PATHWAYS *TO* GOVERNMENT

Building clear, coordinated pathways into public service careers across the Triangle region through cross-sector partnership and a shared commitment to economic opportunity for all.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Central North Carolina's Research Triangle is one of the nation's fastest-growing and most dynamic regions. Each day, new residents arrive drawn by its strong labor market, world-class universities and healthcare systems, entrepreneurial ecosystem, and quality of life. Yet, the rapid growth that fuels regional prosperity is placing strain on the public systems that sustain it.

Behind every safe roadway, clean water system, vibrant park, and responsive emergency service is a local government workforce ensuring essential services are delivered with care and reliability. As demand for public services accelerates, local governments across the Triangle are facing compounding workforce pressures, including persistent vacancies, outdated hiring systems, an aging workforce, and increased competition from private sector employers.

At the same time, local government represents one of the region's most underrecognized opportunities to advance economic mobility. As the second largest employment sector in the region, nearly half of local government roles do not require a bachelor's degree, and many provide stable wages, benefits, retirement security, and structured advancement pathways. For community college graduates, apprentices, and career switchers, public service can serve as a pathway to long-term economic security.

This report presents findings from a focused field research effort commissioned by the United Way of the Greater Triangle (UWGT) and carried out in collaboration with the Raleigh Innovation Team (i-team) and Central Pines Regional Council. The research builds directly on the work of the Pathways to Government (P2G) team from the Greater Triangle Workforce Leadership Academy, launched in partnership by United Way of the Greater Triangle and the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program.

Together, we set out to explore a foundational question: **Where is the greatest opportunity for building inclusive, sustainable career pathways into local government employment?**

Core Insight

Local governments in the Triangle are not simply service providers — they are underleveraged anchor employers and powerful engines of economic mobility. Although the region does not lack talent, it does lack the coordinated infrastructure needed to connect apprenticeship systems, community colleges, and feeder industries to high-opportunity public sector careers.

The central insight of this research is clear: local governments are critical service providers and anchor employers with the potential to function as coordinated workforce development engines.

Although the Triangle has an abundance of talent and training programs, it lacks strong connectivity and alignment across siloed systems that prepare, credential, and hire homegrown talent. By modernizing hiring practices, embedding skills-based approaches, expanding apprenticeship programs, and strengthening regional coordination, local governments can reduce operational strain while expanding access to stable, purpose-driven careers.

With employer leadership, shared data, and focused regional pilots, Central North Carolina can build a replicable model that strengthens public service capacity while expanding access to economic opportunity.

The goal is not simply to reduce vacancy rates; it is to strengthen public sector talent systems by advancing regional economic mobility, public innovation, and long-term civic capacity.

INTRODUCTION, PURPOSE & PROCESS

This research builds on the Aspen Workforce Leadership Academy and the Pathways to Government (P2G) pitch, which identified a convergence of challenges facing local governments across the Triangle: high vacancy rates, underrepresentation of frontline communities, lengthy hiring processes, and high turnover. These challenges are systemic, interconnected, and increasingly urgent as the region's population and service demands continue to grow.

P2G proposed that clear, supportive routes into public sector jobs could be strengthened by adopting best practices from proven national models, locally informed research, cross-sector partnerships, and skills-based hiring and advancement strategies.

The findings in this report are grounded in a mixed-methods research design that included surveys of local HR leaders, in-depth interviews, labor flow analysis, and desk research. Inquiries were structured around these core questions:

1. **Which roles are the highest need and hardest to fill—and why?**
2. **What skills are most transferable from other industries, yet often missing in applicant pools?**
3. **What workforce pressures are HR leaders anticipating in 2026 and beyond?**
4. **How do hiring and advancement pathways compare across the Triangle?**
5. **What solutions and partnership strategies are local governments best positioned to pilot regionally?**

Throughout this research, we have heard from dedicated and hardworking city and county staff who face daily challenges with resilience and purpose. Their commitment to delivering the high-quality services that residents demand and deserve is inspiring and can serve as a catalyst for recruiting and retaining the next generation of public servants.

Why P2G?

When essential public roles remain vacant, service delivery slows, staff burnout increases, and public trust erodes. P2G intervenes by coordinating regionally to make public service careers easier to see, access, and succeed in — linking community colleges, apprenticeships, and feeder industries to local government hiring pathways.

REGIONAL LABOR MARKET CONTEXT

North Carolina's Triangle region is one of the most dynamic labor markets in the United States. Anchored by major research institutions in Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill, the broader region encompasses more than 2 million residents and consistently ranks among the nation's leaders in economic growth, innovation, and quality of life. Yet, the prosperity generated by this growth is not evenly distributed.

By traditional indicators, the region is highly educated and economically competitive. In Wake, Durham, and Orange counties, between 75 and 80 percent of residents hold a postsecondary credential or degree. In neighboring counties such as Johnston and Lee, credential or degree attainment drops to 53 percent and 41 percent, respectively, highlighting meaningful differences in access to opportunity across the region. These disparities are reflected in income levels as well, with the median household income ranging from over $107,000 in Wake County to below $73,000 in Lee County. *Additional data are available on the MyFutureNC Dashboard.*

From 2016 to 2023, the income gap between out-of-state and North Carolina-born residents increased by 68 percent, making birthplace an increasingly strong predictor of earnings.

Rising housing costs and strong demand for highly educated workers have intensified competition for talent across sectors. High-growth industries such as technology, healthcare, and life sciences offer premium wages and clear advancement pathways. Public sector employers, operating within fixed compensation structures and constrained budgets, must compete within this increasingly competitive labor market while continuing to deliver essential public services.

Within this broader context, local governments play a distinctive and often underrecognized role in the regional economy.

Local Governments as Regional Anchor Employers

Across both urban and rural communities, public institutions serve as consistent economic stabilizers. While private sector innovation often dominates regional economic narratives, local governments remain among the Triangle's largest and most stable employers. Roughly half of the over 150,000 public sector workers in the region are employed by local government, and nearly half of these roles do not require a bachelor's degree.

Local governments across the region collectively employ over 4,000 workers in positions that do not require a bachelor's degree, underscoring the sector's potential as a skills-first employer of choice.

