

BRIDGING

EMPLOYER READINESS & WORKER WILLINGNESS

YWCA Southeast Wisconsin
November 2016



eliminating racism
empowering women

ywca

OUR CITY

For decades Milwaukee has been known as the “city of neighborhoods” by its many hard-working, dedicated residents. Milwaukee’s contributions to war efforts during the 1940s positioned the city’s workers to fare well in the following three decades, prospering along with big and small corporations, many privately held by families with deep roots in Milwaukee. Manufacturing and construction were pivotal to the success of the city and its workers for decades.

Milwaukee’s history of industry is also reflected in the variety of businesses that have grown in the city over the years, including Harley-Davidson, Northwestern Mutual, Rockwell International, and the breweries that first made Milwaukee famous: Schlitz, Pabst, Blatz and Miller. Jobs in the financial sector, hospitality, and health care grew in importance as manufacturing opportunities dwindled.

As industry changed, so did the experience of Milwaukee’s workers. Like many other cities, Milwaukee saw a reduction in family-supporting manufacturing jobs, the very jobs that brought waves of immigrants and African-American workers from the South during the 1950s and 1960s. The need for hardworking, semi-skilled workers at that time outstripped the greater numbers available after World War II and the Korean War. Forty years later, the jobs market changed significantly, demanding more technical skills on one end of the spectrum and more manual labor service jobs on the other.

While area employers have expressed their fierce competition for professional and technical workers, the situation for others is much more complicated. Internships, apprenticeships, employer-sponsored entry-level training, and union-sponsored training have all changed. More recently several large and mid-size corporations have been meeting with each other in partnerships to address their mutual needs for skilled employees. For-profit and public training programs and schools are also considering their roles in addressing the situation.

For over two decades, Milwaukee non-governmental organizations and area vocational-technical schools have worked to strengthen the pipeline to secure jobs for people in a variety of trades and services. They attempt to fill the void left by fewer on-the-job training opportunities. Graduates from these programs have been successful in finding employment more often than not, but reports from the various employment sectors suggest that these do not keep up with the demand for more highly skilled workers.

Still, despite the need for more workers, there are thousands of other unemployed, willing workers seeking less-skilled positions as warehouse workers, maintenance staff, home health aides, laundry workers, and food service assistants. In 2016, civil disturbances in Milwaukee’s Sherman Park neighborhood over a police involved killing of a young Black man brought renewed attention to the ongoing disparity between the large number of job seekers and equally large number of unfilled jobs.

LARGEST EMPLOYERS IN MILWAUKEE & NUMBER EMPLOYED

AURORA HEALTH CARE	- 21,000
WHEATON FRANCISCAN HEALTH CARE	- 12,000
KOHL'S DEPARTMENT STORES	- 7,700
FROEDTERT HEALTH	- 6,100
COLUMBIA - ST. MARY'S	- 5,400
MEDICAL COLLEGE OF WISCONSIN	- 5,200
NORTHWESTERN MUTUAL	- 5,000
ROUNDY'S SUPERMARKETS, INC.	- 5,000
ROCKWELL AUTOMATION	- 5,000
WE ENERGIES	- 4,700
BMO HARRIS	- 4,500
AT&T	- 3,700
HARLEY-DAVIDSON INC.	- 3,600
U.S. BANK	- 3,300
POTAWATOMI BINGO & CASINO	- 3,000
JOHNSON CONTROLS	- 2,500
BRIGGS & STRATTON	- 2,000

Source: DiscoverMilwaukeee.org

OUR CHALLENGE

Milwaukee faces significant economic and employment challenges. Nationwide and statewide, the unemployment rate at the end of March 2016 stood at 5%, but the City of Milwaukee's unemployment rate was at 6.3%.¹

The city's African-American population is disproportionately affected by unemployment, with a rate of 17.2% near the end of 2015.² Average earnings for African-American residents were just 41.6% of whites in 2015, according to a report that ranked Milwaukee as the worst place in America to be Black.³ African-American residents also face a number of other disparities related to health, crime victimization, housing access and food security.

The employment landscape for Milwaukee has evolved. Many families saw a decrease in available factory work, jobs moved abroad, and a growing service sector took its place. Yet, Milwaukee is rich in its able-bodied, job-seeking population that has not kept pace with technology advances. With Milwaukee schools struggling to maintain qualified teachers and services due to pounding budget cuts, many Milwaukeeans are not adequately equipped to respond to the changes in the employment landscape. These job-seekers struggle to find family-sustaining employment opportunities, leaving them frustrated and defeated.

