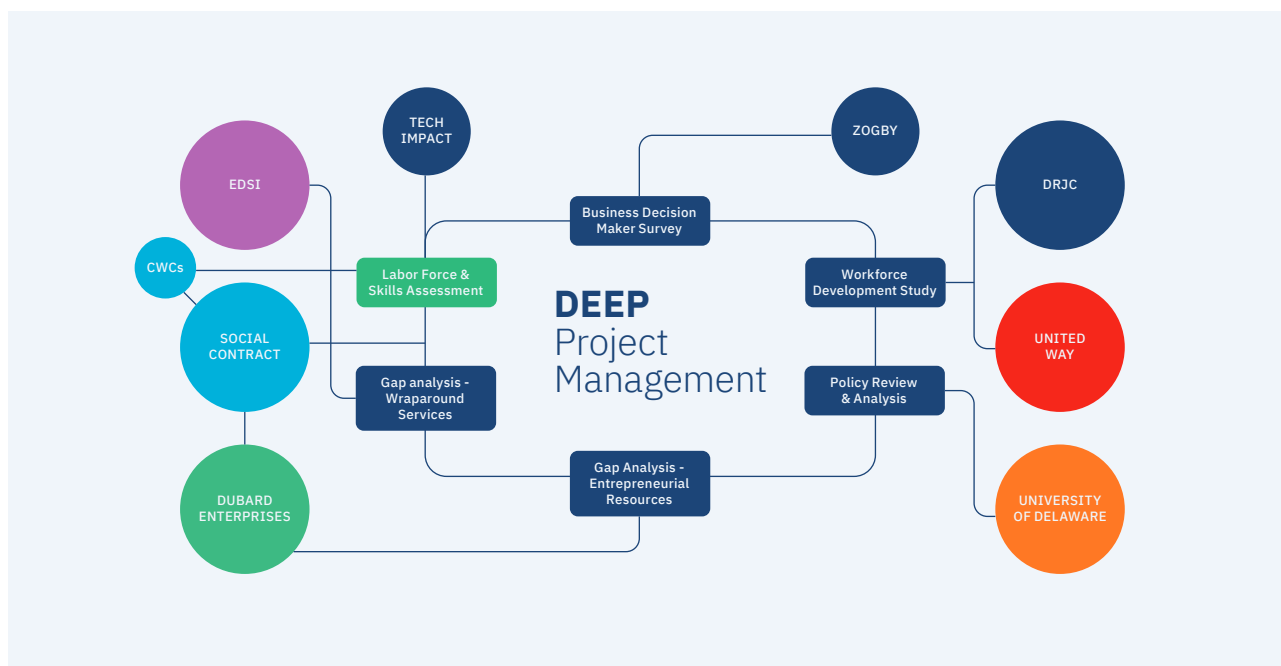
Census tract data was used to compare and visualize any overlap between Promise Communities, Qualified Census Tract (QCT), and Opportunity Zones.





## 4. Understanding the Employment Ecosystem Through an Equity Lens: An Overview of the DEEP Research Workstreams

The Delaware Employment Equity Project consists of six related research projects intended to analyze the state-wide employment ecosystem and identify disparities between and needs of Delaware’s employers and jobseekers, focusing on people living in some of the state’s most marginalized communities. Through these equity-focused assessments and gap analyses of employer needs, labor force skills and desires, entrepreneurial resources, workforce training programs, wraparound services, and workforce policies, we can analyze the delta between current job seeker skills, needs, and desires, and high-demand employer needs, to design effective strategies that increase access to and equity of employment for those in the “Promise Communities” of Delaware.



The following summaries highlight the key findings and top recommendations from each report. Full reports are attached.

### “Delaware Workforce Assessment: A Survey of Business Decision-Makers”

By Zogby Analytics

The “Delaware Workforce Assessment: A Survey of Business Decision-Makers” report, conducted by Zogby Analytics, provides insightful findings from a survey of 251 business leaders across Delaware’s diverse employment sectors. Utilizing both online surveys and live telephone interviews, the study offers a comprehensive view of the state’s employer landscape.