In a region defined by high educational attainment, public employers provide pathways that combine stable wages, benefits, and opportunities for advancement within and outside of the public sector. Many mission-critical roles—including utilities operators, maintenance technicians, inspectors, and public safety personnel—depend less on academic credentials and more on technical training, occupational certifications, and applied experience. These workers form the operational backbone of local communities, maintaining infrastructure and ensuring the reliable delivery of public services.

Viewed through a workforce lens, local governments are not only service providers but also have the power as employers to strengthen regional economic mobility. For high school and community college graduates, apprenticeship completers, and mid-career workers seeking stability, public service can offer a pathway to sustained economic security.

Transferable Skills Across Sectors

Workers regularly transition into public administration from industries where many of the same technical, operational, and interpersonal skills are cultivated. Labor flow data suggest that these transitions are already occurring and could be strengthened and better coordinated.

Between 2023 and 2024, U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) data suggest that the largest feeder industry into public administration jobs in the Triangle is healthcare and social assistance, followed by administrative services, retail trade, and educational services.

These transitions reflect an existing but underleveraged skills pipeline. Many of the competencies required for public sector roles are widely developed across adjacent industries, including:

- **Mechanical troubleshooting and systems diagnostics** (from construction and manufacturing)
- **Customer interaction and de-escalation** (from retail and healthcare support)
- **Documentation and compliance workflows** (from administrative and professional services)
- **Crew coordination and physical site management** (from landscaping and facilities maintenance)
- **Care coordination and family navigation** (from community health and social services)

Taken together, these competencies represent a substantial but underleveraged regional talent pool. While the skills required for many public service roles already exist across the broader labor market, it can be difficult to effectively translate private sector experience into a public sector job offer.

Survey responses suggest that public employers are eager to modernize recruitment through AI-powered sourcing tools, trade-specific job boards, and stronger connections with community college pipelines. However, the regional infrastructure needed to coordinate these efforts remains underdeveloped.

For workers in retail, healthcare support, hospitality, or administrative roles, public employment can offer a transition into stable, family-sustaining careers. For early-career workers, it provides an accessible entry point into the labor market. For mid-career professionals, it offers security, benefits, and mission-driven work. For policymakers, it represents a lever for strengthening workforce equity, civic capacity, and public trust.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS & SYSTEMIC FRICTIONS

Survey findings clarified why certain roles are persistently difficult to fill. Vacancies stem from a combination of market pressures and institutional design choices that narrow applicant pools and slow hiring timelines.

Top 4 Drivers of Vacancy Strain		
Factor	**Description**	**Share of Respondents Citing as Primary Driver**
Skills gaps	Applicants lack the required competencies or professional skills.	**21%**
Compensation competition	Private sector employers frequently offer higher starting wages, and local governments frequently compete with each other for the same talent.	**19%**
Limited applicant pool	Fewer individuals are entering or completing training in fields such as electrical, nursing, horticulture, and public safety.	**19%**
Credential barriers	Formal degree or licensing requirements narrow eligibility, even where transferable skills exist.	**13%**

Interviews illuminated how these factors manifest in practice. Local governments across the Triangle face interconnected structural frictions embedded in hiring systems, regional workforce infrastructure, and an increasingly competitive labor market. These drivers operate at multiple levels: market competition, institutional design, workforce infrastructure, and perception.

Hiring Systems Built for Compliance, Not Agility

Local government hiring systems prioritize legal compliance, equity safeguards, and risk mitigation. These protections are essential to maintaining public accountability and trust. Yet, when layered together, what may appear as a reasonable safeguard often results in delays and rigidity that reduce the competitiveness of government employers in a fast-moving labor market.

Multi-layered approval processes, background checks, and new state fingerprinting mandates can extend hiring cycles and increase hiring costs. In contrast, private sector employers frequently complete hiring within weeks. As a result, candidates with transferable skills or in-demand certifications often accept alternative offers before local government hiring processes are completed.

Interviewees also described an "unspoken expectation" of prior government experience. Although many job descriptions technically allow experience to substitute for formal education, degrees are often used as signals of professionalism, communication ability, or problem-solving skills. When degrees are used as proxies, qualified candidates with applied experiences may be screened out unnecessarily. This dynamic disproportionately affects community college graduates, career switchers, immigrants with foreign credentials, formerly incarcerated individuals, and adults pivoting industries.

Credential & Certification Challenges

Licensing and certification standards—such as journeyman credentials, Basic Law Enforcement Training (BLET), Fire Academy completion, pesticide licensing, nursing credentials, and Commercial Driver's Licenses (CDLs)—are both necessary and difficult to source. Candidates who meet these qualifications are competitive across sectors and frequently command higher wages outside government. In some cases, inconsistent regional policies compound the challenge: one locality may sponsor CDL attainment post-hire, while another requires it as a precondition for employment. Variability across jurisdictions creates confusion for applicants and friction for workers seeking to move between local governments, effectively shrinking the viable talent pool.

The issue is rarely intentional exclusion; rather, it's more often a reflection of institutional inertia. When hiring timelines, credential scarcity, inconsistent standards, and degree signaling interact, they collectively narrow applicant pools and limit government's ability to compete for top talent.

Fragmented Recruitment & Insular Talent Pipelines

Recruitment efforts across local governments remain largely decentralized and reactive. While some communities host job fairs or attend campus events, conversion rates into hard-to-fill operational roles remain extremely low. At the same time, community colleges, workforce boards, apprenticeship programs, and youth employment initiatives operate robust training systems, but are disconnected from local government hiring processes.

The result is fragmentation: training programs exist but are disconnected from public employment pathways, and public vacancies persist despite the availability of technical programs. Survey respondents emphasized this point by listing governmentjobs.com and referrals as their top sourcing channels, while none had tapped into apprenticeship graduates as a possible talent pool.

Fragmentation limits scale and access for nontraditional candidates whose skills are developed outside formal pathways.

Perception Gaps & Generational Shifts

A recurring theme across interviews was a generational shift in how public sector employment is perceived. Older generations often associate government work with stability and prestige. Younger workers tend to prioritize alignment with personal values, workplace culture, flexibility, and visible impact.

Many early-career workers aren't aware of the breadth of government career options, particularly in roles such as utilities, inspections, or infrastructure management. Public service work is essential but often invisible. Broader perceptions of bureaucracy, "red tape," and public scrutiny further shape people's understanding of what it means to work in government, especially public-facing roles.

Without intentional narrative-building, local government is too often viewed as procedural rather than mission-driven. This perception gap limits recruitment among emerging talent.