We have been equally vexed by a perceived shortage of job seekers. A 2014 Manpower Group study shows that one-third or more metro Milwaukee employers claim they can't find enough job-ready workers.

Milwaukee County employers, particularly in the construction, financial services, health care, hospitality, and manufacturing sectors, see increased hiring needs in the near term. By 2022, these sectors expect to see increased hiring ranging from a 5% to 13% over 2012 numbers.⁴ While these percentages could change, employers are in agreement that finding suitable employees will continue to be a top priority.

Employers appear baffled by how best to address unemployment in the city where they have made long-term commitments. Many engage in forums, programs, and plans aimed to address the well-being of Milwaukee's workers. Several have well-crafted schemes to recruit and retain a talented, diverse workforce. But even when prospective workers possess job-related skills, they are seen as having limited soft skills and/or are viewed as having work histories that disqualify them for employment.

Milwaukee, a community filled with neighborhoods rich in diversity, faces a major challenge. This situation appears to be troubling the hearts and minds of employers and job-seekers alike. What can be done to change outcomes for people in desperate need of employment? How do we live as one community, when so many among us are working at low-level wages? What can be done about the situation where people are subsisting on seasonal cash-paying jobs that will never build an employment-ready resume? How can we attract and retain the brightest and best in their respective fields when our city presents itself as unable or unwilling to address the disconnect between workers and employers?

UNEMPLOYED WORKERS IN MILWAUKEE BY RACE

American Community Survey, 2014

AFRICAN-AMERICAN - 20.9%
AMERICAN INDIAN & ALASKA NATIVE - 19.2%
LATINO - 12.4%
ASIAN-AMERICAN - 9.4%
WHITE - 7.3%

CURRENT 5,500 MILWAUKEE JOB OPENINGS IN 5 SECTORS

HEALTH CARE - 2,269 (41%)
FINANCE - 1,418 (26%)
HOSPITALITY - 1,256 (23%)
MANUFACTURING - 424 (7%)
CONSTRUCTION - 155 (3%)

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES IN EACH SECTOR

96,247
25,312
40,223
53,474
14,059

This disconnect between job-provider and job-seeker was the impetus for this Community Readiness Assessment conducted with the leadership of YWCA Southeast Wisconsin.

The YWCA Southeast Wisconsin has provided workforce development programs and services through the lens of racial equity and inclusion for the last 10 years. Much of the work has focused on job seekers' career readiness through soft skill development, interview and resume preparation, adult education, and subsidized work experience. While this work continues to be valuable to each job seeker's success, it does not address employer-related barriers to employment that many YWCA clients face, such as discriminatory hiring practices, workplace policies and environments, and recruiter and management biases.

The YWCA has significant experience working with several local employers providing racial justice training to human resources and management level professionals through its Unlearning Racism: Tools for Action workshop series and tailored trainings. However, there are many more businesses with high growth opportunities that appear resistant to or unaware of the need for this kind of employer intervention. Rather than implementing yet another new program with uncertain interest from local employers, a community readiness assessment (CRA) was proposed to help guide an effective action plan that is appropriate for the actual prevailing attitudes, knowledge, and resources (in other words, community readiness) that exist in the Milwaukee business community.

In late 2015, the YWCA received generous support from the Greater Milwaukee Foundation to conduct a community readiness assessment to guide the planning, preparation and implementation of new solutions for employing Milwaukee's job seekers who have limited soft skills and/or irregular work histories.

OUR ASSESSMENT

In 2016, the YWCA Southeast Wisconsin conducted an assessment intended to help guide the planning, preparation and implementation of new solutions for employing Milwaukee's job seekers who have limited soft skills and/or irregular work histories. Because we wanted to assure the reliability of the assessment outcomes, we elected to use an evidence-based approach developed in Colorado, but used widely in Wisconsin by government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and academic research groups.

The Community Readiness Model

The Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research at Colorado State University has developed a community readiness model that measures the attitudes, knowledge, efforts and activities, and resources available in the community for addressing an issue – in this case the readiness of Milwaukee employers in five sectors to hire and retain workers who have limited soft skills and/or irregular work histories.