This analysis highlights critical aspects of hiring, including the investment of time and resources in recruitment, the efficacy of different hiring methods, the impacts of COVID-19 on employment practices, and various initiatives aimed at enhancing employee skills. Moreover, the survey highlights significant challenges in recruiting qualified candidates due to a range of obstacles, including limitations in both non-

technical and technical skills among candidates. Other critical gaps identified in the workforce include a lack of self-motivation, communication skills, problem-solving capabilities, attention to detail, and essential computer skills, such as proficiency in Excel and basic data analysis.

Additionally, employers face several barriers when hiring new staff, such as candidates' lack of experience, gaps in salary expectations, scheduling issues, and transportation challenges. Smaller companies (2-10 employees) particularly struggle with candidates' lack of self-motivation and initiative, while larger firms (those with annual revenue of over \$1 million) often encounter challenges with aligning the wage expectations of candidates with actual wages.

## “Advancing Racial Equity in Delaware’s Workforce Development System”

By The Urban Institute

The “Advancing Racial Equity in Delaware’s Workforce Development System” report, prepared by the Urban Institute and sponsored by the United Way of Delaware, offers a comprehensive look at the state’s efforts in workforce development with a focus on racial equity. Through document analysis, stakeholder interviews, and surveys, the study evaluates how well these programs promote racial equity and identifies the challenges facing underserved communities.

The report shared an overview of the activities and experiences of Delaware’s workforce development programs. They note that the programs serve a diverse range of individuals, including underserved communities, people of color, youth, and seniors. Motivations for enrollment in programs include long-term earnings, supportive services, in-demand job alignment, no-cost training, and non-traditional career opportunities. Staff roles involve mentorship, goal setting, job placement, and connecting participants to wraparound services. Some providers build employer relationships to ensure employment. While programs often assist in obtaining relevant jobs and sometimes offer work-based learning, job quality standards vary, and most lack participant input in the initial design. Most organizations that provide programming collect demographic data, but utilization varies.

Recommendations for improving racial equity include developing diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies; enhancing data collection and infrastructure to measure outcomes; increasing diversity by removing barriers to training and careers; centering racial equity in recruitment and services; ensuring access to high-paying jobs; fostering collaboration between providers and intermediaries; and ensuring equitable distribution of funding. Advocacy with policymakers and employers is also emphasized.

The report highlights successful models from other organizations in the United States, such as systemic thinking about racial equity (Chicago Jobs Council), operationalizing inclusion and equity in training programs (Humanim), and accountability through data tracking and transparency (Minnesota Employment and Economic Development Department).

## “Gap Analysis of Wraparound Providers, Programs, and Services”

By EDSi

EDSI’s “Gap Analysis of Wraparound Providers, Programs, and Services” report aims to identify solutions for employment barriers and unequal access to job opportunities. It includes an in-depth analysis of wraparound services in Delaware Promise Communities and surrounding areas and suggests ways to enhance collaboration among employers, training programs, and service providers to better serve both

workers and employers. EDSI assessed Delaware’s service provision landscape, detailing services, their locations, and funding. This included visits to the state’s American Job Centers to understand collaborative practices and co-location of services.

The report reveals challenges like a lack of awareness among providers and job seekers about available services, inefficiencies in referral processes, restricted training access for employers, and poor information sharing among agencies. To overcome these obstacles, EDSI proposes the creation of a detailed service catalog, refinement of referral mechanisms, implementation of a unified data system, and boosting understanding of the Workforce Development Board’s function. These steps are designed to improve service coordination, foster information exchange, and enhance support for Delaware’s job seekers and employers.

## “Assessing the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem in Delaware”

By Social Contract & Dubard Enterprises

The “Assessing the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem in Delaware” report, conducted by Social Contract and Dubard Enterprises, explores the current state of innovation and entrepreneurial support in Delaware, focusing particularly on Promise Communities. The research identified gaps in resources and barriers faced by entrepreneurs, especially those from low-income or historically under-resourced communities. Through a comprehensive methodology involving surveys, interviews, focus groups, and workshops, the project engaged over 165 stakeholders to gain insights into the entrepreneurial landscape, challenges, and opportunities within the state of Delaware.