Professional Readiness & Retention Infrastructure

Employers consistently cited gaps in "soft" skills and professional readiness. While certifications typically focus on technical knowledge, essential skills like collaboration, communication, adaptability, and creative problem-solving are rarely viewed as teachable.

Supervisors emphasized that hiring precision is critical, particularly given the complexity of public sector termination processes. Yet, structured onboarding, professional development, and advancement pathways are not consistently embedded across local governments, and are especially absent in small communities without adequate structure and resources.

Wake Tech's tailored soft skills partnership with the Town of Cary demonstrates that community colleges can design employer-responsive curricula. However, we found that this effort is an isolated episode, rather than a standardized practice. Without sustained investment in professional development, local governments risk perpetuating an ongoing cycle of turnover and stagnation.

Compensation Constraints & Market Competition

The Triangle's economic structure intensifies competition for talent. Dominant sectors like healthcare and technology offer competitive wages and clear advancement pathways, while public employers often struggle to match private sector starting salaries, particularly in utilities, IT, and human services roles.

Although government employers typically provide long-term benefits and retirement security, these benefits may not attract younger workers who prioritize immediate compensation and flexibility. Rising housing costs compound this challenge, making it increasingly difficult for frontline workers to live near job centers.

Compensation is not the sole driver of vacancy strain, but it interacts with hiring speed, credential requirements, and perception to shape overall competitiveness.

Structural Exclusion & Untapped Talent

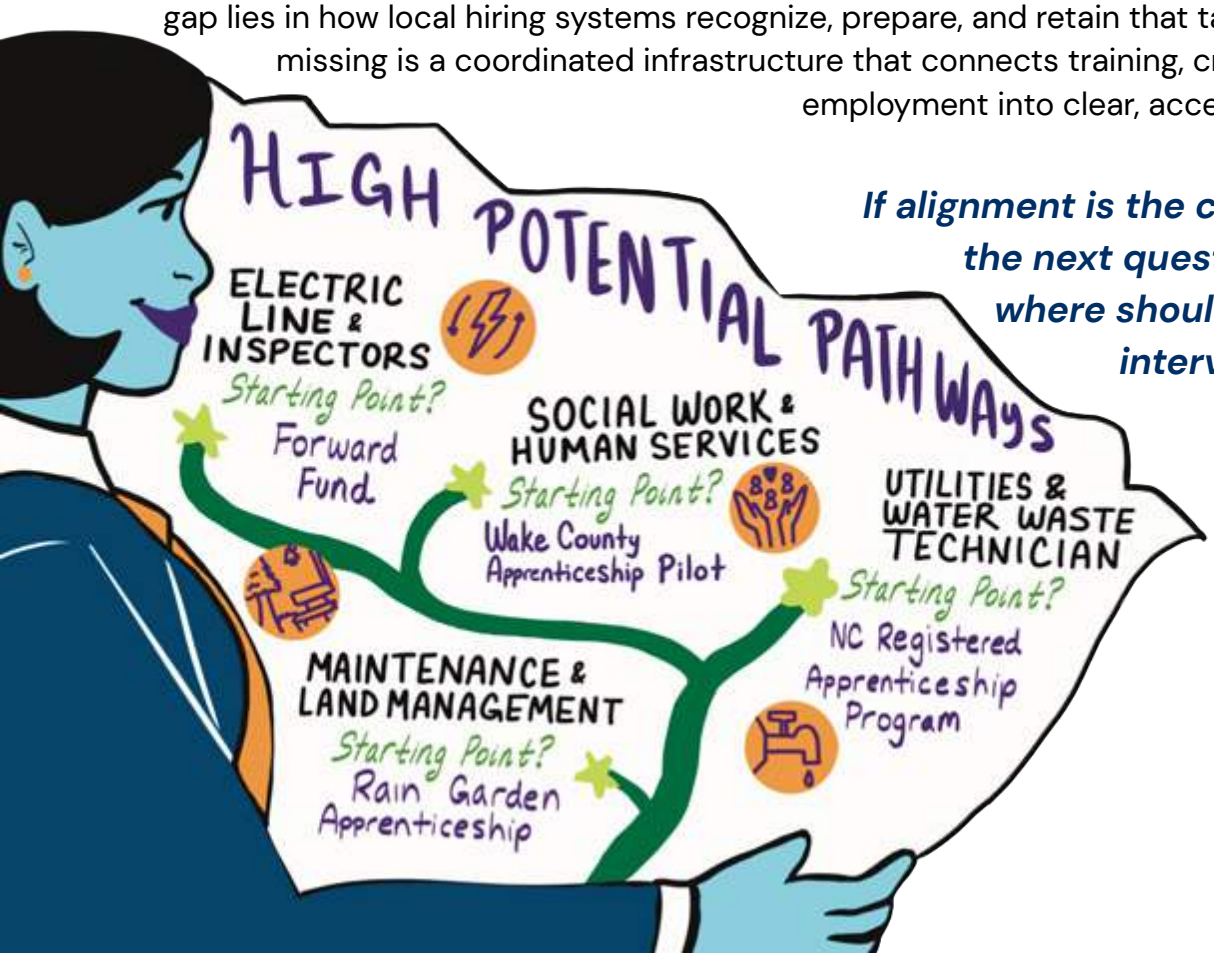
Persistent barriers continue to limit access for certain populations, including formerly incarcerated individuals, immigrants with foreign credentials, adults re-entering the workforce, and individuals with nontraditional educational pathways.

Formerly incarcerated individuals may perform government-contracted labor while incarcerated, yet face significant barriers to employment upon release. Inclusive hiring initiatives often depend on individual champions, but when leadership changes, momentum can stall.

More broadly, the workforce ecosystem lacks consistent systems for recognizing skills gained through military service, caregiving, gig work, or community leadership. As one stakeholder observed, "People gain skills through many life experiences, but those skills aren't always valued equally during the hiring process."

Taken together, these systemic frictions suggest that the Triangle's workforce challenge is driven less by talent scarcity than by systemic misalignment. The region has substantial workers in adjacent feeder industries with relevant skills and experience. The gap lies in how local hiring systems recognize, prepare, and retain that talent. What is missing is a coordinated infrastructure that connects training, credentialing, and employment into clear, accessible pathways.