The Tri-Ethnic Center's model⁵ scores a set of open ended survey questions based on five dimensions of readiness: (1) Community efforts and the community's knowledge of efforts, (2) Leadership, (3) Community climate, (4) Community knowledge of issue, (5) Resources. For the purpose of this assessment, "community" refers to the manufacturing, hospitality, financial services, health care, and construction employment sectors in Milwaukee County, which Employ Milwaukee (formerly known as the Milwaukee Area Workforce Investment Board) has identified as the area's high-growth employment sectors.

The scores are then analyzed to characterize this community of employment sectors into one of the following nine stages of readiness: (1) No awareness, (2) Denial/resistance, (3) Vague awareness, (4) Pre-planning, (5) Preparation (6) Initiation, (7) Stabilization, (8) Confirmation/Expansion, and (9) High level community ownership.

Each stage of readiness suggests recommended actions that will best serve to influence change from one particular level of readiness to the next. For example, if responses from a community under assessment score at Level 6, Initiation, this model provides recommendations on how best to move to Level 7, Stabilization. For some communities, the notion of moving from one level of readiness to the next may seem arduous or unreasonable, but one can readily imagine the pitfalls of attempting to expand an unstable program will likely produce greater setbacks in the long run.

**Community Readiness
Assessment Implementation**

A group of project advisors from each of the five employment sectors convened in December 2015 and met throughout the term of the assessment and the development of this report. They reviewed the overall goals of the assessment, the model used, identified key informants, preliminary findings, and themes identified through structured interviews with employer representatives. They also considered the recommendations prescribed for the assessed level of readiness.

Between February and April of 2016, following the prescribed methods of the Community Readiness Assessment Model, three interviewers completed 47 interviews with individuals employed across the five identified sectors. The interviewees were identified through the leadership team at the

**LEVELS OF READINESS AND
CORRESPONDING NAMES**

1	NO AWARENESS
2	DENIAL/RESISTANCE
3	VAGUE AWARENESS
4	PRE-PLANNING
5	PREPARATION
6	INITIATION
7	STABLIZATION
8	CONFIRMATION/EXPANSION
9	HIGH LEVEL OF COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

YWCA and through key informants in the respective sectors with assistance from Employ Milwaukee and members of the project's advisory team. The interviewees were chosen because of their roles in the identification and hiring of prospective employees. Each was asked the same questions, with changes only to include the name of the sector in the interview questions. Interviews typically took around one hour, though they varied in length.

GENDER IDENTITIES OF INTERVIEWEES		
NUMBER OF INTERVIEWEES	FEMALE	MALE
47	33	14
100%	70%	30%

Once the interviews were completed, the transcripts were de-identified and scored by two trained scorers who work outside of the YWCA. Scoring of the responses utilizes an anchored rating scale for each of the five dimensions being scored. The independent scorers start with the first anchored rating

ETHNIC & RACIAL BACKGROUNDS OF INTERVIEWEES					
AFRICAN-AMERICAN	AFRICAN-AMERICAN & HISPANIC	ASIAN-AMERICAN	CAUCASIAN/WHITE	LATINO/LATINA	MIXED RACE
10	1	1	31	3	1
21%	2%	2%	66%	6%	2%

statement determining if the respondent exceeds the first of nine statement, then proceed to the next statement and so on. In order to receive a score at a certain level of readiness, all previous levels must have been met up to and including the statement which best describes the response. The two scorers then review the results with each other, coming up with a final shared score. Differences are resolved by careful discussion and agreement with the final score. An assessment supervisor was available to assist if resolution could not be reached.

Response transcripts were then analyzed for overarching themes that could at once provide validation for the numeric scores and give nuanced meaning that is specific to Milwaukee employers.

Results for Milwaukee County Employers

Quantitative Results: The overall readiness of employers in the five sectors interviewed for this assessment is at Stage Three: Vague Awareness. This stage is characterized by some employers having heard about local efforts to address the needs of workers with limited soft skills and/or irregular work histories, but most lack sufficient motivation to act on what they currently know and others have little confidence that anything can be done at all. The employers in these sectors have some awareness about why this impasse between filling job openings with current job-seekers might persist, and understand that they have some—but likely insufficient—resources to address the issue.