Despite Delaware’s rich array of resources for entrepreneurs from public, private, and nonprofit sectors, the report uncovers key issues. Importantly, the ecosystem’s fragmented nature makes resource navigation difficult, leading to service inefficiencies and duplications, disproportionately affecting smaller businesses and those from marginalized backgrounds. Another significant obstacle identified is limited access to capital, with financial support failing to inclusively reach the diverse entrepreneurial community.

To address these findings, the report proposes the creation of a centralized entrepreneurship hub to simplify resource access and improve ecosystem coordination. It also recommends developing a strong mentor and investor network to support a diverse range of entrepreneurs and integrating entrepreneurial education into workforce development strategies. These measures aim to foster a supportive culture for innovation and business creation, enhancing Delaware’s entrepreneurial ecosystem for all.

## “Labor Skills Assessment Survey”

By Social Contract

The “Labor Skills Assessment Survey,” administered by Social Contract, focuses on assessing the skill sets and employment interests within Delaware Promise Communities. This initiative seeks to understand job-related skills, employment status, and areas for training and growth.

Through the deployment of surveys with approximately 300 people and follow-up focus groups, the study provides a deep dive into the employment landscape across marginalized communities. Key findings reveal a significant unemployment rate among respondents at 26%, which starkly contrasts with the state’s average of 4%. Employment of respondents is concentrated in sectors such as healthcare, education, and management while noting the industries like food and hospitality where many currently unemployed respondents last worked.

Notably, the report also reveals that over a quarter of the surveyed individuals have participated in workforce training, primarily focusing on soft skills and sector-specific skills such as healthcare and educational training. However, feedback suggests a need for more comprehensive training programs that offer better content, support, and follow-up.

When it comes to searching for opportunities, Participants use a variety of methods with many favoring online job sites and personal networks. The study notes that the biggest barriers to obtaining ideal jobs include insufficient skills or training, lack of transportation, socio-emotional skills, criminal history, and lack of childcare.

To address these insights, the report recommends enhancing the availability and quality of training programs, improving job-matching services, and fostering closer ties between community members, local workforce development actors, and employers. The focus group discussions pointed to a strong interest in advancing within current careers or transitioning to fields like human services, technology, and education. The participants voiced a clear desire for more accessible and relevant training opportunities that align with their career aspirations.

## **“Landscape Analysis” of State Policies Related to Workforce Development**

By The University of Delaware’s Institute for Public Administration

The “Landscape Analysis” report by the Institute for Public Administration focuses on state policies related to workforce development, specifically examining the Delaware Workforce Development Board (DWDB) and its partner agencies. Aimed at identifying policy overlaps, misalignments, and opportunities for enhanced collaboration, the analysis reviewed over 180 federal and state-level policies and included interviews with representatives from 16 DWDB partner agencies.

The review identified several critical issues: 10 policies were outdated or duplicated, and 26 exhibited significant gaps or misalignments. Additionally, 15 policies were pinpointed as offering opportunities for future collaboration and alignment, underscoring the need for regular updates and reviews to ensure policies are relevant and effective.

Data-sharing issues, including concerns around data platforms and privacy, were frequently mentioned by agency partners. Furthermore, interviews revealed gaps in formal policy documentation for partnerships and a lack of comprehensive understanding among agencies regarding support for people with disabilities and the integration of financial literacy within the workforce system.

The report recommends that agencies update redundant and outdated policies and enhance interagency collaboration to improve information sharing and service integration across health, housing, and education sectors. Advocating for technological solutions, such as a universal data system, the report emphasizes the importance of keeping policy documents current and providing ongoing training for agency staff. These strategies are designed to foster a cohesive and effective approach to meeting the workforce development needs in Delaware.

## 5. Cross-cutting Findings that Impact the Equitable Access to Employment Across the State

### Introduction

This section synthesizes insights from multiple studies to illuminate the multifaceted challenges within Delaware’s workforce ecosystems. It provides a detailed examination of both individual barriers and systemic issues affecting access to training and employment, highlighting their interconnected nature and proposing strategic actions for effective resolution. By addressing these layers comprehensively, Delaware can foster an environment where collaboration and efficiency are paramount, ultimately leading to a more equitable and prosperous workforce.