If alignment is the core challenge, the next question becomes: where should coordinated intervention begin?



HIGH-OPPORTUNITY CAREER PATHWAYS

A central objective of this research was to identify high-opportunity local government positions where vacancies are persistently high, skills transfer across jurisdictions, job stability is strong, and barriers to entry are relatively low or could be meaningfully reduced.

Drawing from survey findings, labor flow analysis, and an assessment of regional workforce assets, four local government career pathways emerge as particularly promising for coordinated intervention. Each meets the criteria established at the outset of this research: high demand, difficult-to-fill positions, livable wages with advancement potential, and strong alignment with transferable skills from industries already feeding into public service careers.

Triangle's Top Pathways to Local Government

Utilities & Wastewater Technicians

These careers offer stable wages and structured advancement through certification. They also play a critical role in climate resilience and environmental sustainability.

Maintenance & Land Management

As urban centers densify and suburban areas expand, demand is growing for skilled workers knowledgeable in horticulture, urban forestry, sanitation, and green infrastructure.

Social Work & Human Services

Social workers are consistently cited as high-need and hard-to-fill, competing with hospital systems and nonprofit organizations for talent.

Electric Line Workers & Inspectors

Electrical line workers and building inspectors are critical to infrastructure development and maintenance, housing growth, and public safety.

Individually, most municipalities do not have enough openings in a single occupational category to justify launching a stand-alone apprenticeship or customized training track. However, when aggregated across jurisdictions, scale increases significantly. Among the 18 HR leaders who responded to our survey, more than 1,200 municipal positions were posted in FY25 alone. Extrapolating out to the full 50 local government members that Central Pines supports, that's over 3,000 jobs posted annually. When viewed regionally rather than jurisdiction by jurisdiction, the volume of demand reaches a threshold that justifies coordinated pathway development, shared apprenticeship models, and aligned training investments.

The opportunity, therefore, is not just occupational; it's structural. Regional aggregation creates the scale necessary to move from reactive vacancy filling to proactive talent cultivation.

Triangle's Top Pathways to Local Government

1. Utilities & Wastewater Technicians

Utilities and wastewater roles were consistently cited as both high-need and difficult to staff. These careers offer stable wages and structured advancement through certification. They also play a critical role in climate resilience and environmental sustainability. Transferable feeder industries include construction, manufacturing, transportation, and warehousing.

These industries already rank among the top sources of workers transitioning into government roles in the region. Workers bring mechanical aptitude, safety compliance experience, and operational discipline, but aren't always considered top talent without government experience.

The North Carolina Rural Water Association (NCRWA) Registered Apprenticeship Program provides a strong starting point. With 22 apprentices currently enrolled or completed, the program demonstrated proof of concept and significant opportunity for expansion and stronger integration with local government hiring pipelines.

Approximately 52 job openings for "Water & Wastewater Treatment" are posted annually across the Triangle.

2. Maintenance & Land Management (Stormwater, Parks, Solid Waste)

Wake County, the region's largest employment base, is home to the City of Raleigh, affectionately known as the "City of Oaks" for its commitment to environmental sustainability and community resilience. Integrating nature into city planning and urban development provides numerous economic, social, and health benefits. Rapidly urbanizing places like Johnston County are developing their own sanitation and green stormwater units for the first time. As urban centers densify and suburban areas expand, demand is growing for skilled workers knowledgeable in horticulture, urban forestry, sanitation, and green infrastructure.

Potential feeder industries include retail and hospitality, landscaping and groundskeeping, construction, transportation, and warehousing.

Promising models such as Raleigh's Rain Garden Apprenticeship pilot provides high school students with early exposure to environmental knowledge and engineering skills. Expanding this initiative and similar young engagement programs to adult learners could create more community-rooted, industry-responsive programs, learning from successful models like PowerCorpsPHL. Supportive and transparent career ladders, from entry-level maintenance to supervisor roles would further strengthen opportunities for advancement and retention.

In the Triangle, nearly 1500 job openings in "Landscaping & Groundskeeping" are posted annually.

3. Social Work & Human Services

Healthcare is the largest feeder industry into government employment. This alignment presents a clear opportunity to develop structured transitions into human services roles. Social workers are consistently cited as high-need and hard-to-fill, competing with hospital systems and nonprofit organizations for talent.

Wake County is launching a pilot Social Services pre-apprenticeship program in Summer 2026.

Potential strategic interventions include: mid-career transition pathways from healthcare support roles, recognition of substitute credentials and relevant experience, expanded tuition assistance and loan repayment incentives, streamlined licensing and onboarding processes

Strengthening partnerships among four-year institutions, community colleges, workforce boards, and philanthropic funders can support expanded certification pipelines while reducing barriers to entry.