READINESS LEVELS BY SECTOR & DIMENSION						
SECTOR	COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF EFFORTS	LEADERSHIP	COMMUNITY CLIMATE	COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF ISSUES	RESOURCES	STAKEHOLDER GROUP TOTALS
CONSTRUCTION	3.9	4.4	4.6	4.9	3.9	4
FINANCIAL SERVICES	3.0	4.4	4.2	3.2	3.0	3
HEALTH CARE	3.6	3.9	4.6	5.9	3.6	4
HOSPITALITY	2.9	3.3	3.3	4.2	2.9	3
MANUFACTURING	1.8	4.0	3.8	3.5	3.0	3
DIMENSION TOTALS	3	4	4	4	3	OVERALL READINESS SCORE 3

These quantitative results show that as whole, area employers neither deny that this problem exists nor are overly resistant to doing something about it. On the other hand, with few exceptions, current efforts to do something are unfocused, likely failing to have a clear recognition of the importance or urgency of the situation.

There are three dimensions where the individuals interviewed scored higher than Stage Three on the issues of working with individuals with limited soft skills and/or irregular work histories. Those dimensions are Leadership, Community Climate and Community Knowledge of the Issues.

It is important to examine these scores by dimension, as individual dimension scores range between 3 and 4. (See Table 4) To ensure that those on the lower end of the scoring range can be “brought along”, scores are rounded down to the nearest whole number in the Community Readiness Model. Additional discussion relevant to these scores can be found in the thematic analysis section later in this report.

TABLE 4: SCORES BY DIMENSION

DIMENSION	SCORE	EXPLANATION & ANALYSIS
COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF EFFORT	3	<p>VAGUE AWARENESS: “Something should probably be done, but what? Maybe someone else will work on this.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A few community members have at least heard about local efforts, but know little about them. • Leadership and community members believe that this issue may be a concern in the community. They show no immediate motivation to act. • Community members have only vague knowledge about the issue (e.g. they have some awareness that the issue can be problem and why it may occur). • There are limited resources (such as a community room) identified that could be used for further efforts to address the issue.
RESOURCES	3	
LEADERSHIP	4	<p>PRE-PLANNING: “This is important. What can we do?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some community members have at least heard about local efforts, but know little about them. • Leadership and community members acknowledge that this issue is a concern in the community and that something has to be done to address it. • Community members have limited knowledge about the issue. • There are limited resources that could be used for further efforts to address the issue.
COMMUNITY CLIMATE	4	
COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF ISSUES	4	

Sub-Sector Scores

By examining each sector based on its number of employees, the scoring process more carefully focused on the readiness of each sector to work with job seekers who have limited soft skills and/or irregular work histories. Derived from the overall scores above, the five sectors were broken into small-to-medium and large or medium and large groups in terms of organization size, then re-scored. (See Tables 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.)

TABLE 5: CONSTRUCTION SUB-SECTOR SCORES

SECTOR: CONSTRUCTION (N=9)	COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF EFFORTS	LEADERSHIP	COMMUNITY CLIMATE	COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF ISSUES	RESOURCES	STAKE-HOLDER GROUP TOTALS
SMALL TO MEDIUM (N=4)	3.1	3.9	4.6	5.3	4.4	4
MEDIUM TO LARGE (N=5)	3.3	5.0	4.5	4.4	3.3	4

TABLE 6: FINANCIAL SERVICES SUB-SECTOR SCORES

SECTOR: FINANCIAL SERVICES (N=11)	COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF EFFORTS	LEADERSHIP	COMMUNITY CLIMATE	COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF ISSUES	RESOURCES	STAKE-HOLDER GROUP TOTALS
SMALL TO MEDIUM (N=5)	2.8	4.2	4.2	2.7	2.8	3
MEDIUM TO LARGE (N=6)	3.2	4.8	4.1	3.8	3.2	3

TABLE 7: HEALTH CARE SUB-SECTOR SCORES

SECTOR: HEALTH CARE (N=9)	COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF EFFORTS	LEADERSHIP	COMMUNITY CLIMATE	COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF ISSUES	RESOURCES	STAKE-HOLDER GROUP TOTALS
SMALL TO MEDIUM (N=4)	3.4	4.0	4.9	5.1	3.4	4
MEDIUM TO LARGE (N=5)	2.9	3.8	4.1	6.9	3.9	4

TABLE 8: HOSPITALITY SUB-SECTOR SCORES

SECTOR: MANUFACTURING (N=9)	COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF EFFORTS	LEADERSHIP	COMMUNITY CLIMATE	COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF ISSUES	RESOURCES	STAKE-HOLDER GROUP TOTALS
SMALL TO MEDIUM (N=4)	3.4	3.4	3.3	4.1	3.8	3
MEDIUM TO LARGE (N=5)	3.2	3.3	3.3	5.0	3.2	3