### Barriers to success and access exist at every level of the ecosystem

#### Finding 1: Challenges accessing resources and supports related to geography and poverty are persistent across the state

In Delaware, the workforce ecosystem is hindered by significant barriers that impede individuals’ capacity to fully participate and succeed. The primary obstacles identified are related to accessing essential services such as transportation and childcare services, which are pivotal for individuals’ effective workforce engagement.

A notable concern across the state, particularly in Kent and Sussex counties, is the scarcity of accessible transportation. This issue is highlighted by 26% of business leaders, who recognize transportation challenges as a major hurdle to employment, according to the business decision-makers survey. The lack of reliable transportation not only impacts hiring but also affects current employees’ ability to maintain their positions.

Moreover, the “Advancing Racial Equity in Delaware’s Workforce Development System” report underscores that unreliable transportation severely limits participants’ ability to access training and job opportunities. This barrier is echoed in the responses from the Labor Skills Assessment Survey, where 86% of all respondents cited transportation challenges as a significant obstacle to securing an ideal job. This was especially notable among those employed in the healthcare, counseling, food, and hospitality sectors.

In all but one report, childcare was mentioned as another critical barrier, profoundly impacting participants from economically disadvantaged backgrounds’ ability to engage fully in training and employment opportunities. Despite efforts by wraparound service providers to link participants to childcare services, a crucial funding shortfall persists. Many agencies facilitating these connections lack the necessary financial resources and infrastructure to meet the demand. This issue is particularly acute for organizations in Kent and Sussex counties, which face significant challenges with funding availability and accessibility.

#### Finding 2: Gaps detected between priority skill areas required for modern jobs in Delaware and individual skill sets of people living in marginalized communities

Through the research, key barriers around skills and training that impact workforce participation are identified, beginning with the foundational issue of education. The “Advancing Racial Equity in Delaware’s Workforce Development System” report pinpoints the level and quality of prior education as a significant barrier, noting that inadequate educational backgrounds prevent individuals from being adequately prepared for their desired career paths. This foundational gap sets the stage for further challenges in the workforce.

Expanding on this challenge, the Labor Skills Assessment Survey illuminates a notable gap perceived by those searching for work, between the current skills of workforce participants and the demands of modern jobs. Additionally, the Business Decision-makers Survey results highlight a lack of both technical and soft skills—such as self-motivation, communication, and problem-solving— as barriers to recruitment and employment. These gaps not only reflect the disparity between the skills needed by employers and those available in the workforce but also highlight the consensus on this challenge between both job seekers and employers.

Finally, there is a noted demand for more support throughout the job application process, as indicated by the Labor Skills Assessment Focus Groups. Applicants need more comprehensive assistance, including specialized training and insights into modern hiring practices, to navigate the increasingly complex job market effectively.

Collectively, these barriers—ranging from educational and skill deficits to the need for greater career support—form a daunting landscape for those seeking to enter or advance within the workforce. These challenges underscore the critical areas across the ecosystem that need attention to improve employment outcomes and workforce readiness.

### **Systemic Obstacles Reinforce Workforce Barriers**

The barriers identified in the report are not isolated but are significantly intensified by a network of systemic issues that contribute to the challenges faced by individuals in Delaware’s workforce landscape.

#### **Finding 3: Allocation of resources across the ecosystem has resulted in redundancy and duplication of workforce-related wraparound services:**

The reports collectively spotlight the inefficiencies stemming from uncoordinated resource deployment. The competition for funding exacerbates inefficiencies, promoting a competitive rather than a collaborative environment. This competitive landscape stifles the potential for unified efforts toward common goals, particularly affecting training and employment initiatives in Promise Communities.