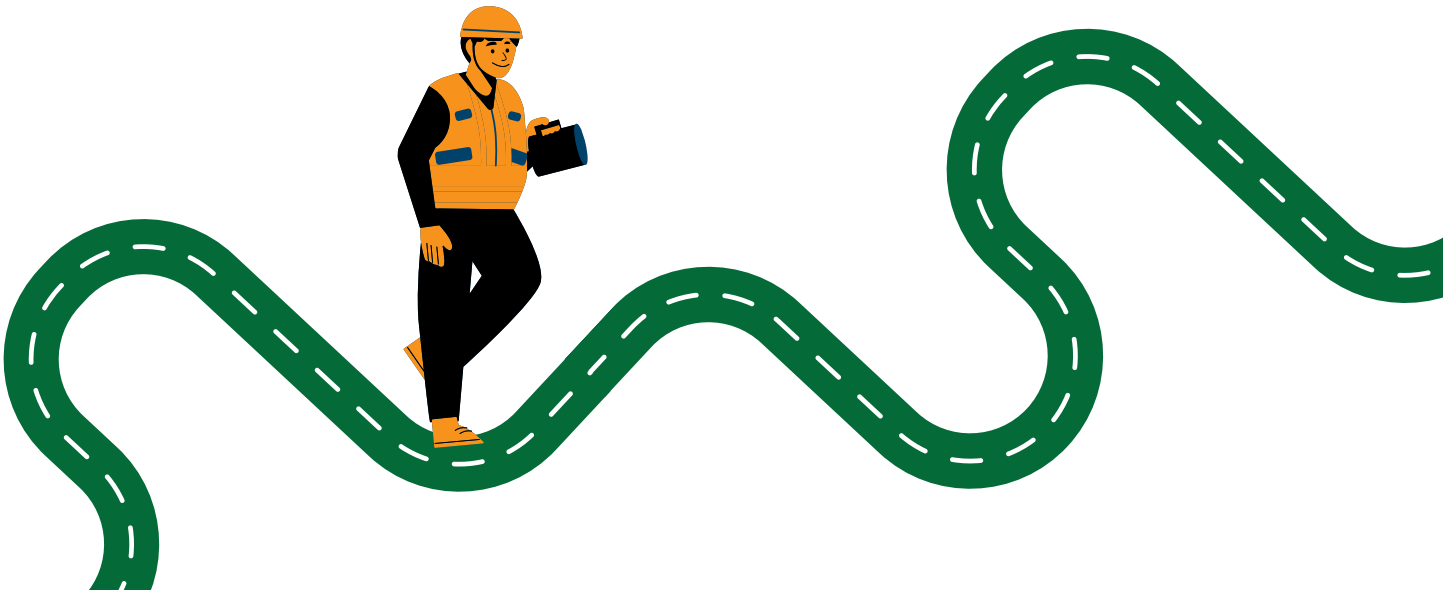
4. Electric Line Workers & Inspectors

Electrical line workers and building inspectors are critical to infrastructure development and maintenance, housing growth, and public safety. These positions offer strong wages and long-term stability but remain persistently difficult to fill.

Across the Triangle, approximately 560 job openings for "Electricians" are posted annually.

Innovative financing mechanisms like the Forward Fund, North Carolina's first pay-it-forward model partners with workforce training providers like Durham Tech to provide student-centered financing for individuals seeking higher-wage careers.

As this model scales, there is a critical window of opportunity to expand and strengthen partnerships intentionally targeted toward developing the electrical line workers local governments need. Formalizing partnerships among cities, counties, community colleges, apprenticeship providers, and workforce intermediaries would further accelerate credential completion and employment outcomes.

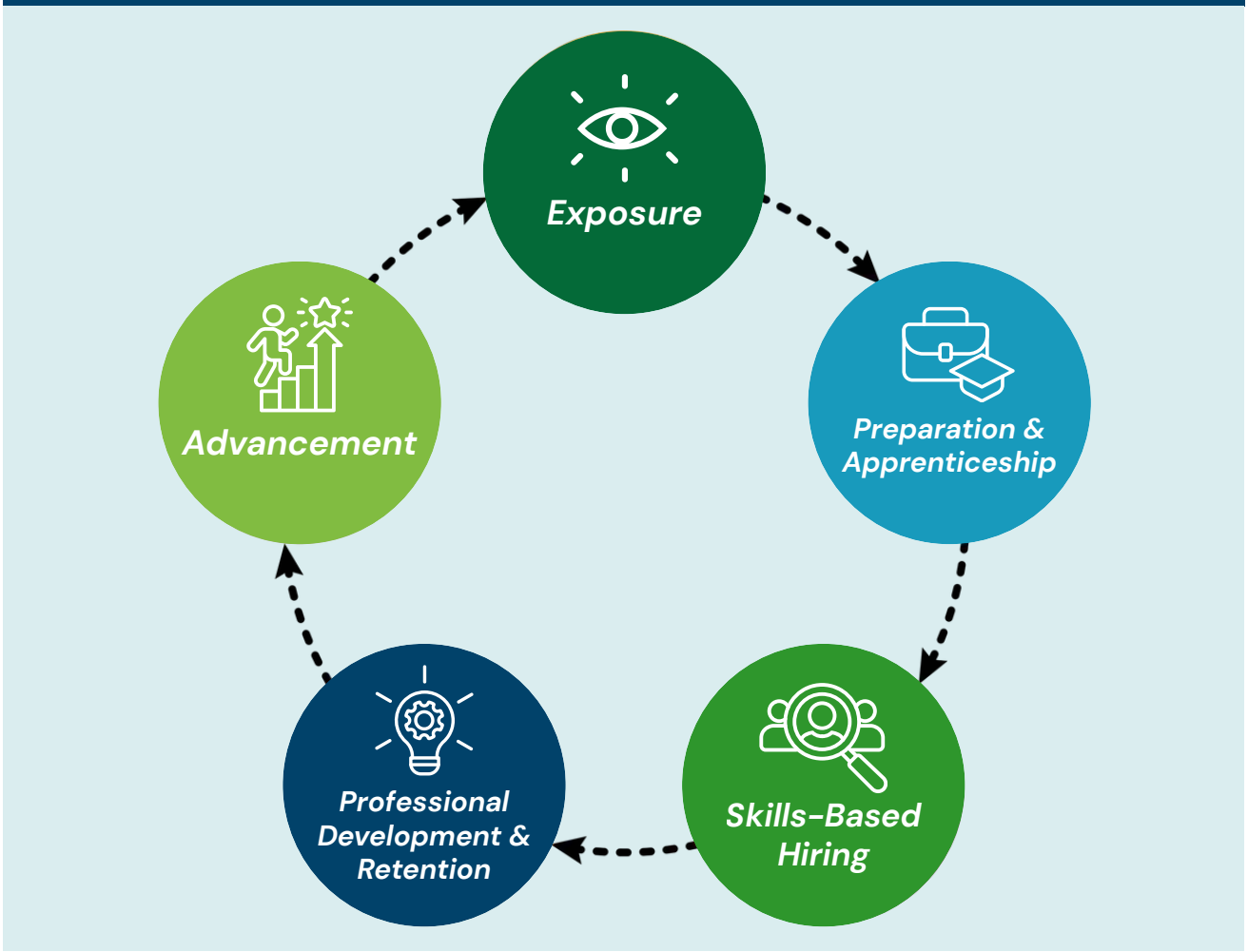


STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE TRIANGLE

Workforce pressures in the Triangle reflect a convergence of demographic, economic, and institutional shifts that create both urgency and opportunity. The strategic opportunities that follow address the structural frictions outlined above. Strengthening the four high-opportunity pathways highlighted in this research will require stronger connections across early exposure, workforce preparation, hiring, retention, and advancement. By aligning efforts across the Public Service Talent Lifecycle, local governments and regional partners can transform fragmented initiatives into a more coherent and cohesive talent system. Over time, stronger and more inclusive pathways can cultivate public servants who become mentors—expanding exposure for the next generation of civic leaders and advancing sustainable growth and shared prosperity.