TABLE 9: MANUFACTURING SUB-SECTOR SCORES

SECTOR: MANUFACTURING (N=9)	COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF EFFORTS	LEADERSHIP	COMMUNITY CLIMATE	COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE OF ISSUES	RESOURCES	STAKE-HOLDER GROUP TOTALS
SMALL TO MEDIUM (N=4)	2.0	2.7	3.3	3.7	2.4	2
MEDIUM TO LARGE (N=5)	1.7	4.7	4.0	3.5	3.3	3

The overall readiness score did not change significantly when grouping the larger companies from their small to medium counterparts. The main difference was revealed in the manufacturing sub-sector scores. Medium sized manufacturers scored at a readiness level of two while the large manufacturers were at a three. As previously shown, construction and health care sub-sectors remained at stage four

“Here in Milwaukee we are very cliquy and we tend to go with the same people. If you’re not [in the clique] then you have to find ways to be a part of the network. If you keep missing it’s a lot harder [to break in]. I think there are people who might not have connection with people to get them further.”

--Hospitality Sector Interviewee

or pre-planning. Pre-planning is characterized by: some community members having at least heard about local efforts, but know little about them; leadership and community members acknowledge that this issue is a concern in the community and that something has to be done to address it; community members have limited knowledge about the issue; and there are limited resources that could be used for further efforts to address the issue.⁶

Our assessment also shows relatively consistent vague levels of awareness across all five sectors, with construction and health care employers showing a somewhat greater interest in engaging in planning to take action on the issues at hand. It also points to deficits in understanding the basics of what is currently being done to address these issues in Milwaukee, particularly among employers in the hospitality and manufacturing sectors.

These professionals involved in hiring workers in the five sectors shared that, while there are a few individuals recognizing the need to do something about addressing the employment needs of Milwaukee job seekers, motivation was insufficient to make much happen at the corporate level. Existing efforts – some by employers and others by community-based programs which engage job seekers – remain relatively unfamiliar to the respondents and their peers. While they believe some leaders are trying to get some things started to employ workers with limited soft skills and/or irregular work histories, those interviewed were hard pressed to name leaders outside government or non-governmental organizations.

“I think that employers are finding it difficult to find good workers, but I don’t think they are considering this particular group first.”

--Manufacturing Sector Interviewee

Respondents also shared an overall belief that the climate in Milwaukee is now reflecting some interest in doing something about this issue, but there is no agreement about what should be done. Employers across sectors doubt that there are resources available for them to address this issue, mostly because at this time they don’t know what it would take.

Qualitative Results: The overall themes that emerged in transcripts of the interviews support the view that employers in the five sectors are somewhat aware of the issues at hand for job-seekers in Milwaukee, but this awareness has yet to translate for them into a cohesive picture from which solutions can be identified and resources marshalled. For example, interviewees saw barriers for job seekers such as limited transportation, instability in neighborhoods and homes, lack of connection to those who could network for employment, and insufficient child care options. They also noted that some job seekers lack required certifications and have histories of incarceration. Further, they concede that their own community outreach and involvement with nonprofits is insufficient to make the situation different.

“I think the heads of Human Resources ... diversity leaders like myself, chief diversity leaders are all aware of the challenge that we have with these populations. In my case, I’ve also made our CEO aware. I can’t say that all CEOs in all the healthcare systems are aware.”

--Health Care Sector Interviewee

Interviewees expressed limited or no recognition that solutions to these issues would benefit them as employers or their employees. Almost no one commented that improving Milwaukee’s economy

“Work starts at 6 AM. What are you going to do with your children?”

--Construction Sector Interviewee

would benefit their ability to attract and retain more highly skilled workers as well. No one interviewed saw seasonal and temporary employment as contributing factors to the situation that many workers with irregular work

histories face. Nor did interviewees acknowledge the substantial investments made by them to bolster soft skills among college interns and new hires in their most highly compensated jobs, which was remarkably incongruent with their assistance for those in considerably greater need.

Comments made in the interviews show that some employers recognize that Milwaukee’s racial segregation and income disparities reinforce biases against those seeking work, putting people who reside outside the city in charge of hiring those from racial and ethnic groups with whom they are unfamiliar.