In Delaware’s employment service sectors, inefficient resource allocation is a challenge that stems from the fragmentation of efforts and a competitive funding landscape. This inefficiency manifests in redundancy, inconsistency, and a dilution of potential impact, leading to suboptimal outcomes for the community and service providers alike. For instance, as highlighted in the wraparound services report, multiple agencies often compete for the same pool of limited community resources, which could otherwise support expansive and inclusive service provision. This competition not only dilutes the effectiveness of resources but also hinders the ability of providers to deliver comprehensive support to those in need. Similarly, within workforce development, the competitive nature of funding opportunities compels organizations to operate in silos, striving independently for financial support rather than collaborating, which could maximize impact and resource utilization. In the entrepreneurial sector, this challenge is evident when different startup support programs independently seek funding for similar initiatives without awareness of each other’s activities, leading to redundancy and inconsistency in the support offered to entrepreneurs.

#### **Finding 4: Silos between and within agencies create bottlenecks and inefficiencies**

Silos result in isolated operations where organizations operate without coherent strategies or shared information. Simultaneously, data silos within each agency and organization hinder the seamless flow of essential information, complicating both service delivery and decision-making processes.

A clear manifestation of these challenges is seen in wraparound service provision, where agencies lack a unified view of a client's history, resulting in disjointed support and inefficient resource utilization. Similarly, in the entrepreneurial sector, the lack of a coordinated flow of information among support organizations leads to inconsistent and often ineffective support for entrepreneurs, diminishing the overall impact of the entrepreneurial support ecosystem.

**Finding 5: Resource disparities create further barriers to access training and employment across the State**

Significant geographic disparities exacerbate systemic issues within the workforce development ecosystem. Employment and training resources and opportunities are heavily concentrated in urban areas, such as Wilmington, leaving rural counties like Kent and Sussex markedly underserved. This uneven distribution not only affects access to training and employment opportunities but also hampers the provision of entrepreneurial support, creating regional imbalances that stifle economic growth in non-urban areas. On a positive note, these disparities are not noted in the distribution of wraparound services across the state, nor in the distribution of identified structural or social barriers to employment, meaning that the infrastructure to provide social services that can support sustained employment already exists statewide.

**Finding 6: Historic inequities in marginalized communities lead to barriers to access and entry into the workforce ecosystem**

Historic inequities remain a significant factor in restricting opportunities for minority groups. Racial biases, language barriers, and a shortage of culturally relevant resources inhibit the full participation of many individuals in workforce activities. For example, non-English speaking entrepreneurs encounter considerable obstacles due to service offerings that do not meet their linguistic and cultural requirements, hindering their access to essential support and resources. Furthermore, marginalized communities, including people of color, immigrant populations, people in rural areas, and people living in poverty, have historically been excluded from traditional networks and spaces of power and access, both by design as well as by omission. These include formal education systems, business associations, and financial institutions. Unless a concerted effort is made to bring these groups closer to these spaces and networks, they will remain at the margins.

## **6. Pathways for Improvement: Strategic Recommendations for the Delaware Workforce Development Board**

Collectively, these issues underscore the necessity for a more integrated approach to addressing the barriers to workforce participation and economic activity in Delaware. As we move towards recommendations, it is crucial to consider strategies that not only tackle these individual and systemic barriers in isolation but also look at the workforce ecosystem holistically to foster an environment where collaboration, inclusivity, and efficiency are at the forefront of workforce development efforts. This holistic view is essential for crafting innovative solutions that can improve the overall quality of services and align workforce capabilities with the needs of the economy, thus ensuring a more equitable and prosperous future for all Delawareans.

These recommendations consider the current role and capacity of the Delaware Workforce Development Board in the employment ecosystem, as well as a potential future role that the Board might play within a more connected and holistic system. They also consider current and emerging workforce initiatives and reports in Delaware and around the country.

In particular, the findings in this project validate and elevate those described in the “*Delaware Investment Agenda*” from the Delaware Business Roundtable, which highlight systemic challenges that families face

in obtaining employment, the growing demand for innovative workforce training programs and , as well as the need for increased outreach to expand entrepreneurship and employment opportunities. Several of the following recommendations build on the recommendations from the “Agenda” and will add value to many of the proposed strategies in that report. They also reflect the findings and recommendations from the White House’s 2023 “Workforce Development Roadmap” which describes the administration’s priorities for workforce training and development funding and infrastructure.