The strategies below outline how regional partners can begin strengthening this lifecycle.

Public Service Talent Lifecycle



Invest in Regional Collaboration

Fragmentation across jurisdictions remains one of the most significant barriers to scale. Local government hiring efforts, apprenticeship programs, youth employment initiatives, and community college training assets operate independently throughout the region, but often without shared strategy, coordination, and timelines.

The HR Consortium convened by Central Pines provides a foundation for greater collaboration. By investing in regional coordination, local governments can share vacancy forecasting, identify priority occupations, align entry-level preparation standards, and coordinate apprenticeship registration and recruitment messaging.

Rather than competing for the same limited applicant pool, local governments can collaborate to expand it. Employer-led coordination signals seriousness to community colleges, workforce boards, and apprenticeship sponsors, enabling them to align resources to clearly articulated public workforce priorities.

Regional coordination reduces redundancy, strengthens scale, and positions public sector employment as a shared regional asset rather than a place-based challenge.

Align Local Positions with Statewide Apprenticeship Expansion

North Carolina's expanding commitment to apprenticeship programs presents a timely opportunity for local governments. With state and local government now recognized under NC Career Launch and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds supporting apprenticeship development, public employers can be more fully integrated into the state's workforce infrastructure.

Many high-need public positions—utilities operators, EMS technicians, inspectors, transit operators, IT specialists, and maintenance technicians—are well-suited to registered apprenticeship models. These roles depend on applied technical skills, structured progression, and require long-term workforce stability.

Embedding municipal positions within the apprenticeship ecosystem allows local governments to leverage existing funding, technical assistance, and employer networks while formalizing transitions from feeder industries such as construction, manufacturing,

retail, and healthcare support. Yet, none of the local governments surveyed reported currently using registered apprenticeships as a recruitment strategy. But 16 percent expressed interest in strengthening connections to existing apprenticeship programs and nearly 10 percent indicated interest in launching new apprenticeship models, suggesting strong employer demand but little activation infrastructure.

Aligning public sector hiring with statewide apprenticeship expansion would ensure that local governments are fully integrated into the state's broader "apprenticeship economy."

Model the Benefits of Skills-Based Hiring Practices

In conversations with HR leaders and hiring managers, we heard degrees being used as proxies for professionalism. Even when degrees are not explicitly required, some hiring managers look at academic degrees as signals for the ability to "work as a team, solve problems, and communicate." Modernizing hiring practices to emphasize requisite skills and applied competencies can expand access while maintaining standards.

Local governments are uniquely positioned to model the benefits of skills-based hiring. By auditing job descriptions, clarifying essential competencies, recognizing substitute credentials, and streamlining pathways for career switchers and nontraditional candidates, public employers can widen applicant pools without lowering quality.

Skills-based hiring practices also open pathways to non-traditional candidates. Recognizing experience gained through military service, caregiving, community leadership, or gig work expands access for populations historically excluded from formal credential programs.

As anchor employers, local governments can set a regional example by demonstrating that competency, reliability, and commitment to service are not defined by academic study alone. Investing in on-the-job training pathways will ensure that the talent needed to fill critical roles is readily available among local talent pools.

Connect Early Exposure to Career Outcomes

Youth employment programs, internships, and collegiate partnerships demonstrate strong promise but rarely convert to full-time roles, with some notable exceptions in

Raleigh, Goldsboro, and elsewhere. Early exposure to municipal careers, particularly in trade work related to utilities, inspections, and infrastructure management, can shift perceptions and expand interest among young people.

The biggest barriers to young people engaging in their communities include uncertainty about how to get started, a lack of clear mentorship and guidance, feeling doubtful about their skills or knowledge, and limited access to leadership opportunities. These are solvable issues, and they provide a great starting point for community leaders, philanthropy, and policymakers to take collective action.

Structured education-to-career bridges, expanded internships, and rotational models can build awareness and provide clearer advancement pathways, particularly when paired with guaranteed interviews, apprenticeship entryways, or employment conversion.

Embed Professional Skills Training & Mentorship

Interviews consistently underscored that technical competency alone does not ensure retention. Communication, accountability, teamwork, adaptability, and conflict resolution are critical to long-term success.

Wake Tech's bespoke partnership with the Town of Cary demonstrates how community colleges can design employer-responsive curricula that integrate professional skills into workforce preparation. Scaling similar models regionally would reduce onboarding friction, strengthen supervisory confidence, and support advancement. Essential skills training should be framed as critical across the career ladder.

Training Model Spotlight: Wake Tech & Town of Cary

Wake Tech's tailored essential skills partnership with the Town of Cary included four key training modules, including big data visualization, effective communication, confidence in public speaking, and inter-generational leadership. This model, although currently an isolated episode rather than a standardized practice, identifies what systematic regional alignment could achieve.

Survey responses also highlight internal talent mobility as a growing employer priority. Clearer advancement ladders, internal talent profiles, and structured promotion pathways were linked directly to retention and preservation of institutional knowledge. Strengthening transparent career progression and cross-department mobility can reduce turnover, protect operational expertise, and signal that public service offers entry and long-term growth.