“ ... communities today aren’t really overly concerned with the entry level candidates in the world. It would be, if they had more programs that were well known, and made to be successful, it would make everything more successful, more people working, everything else.”

--Financial Sector Interviewee

There were seven overarching themes that emerged from the 47 interviews conducted as part of the community readiness assessment. Each is presented below, then discussed and supported with quotes pulled directly from interview transcripts.

THEME 1:

Barriers to participating in current efforts include: transportation, instability of home life, lack of connection to people who can help with networking and employment, certifications, child care issues, and a growing number of people with a history of incarceration.

In the health care sector, prospective employees must pass extensive background checks. In the financial services sector, employees may need to submit to a credit history check. In some manufacturing jobs, employees will need hard skills that may require participation in certification programs. Employers and employees alike struggle with transportation issues.

“One of the things we hear fairly often is transportation. Others are not having appropriate child care and lack of education. Work habits or your “soft skills” definition you mentioned. And sometimes I think, ‘I’m not sure how you teach that.’ It often times has to be engrained in how someone grows up.”
--Health Care Sector Interviewee

“I was at a job fair yesterday and a lot people were wondering if we were on the bus lines and we’re not. The reality is even if people want these jobs and the contractor is willing to hire, you have a whole reality gap of getting people there.”
--Construction Sector Interviewee

“For us, we would just like for candidates who do have irregular background and work history to just be prepared to be questioned on stability. We do have an understanding if they have an irregular work history. But we do want stability, so they should be prepared to explain that. The biggest piece of this, however, that we’ve seen is the inability to hire based upon criminal backgrounds. It’s been a huge roadblock for us.”
--Financial Sector Interviewee

“If I look at the demographics of where we want to hire people for manufacturing, you are seeing more and more individuals coming out of high school, GEDs, the prevalence of DUIs, background issues, past issues, complete lack of soft skills, attendance issues, and it is all a vicious cycle. The folks that we want to bring on board are unequipped. We are not going to pull ourselves up as a county, a state, unless we address that.”
--Manufacturing Sector Interviewee

“Sometimes there are opportunities that are out of the way, like off the bus lines. They want to have a diverse environment but a person never fits in and they’re different. That makes it difficult so depending on where the jobs are located in Milwaukee County. There are individuals who want to make the move to hire but there are difficulties.”
--Hospitality Sector Interviewee

THEME 2:

Milwaukee County's extreme racial and income segregation reinforces biases against those seeking work and often puts people who don't live in the city in charge of hiring people from the city, contributing to a sense that addressing these issues is "not my problem."

Milwaukee is the most segregated city in America.⁷ This affects who has business and social relationships with whom, and ultimately affects who obtains employment. People with disproportionate rates of incarceration, un- and underemployment, and other disparities are concentrated in parts of the city that also have a lack of available jobs. Racial and economic divisions are self-perpetuating.

"I find Milwaukee small-minded, very religiously right, very conservative, very unaccepting. People don't get it here. Nothing open and inclusive. The business climate is the same way."

--Manufacturing Sector Interviewee

"I work in HR so I'm part of different groups and I work with groups that work with minorities, but it's funny how we're doing similar work -- even at that level -- at a conference we had a person say 'I never thought I was excluding people who were a minority because I never really thought about it that way. They hadn't had that experience so they couldn't contribute or relate.' When you just don't know, you just don't know. I think resources are out there to have people become aware, but I don't think people realize it's as big of an issue as it is."

--Hospitality Sector Interviewee

"Yes, there are people who oppose it (addressing the issues of employing people with limited soft skills and/or irregular work histories). There are more leaders from outside construction companies who won't be able to bring their full crews to Milwaukee. They would oppose it. They would talk to the legislature to try to get the numbers (for minority hires) down, not make the percentages."

--Construction Sector Interviewee

"If these people want to work they need to get the soft skills and get them on their own. Just like we did. Just like our parents."

--Construction Sector Interviewee

"The misconception is that people just don't want to work. They would rather live off the government or off unemployment, and they just don't have a desire to work."

--Manufacturing Sector Interviewee

"One of the biggest issues we have in Milwaukee is there is a lot of racism. I think that plays out very hard in the hiring process. So that may make it very tough. You have some level of awareness with some employers. You have some employers who may not be aware, and some that are."