**1. Build a Knowledge Management infrastructure across the Workforce Ecosystem that considers equitable access to key knowledge and information for all stakeholders, including employers, workforce development staff, wraparound service providers, and members of the workforce.**

Efficient storage, sharing, and meaningful use of information and knowledge that is required by multiple agencies and actors in the employment ecosystem requires an explicit knowledge management strategy. Knowledge management is the systematic organization, capture, and dissemination of insights, expertise, and best practices across an organization or network. It encompasses the development of processes, technologies, and cultural norms that facilitate the creation, transfer, and utilization of knowledge assets. Effective knowledge management fosters innovation, enhances decision-making, and enables continuous learning and improvement within an organization or ecosystem.

The Board is well-positioned to convene and lead the participatory design of an ecosystem-wide knowledge management strategy that leverages the collective expertise of key partners, considering the unique knowledge and information needs and goals of each. The strategy will include proposals for knowledge-sharing platforms, training programs, and collaborative projects aimed at addressing current challenges and seizing emerging opportunities in the workforce landscape, including those detected in the DEEP research. Additionally, the strategy will prioritize the design and implementation of technology-driven solutions to facilitate seamless information exchange and collaboration among partners, while considering data privacy and security issues. This approach will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of workforce development initiatives and foster a culture of continuous learning and adaptation within the employment ecosystem, ultimately leading to a more equitable employment landscape, sustainable economic growth and prosperity.

Finally, should the State act on the “*Delaware Investment Agenda*” recommendation to relocate the DWDB to the governor’s office, the Board will be in an optimal position to convene diverse partners for the design and implementation of such a strategy that would impact, and enhance, the operations and outcomes of agencies and programs across the state.

**2. Expand and enhance connections between the workforce, community organizations, employers, and workforce development agencies to support building new, non-traditional support networks, mentorship, and references.**

Word of mouth and networking are two of the most important means of receiving and transmitting key information and messages related to employment opportunities and entrepreneurial resources in the state. Marginalized communities have been historically excluded from high-impact engagement with employers and resources due to cultural differences, segregated communities and networks, and socioeconomic barriers to access, such as transportation and childcare.

The Workforce Development Board has the opportunity to expand its existing business liaison program to broaden connections between employers and training providers to community partners and members. By establishing meaningful partnerships with local community organizations, the liaisons will be able to expand the workforce network, bringing information, jobs, resources, and training closer to the



marginalized communities that need them the most. At the same time, through these closer connections with local organizations and leaders, the Workforce Development Board will be better positioned to provide comprehensive, community-centered support to new businesses entering the state.

The “*Workforce Development Roadmap*” aligns with this recommendation, as well. The Roadmap’s emphasis on expanding equitable access to education and training, fostering public-private partnerships, and integrating support services such as childcare into comprehensive workforce strategies, reflects a commitment to building robust and inclusive networks. Non-traditional mentorship and reference networks will ensure that diverse talent is cultivated and connected to well-paying, sustainable jobs, across various sectors.

### **3. Support innovative, on-site workforce training programs that center on eliminating barriers to opportunities and promoting career growth and wealth generation in historically marginalized communities.**

The majority of survey respondents expressed interest in career growth within their current fields, including medical/counseling, education, and administration/business, while also describing interrelated challenges to achieving such growth including training, transportation, and child care. The Workforce Development Board has the opportunity to support the development of innovative training programs that not only build soft and technical skills in priority industries but also address barriers either by connecting with existing service providers to facilitate access for participants or by incorporating wraparound services into training programs.

This recommendation aligns with the findings and recommendations from the *Delaware Investment Agenda* as well as with the White House’s *Workforce Development Roadmap*. Both of these reports reference challenges that families face in accessing training and employment and recommend developing more integrated and innovative workforce programs that can support greater access and inclusivity for job seekers while also bringing high-demand skill training in priority areas to communities with the most need for training, and the most potential for filling the current employment gaps.