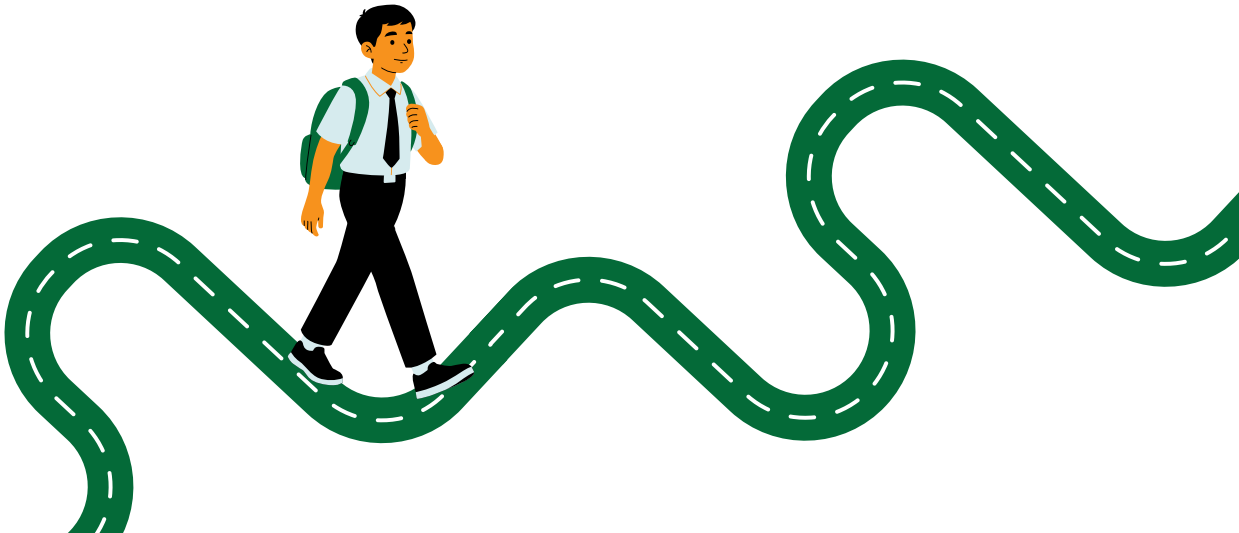
Modernize Recruitment Narratives & Strategies

Perception remains an easily overlooked but powerful barrier. Many young workers and career switchers are unaware of the breadth, impact, and stability of government careers. Public service work, while essential, is often invisible or undesirable.

More than half of Americans report wanting to be more involved in their community. One in five say they are motivated to lead a project that benefits their community, which suggests nearly 400,000 people in the Triangle who are potential public servants.

Modernizing recruitment narratives to capitalize on people's proclivity toward public service requires more than posting job listings and hosting job fairs. Coordinated communications strategies can tell a more compelling story about impact, advancement, and purpose. Highlighting frontline employee journeys, clarifying wage progression pathways, and showcasing work in climate resilience, housing, infrastructure, and community safety can reframe public service as dynamic and mission-driven.

This effort could build on existing work in places like Raleigh, where staff profiles and video content highlight unsung heroes who help deliver the public service on which residents rely. Younger generations increasingly seek work aligned with their values. Local government careers inherently offer community impact, stability, and long-term advancement, but these attributes must be communicated consistently and strategically.



CONCLUSION: A REGIONAL INFLECTION POINT

The primary challenge facing the Triangle is coordinating a cohesive network of job seekers, workforce generators, and public employers. When strong institutions operate in parallel rather than in partnership, vacancies persist, and economic mobility opportunities go unrealized. Left unchanged, the status quo will deepen regional stratification in pay, job security, and career mobility.

Rapid population growth, demographic shifts, economic uncertainty, and an aging public workforce converge to create both pressure and possibility. Without intentional action, local governments will continue to compete for a limited talent pool while service delivery strains under vacancy pressure. With regional coordination, however, the Triangle can transform this moment into a model of public workforce innovation.

By linking early exposure, skills-based hiring, apprenticeship expansion, professional development, and employer collaboration into a coherent regional talent infrastructure, local governments can reduce operational strain while expanding access to stable, family-sustaining careers. As one of the region's largest and most stable employers, public service can function as a visible and inclusive engine of economic mobility.

Pathways to Government offers a practical, purposeful framework for activating the region's many assets. Through shared data, employer-led coordination, and a focused regional pilot, Central North Carolina can build a replicable model that strengthens civic capacity and expands economic opportunity for all.

The infrastructure largely exists. What's needed now is strategic investment and intentional activation.

About the Author

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APPENDICES:

Partner Profiles

United Way of the Greater Triangle (UWGT)

United Way of the Greater Triangle (UWGT) is a regional philanthropic and community leadership organization dedicated to advancing economic mobility and strengthening community well-being across the Triangle region of North Carolina, including through its Future of Work Action Lab. By investing in research, organizing cross-sector partners, and aligning resources toward systemic change, UWGT supports initiatives that expand access to stable employment, education, and financial security. In commissioning and supporting the Pathways to Government research phase, UWGT has played a catalytic role in identifying high-opportunity public sector career pathways and exploring the conditions necessary for a regional pilot to position local government workforce development as a lever for inclusive growth and economic mobility. To learn more, visit **www.unitedwaytriangle.org**

Central Pines Regional Council (CPRC)

Central Pines Regional Council (CPRC) is a regional council of governments that serves local governments across a seven-county region of central North Carolina, representing more than 2 million residents. As a legally recognized local government entity, Central Pines convenes and supports cities and counties to address capacity gaps, launch programs, and coordinate regional solutions. CPRC's membership spans 50 total communities, from as large as Wake County to the Town of Goldston. Through initiatives such as its Regional Human Resources Consortium, Central Pines supports collaborative workforce strategies, real-time compensation benchmarking, and shared problem solving to help participating members strengthen recruitment, retention, and long-term public sector talent development across the Triangle. Learn more at **www.centralpinesnc.gov**

Raleigh Innovation Team (i-team)

The Raleigh Innovation Team (i-team) is embedded within the City of Raleigh through the Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation at Johns Hopkins University. The i-team works across city departments and with community and regional partners to tackle complex civic challenges through data-driven research, human-centered design, and cross-sector collaboration. Focused on the intersection of climate resilience and inclusive economic opportunity, the i-team translates systems-level challenges into actionable strategies, pilots scalable solutions, and strengthens the City's capacity for innovation. Through its leadership in Pathways to Government, the i-team has convened and engaged local employers, workforce intermediaries, and community stakeholders to explore how local governments can accelerate efforts to provide quality services and sustainable community resilience.

Research Methods Snapshot

Method	Description
Survey	Distributed to 50 local government members of Central Pines Regional Council; 21 responses received
Interviews	Conducted 15 in-depth conversations with HR leaders, hiring managers, and incumbent workers
Labor Market Analysis	Analyzed Job-to-Job Flow data from the U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) to examine transitions into public administration across the Triangle
Desk Research	Reviewed national and state models of workforce development that advance community-rooted, industry-responsive, and skills-based pathways to employment

Together, these quantitative and qualitative methods illuminate both the structural barriers embedded in current hiring systems and aim to strengthen public sector employment as a driver of inclusive growth.

