



# Good Things *from* Small Packages:

## Finding Common Ground for Workforce Development in Rhode Island

### Overview

#### I. Addressing the Economic Imperative

The United Way's Building Adult and Neighborhood Independence Steering Committee has conducted a listening process with policymakers, funders, employers, advocates, and nonprofit organizations to identify common ground and potential strategies for aligning resources and actions around a set of shared core values for a high-performing workforce development system in Rhode Island. Key issues identified include the fragmentation of populations, service delivery, and resources; the need for a unifying vision on the goals and outcomes of the system and leadership at the highest levels for collaboration to attain these goals; and the need for models and capacity building to achieve system goals. Stakeholders also reinforced the idea that Rhode Island has a significant base of accomplishments upon which to build. While many promising models are disconnected from one another, the state's unified strategic planning process presents an opportunity to

advance beyond innovative yet isolated programs to create a high-performing workforce development system.

#### II. Adopting Strategies that Support High Performance

Across the country, high-performing workforce development systems share a recognition that regional economic competitiveness increases as communities cultivate a workforce that has both technical skills in demand by local employers and the ability to solve problems and learn rapidly. Based on observations of outstanding programs across the country, Jobs for the Future and Abt Associates have identified a set of seven "high-leverage principles" that might guide the workforce development system in defining its policy goals, organizing service delivery, and promoting accountability and sustainability. A number of strategies to further align Rhode Island's system to these principles are detailed in the executive summary and full report.

#### Defining Policy Goals of the Workforce Development System

- The system provides dual customer services that meet the needs of employers and of job seekers and incumbent workers.
- The system focuses on jobs and industry sectors that offer pathways to career advancement and economically self-sustaining wages.



*Good Things from Small Packages* was prepared by Gloria Cross Mwase and Geri Scott of Jobs for the Future, for the Building Adult and Neighborhood Independence Steering Committee of United Way of Rhode Island.

To download *Good Things from Small Packages*, go to [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org).

## Organizing Service Delivery

- The system aligns investments from multiple public and private sources to provide a continuum of education, training, and support services that meet the large-scale needs of employers and residents.
- The system supports the functions of workforce intermediaries that organize complex initiatives by convening stakeholders, aligning resources, and brokering or providing services to meet the workforce needs of employers and residents.

## Promoting Accountability and Sustainability

- The system focuses on accountability and measurable, positive outcomes for employers and for individuals.
- The system invests its resources in building capacity and professional development to strengthen its ability to reach its goals.
- The system implements policies and investment strategies to sustain improved employer, institutional, and agency practices.

## III. Achieving a High Performance System for Rhode Island

Building on what it has in place, Rhode Island has the opportunity to develop a high-performing workforce development system that meets the needs of employers and workers, resulting in increased economic competitiveness, improved business productivity, and a higher quality of life. The high-leverage principles and strategies provide some guidance for how Rhode Island can do this.

To apply these principles, **stakeholders in the listening process recommended that the Governor's Workforce Board:**

- *Use the high-leverage principles as a lens.* The Governor's Workforce Board can use these principles as a "screen" or set of benchmarks for evaluating its strategic plan. This will help ensure a focus on high performance at the strategy level. This screen can also be used to assess

implementation plans to ensure high performance in service delivery and ultimately in outcomes.

- *Articulate a concise workforce development goal for the state that unifies the contributions of individual programs, agencies, and funding sources.* The Governors' Workforce Board can articulate a vision for the state in a manner that speaks to employers and residents. The unified state plan can lay out how each program, agency, and funding source contributes to that vision, in addition to meeting its individual regulatory goals.
- *Create a clear, cohesive workforce development agenda early in the planning process.* The Governor's Workforce Board can identify three to five high-level issues to focus on, and then communicate these to key stakeholders even before the completion of the final strategic plan. Even while tactics for addressing these high-level issues are being developed, advocates can use the issues to rally key stakeholders, including public and private funders and the private sector, around the agenda.
- *Place a high priority on public investment in building the skills of low-skilled adults.* Compared to low-skilled, and often low-income, adults, higher-skilled adults often have access to greater personal and professional resources to facilitate their skill development and career advancement. Given the high proportion of low-skilled adults in Rhode Island compared to other states, the state's competitiveness will be correspondingly higher based on success in addressing the needs of this population.
- *Provide high-level leadership and visibility in the strategic planning process.* This will make key stakeholders and the public at large aware that the process is underway, communicate its significance to the state, encourage greater participation and support, and build a constituency base that can promote greater accountability to high performance.