### **4. Continue to provide leadership in the revision and re-definition of priority communities.**

This project provided the opportunity for the Delaware Workforce Development Board to examine priority community designation metrics and status with the support of the Data Innovation Lab (DIL) at Tech Impact. Through a redefinition of key metrics to determine levels of marginalization and need, DIL and the DWDB were able to gain a more precise understanding of which neighborhoods and communities are most in need of targeted support and resources.

The DWDB should disseminate the proposed methodology for the redefinition of “Promise Communities”, as well as the maps with the most current data, with its partners and stakeholders, and encourage them to consider these adapted criteria in their targeted efforts to address equity in employment across the state.

### **5. Leverage the data collected through this project to build directories and databases.**

The DWDB can leverage the different matrices of resources about the workforce development ecosystem that were developed for this project, to create comprehensive libraries and applications that serve the ecosystem and communities. By systematically organizing and digitizing these resource matrices, and updating them regularly through collaboration with partners, the Board can increase access to essential services and resources for community members, facilitate connections between employers, service providers, training programs, and the labor force; use the data to inform policy recommendations and

advocate for additional resources and support; and ensure that Delaware’s workforce ecosystem resources align with local and national priorities and best practices.

This resource library would be an integral part of the knowledge management strategy, described above, with the strategy defining the “how”, “where”, and “what for”, for the meaningful use of data, information, and knowledge across the ecosystem.

## **6. Support the design of a state-wide workforce research strategy that includes the implementation of a business decision-makers survey and labor force engagement and assessments regularly.**

The research conducted through this project is critical for Delaware if the state aims to enhance employment equity over the next several years. To ensure sustainability we recommend the development of a state-wide workforce research strategy that continues this work periodically so that policymakers, state agencies, and the Workforce Development Board will have access to essential and up-to-date data and insights to make informed decisions regarding employment practices. The regular implementation of a business decision-makers survey will provide key information on the needs, challenges, and opportunities faced by employers in the state. This data can guide the development of policies and programs that promote fair employment practices, reduce discrimination, and enhance diversity and inclusion in the workforce.

Incorporating regular and systematic labor force engagement and assessments into the research strategy is crucial for Delaware to center community members in the development of successful workforce policies. By actively involving community members in the assessment process, policymakers can gain valuable data and insights directly from those impacted by employment practices and policies. These engagements will not only enable the state to monitor the effectiveness of its employment initiatives but also ensure that the voices of marginalized groups are heard in shaping policy decisions. Through continuous data collection on demographics, hiring practices, and workplace dynamics, Delaware can collaborate with community members to identify disparities, address barriers to employment and training, and implement tailored interventions that foster a more inclusive and equitable workforce for all residents.

## **7. Conclusions**

The Delaware Employment Equity Project (DEEP) has been an innovative initiative aimed at better understanding the Delaware workforce ecosystem and identifying opportunities for the Workforce Development Board to improve equity in employment, particularly for people living in the state’s Promise Communities. The research conducted through DEEP has shed light on various challenges and barriers faced by both employers and job seekers, offering key insights for policymakers and the Delaware Workforce Development Board to make informed decisions. By focusing on stakeholders from across the employment ecosystem, including employers, training programs, wraparound service providers, and residents of the state, DEEP has facilitated a deeper understanding of the workforce dynamics and disparities within Delaware. Through this multi-faceted approach, strategic recommendations have emerged to prioritize knowledge management, foster connections between stakeholders, support innovative training programs, redefine priority communities, leverage collected data, and establish a state-wide workforce research strategy. These recommendations are critical steps toward fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous workforce in Delaware.

By acknowledging and tackling persistent issues such as resource disparities, skill gaps, barriers such as transportation and child care, fragmentation of efforts and information, and systemic inequities and exclusion, the DWDB and its partners can work towards creating a more efficient workforce ecosystem

in the state. The insights that have emerged from the Delaware Employment Equity Project provide a roadmap for enhancing collaboration among stakeholders, prioritizing community members' voices in workforce decision making, and fostering a culture of equity, information sharing, and empowerment within Delaware's employment ecosystem.

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