Research Insights Overview

Primary Data Collection

- Survey: 21 HR respondents across central NC
  - 61% of participants serve populations between 10,001–100,000 residents
  - 44% of participants employ between 101–500 full-time staff
  - 66% of HR respondents have been in their HR role 0–5 years
- Deep-dive interviews: 15 local government professionals
  - Counties represented among participants:
    - Chatham
    - Durham
    - Johnston
    - Wake
    - Wayne

Survey Insights

- **High Vacancy Volume:**
  - Most respondents posted between 26–75 job openings in FY 2024–25
  - 41% of participants reported that only 0–25% of roles did not require a bachelor's degree
- **Emerging Tension:**
  - Many high-demand operational roles do not require degrees, yet hiring systems remain credential-oriented.

Desk Research

- National and statewide career pathway models
- Skills-based hiring literature
- Apprenticeship and pre-employment programs

Author's Note

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Definitions

Anchor employer: large organizations where long-term sustainability is tied to the wellbeing of the communities they serve.

County: counties are administrative subdivisions of the state, serving larger areas and covering all residents for services like public health, social services, and education. A county typically encompasses multiple municipalities.

City/Municipal: incorporated administrative division—such as a city, town, or village—that is granted powers of self-government by state or national law. Acts as a local government body responsible for providing public services like police, fire, water, and zoning to its residents.

Essential skills: also known as soft skills, power skills, or core skills – including communication, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and more.

Local Government: a county, city, town, village, or consolidated city-county that is created and authorized by the NC General Assembly.

Public Sector: part of the economy composed of government-owned, operated, and funded entities at federal, state, and local levels.

"The Triangle": The geographic boundaries of the Triangle differ depending on who is drawing the lines. For the purposes of this report, we focus primarily on the four counties served by The United Way of the Greater Triangle: Durham, Johnston, Orange, and Wake. We also engaged with local governments and incorporated information from municipalities across Central Pines' seven-county region, including Chatham, Lee, and Moore.

Transferable skills: skills that are developed within one job that are align with core competencies in another job or industry.

Workforce: the people engaged in or eligible to work, in a particular area, company, or industry.

Case Studies

Supporting our primary data collection through surveys and interviews, we researched various pre-employment program models to gain a more holistic view of possible career pathways to local government and learn from promising practices. These are a few illustrative examples:

PowerCorpsPHL

PowerCorpsPHL is a Philadelphia-based green infrastructure and workforce development initiative founded in 2013 to support young adults, particularly those 18 to 30 years of age who have been involved in the carceral system, in building stable long-term careers. The program offers paid, crew-based service experiences that blend hands-on environmental work with industry-specific training in fields such as water infrastructure, skilled trades, urban forestry, youth work, preservation trades, and grounds maintenance. Their programs often range from four months to two years, depending on participants' evolving needs. Their model is intentionally holistic, providing participants with stipends, career preparation, and wrap-around social services that support personal development before, during, and after job placement. PowerCorpsPHL operates through a wide network of collaborators including AmeriCorps, the Philadelphia Water Department, Solar States, Philadelphia Parks and Recreation, and several community-based organizations and training centers. A key insight from the program is the importance of practical barriers such as access to a driver's license in determining long-term career mobility. The organization's impact has been significant, with 92% of graduates transitioning into career pathway employment and justice-involved participants showing an 8 percent one-year recidivism rate compared to the citywide average of 45 percent. These outcomes highlight PowerCorpsPHL's role as both a workforce pipeline and a community empowerment engine within the green infrastructure sector.

NC Career Launch

NC Career Launch is North Carolina's youth apprenticeship system, designed to provide high-quality work-based learning opportunities for students from 16 to 24 years of age. Originally developed between 2017 and 2018 with funding from the US Department of Labor, the program recently expanded under Governor Josh Stein using Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funds to strengthen its connection to NCWorks, the state's workforce system. Career Launch focuses on pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs that allow high school students to gain paid, structured experience in high-demand industries. The program engages with ApprenticeshipNC, the North Carolina Business Committee for Education, the Department of Public Instruction, community colleges, and local workforce boards. Early learnings highlight the importance of clearly-defined industry pathways and strong employer partnerships. The program continues to track outcomes through resources such as the 2024 Impact Report and statewide announcements supporting apprenticeship expansion.

Surry-Yadkin Works

Surry-Yadkin Works is a regional work-based learning initiative in Pilot Mountain, North Carolina, created in 2021 to connect high school students to meaningful career pathways. The program offers a wide range of experiences including pre-apprenticeships, apprenticeships, job shadowing, internships, co-ops, and other forms of business and education engagement, prioritizing both technical and professional skill-building. Their educational focus emphasizes leadership development, communication, teamwork, and goal-setting. Regarding employment, the mission links students to training and job opportunities that reflect real employer needs. Surry-Yadkin Works partners with Surry Community College, Elkin City Schools, Mount Airy City Schools, Surry County Schools, and Yadkin County Schools, with financial support from county commissioners and private donors. The program also uplifts local economic development by cultivating partnerships with businesses committed to developing a skilled and engaged workforce. Early learnings point to the importance of clear application processes and strong coordination between schools and employers. Program outcomes are documented in resources such as the 2023–2024 ROI Report and additional materials highlighting its impact.

LiNC-IT

LiNC-IT is a statewide North Carolina workforce program launched in 2018 to expand employment opportunities for autistic students and job seekers. The initiative connects neurodivergent talent with paid internships, on-the-job training, and meaningful professional experience, while helping employers access skilled candidates who are often overlooked in traditional hiring processes. The LiNC-IT Collaborative collaborates with the North Carolina Business Committee for Education, the Governor's Office, NC State Human Resources, the Department of Health and Human Services, the TEACCH Autism Program, the Autism Society of North Carolina, and other organizations that specialize in supporting autistic individuals. The program is funded through the Department of Health and Human Services' Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities initiative, and leverages vocational rehabilitation resources along with job coaching providers who have expertise in neurodiversity. Their work demonstrates the importance of a clear and supportive candidate process that helps participants navigate applications, interviews, and workplace expectations. LiNC-IT continues to track outcomes through its program reports and shares additional insights through guidebooks, podcasts, and national coverage highlighting the value of neurodivergent talent in the workforce.

Interactive Online Resources

- 2022–2032 Occupation Projections | LEAD Analytics
- 2025 Economic County Snapshots for North Carolina
- MyFutureNC Dashboard
- LOR-Gallup Survey: Local Leadership in America
- North Carolina Department of Commerce
- Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) Program

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