--Health Care Sector Interviewee

THEME 3:

Employers need to do community outreach and collaborate with organizations and programs that go beyond just offering jobs (e.g. outreach, address job readiness, mentoring) to create a more sustainable workforce and improve their own and the community economy.

Many employers have a need for reliable workers who will help them with their current and planned workforce. There is a disconnect between the need and what will need to occur in order to meet these needs. Even though most people feel that something should be done, there is disagreement about whose responsibility it is.

“Process can be somewhat flawed in that the candidates have to go online and apply. So if they can’t meet the criteria, their application may get bumped out. So that’s a huge weakness in that process. I think if we did more direct recruitment where we were going to some of these agencies, it may help a little bit, but I think all agencies are doing it online so it does create some major challenges. That’s probably the biggest weakness in the system.”

--Health Care Sector Interviewee

“I’m hopeful that employers are identifying people who have not had a good work experience and wanting to kind of mentor them and bring them along. But I just don’t think all manufacturer employers are there yet. More often, manufacturers are just like “get me a body and make sure they show up every day.”

--Manufacturing Sector Interviewee

“There are a lot of efforts right now to connect the people you are talking about to the construction industry; it’s just not as easy as people would like it to be. It’s taking longer than it should but there are efforts that show promise. I would hope instead of recreating the wheel that there would be more partnerships with organizations already working on it and addressing it. One thing over the years is that organizations would create a program to solve a problem and another would create another one and money was being spent everywhere. There need to be partnerships and collaboratives; instead of duplication there needs to be strength based on expertise and experience. It’s easy to think you can create a solution, but it’s easy to waste a lot of money and I’ve seen it done before.”

--Construction Sector Interviewee

“There’s a misconception that we’re all rich and making decisions about people who don’t have a lot of money. The margins in restaurants are small. Owners have a ton riding on this. It’s easy to say they made a million, but we also had costs. The misconception is that anyone owning a business is flush with money. There’s a misconception that we’re not committed to the community. We know if the Milwaukee County goes, so does our business.”

--Hospitality Sector Interviewee

THEME 4:

Employer resources are limited in addressing these populations: working on these issues requires time and effort many employers do not have. Employers may need to be convinced that their needs and societal needs are in alignment in order to act.

Seeking, screening, training, and hiring employees is a costly enterprise. Some employers are wary of spending money on groups that they feel might not stay in their jobs. Collaboration and an increase in readiness in the identified five sectors could help advance work opportunities for these populations.

“I don’t think you will have anybody directly opposing (working on initiatives to employ people with limited soft skills and/or irregular work histories)—it depends on what is being asked in terms of resources, monetary or time commitments. If it is too much, based on their perception, I can see that being a constraint, but I can see there being a long-term value on this.”

--Construction Sector Interviewee

“I think they would (support work with these populations), but there would be a question of what would be the cost to the health care system.”

--Health Care Sector Interviewee

“I think it’s a common misconception about the amount of time it would take to onboard that individual.”

--Financial Sector Interviewee

“Attendance is a critical part of manufacturing: you all start and finish at the same time. We schedule work for everyone in the building. If they are not here someone has to absorb the other workload.”

--Manufacturing Sector Interviewee

“Hiring a person is a very expensive undertaking for any organization. It can literally cost thousands of dollars just to get someone to their first day of work when you take all the interview costs, overhead, technologies and that sort of thing. So there are concerns about someone on who has not necessarily proven that they will stay. And that obviously contributes to the high turnover.”

--Health Care Sector Interviewee

“Before (Wisconsin) went “right-to-work” it would have been the unions (who worked with these groups). There was a lot of training that went through union halls. We took a real hit. It is now a gap.”

--Manufacturing Sector Interviewee

THEME 5:

Employers may be aware that un- and underemployment of these groups is an issue. There is a lack of information and understanding of solutions and how to be involved in a way that benefits employer and employee needs.

There is a range of awareness among employers of these groups as prospective employees. Employers generally do not consider these groups a priority when making hiring decisions. Many in the identified five sectors are not aware of the programs that already exist to address employment of these groups.

“I think if they were more aware of programs to assist candidates even if their work history doesn’t show it, they would be more open to interview candidates without skills to see if maybe their attitude would make them successful. A person with a good attitude can make the difference.”

--Hospitality Sector Interviewee

“I think it’s a case that some have heard of it (Right Step) and the majority have used the program and understand it.”

--Construction Sector Interviewee

“I don’t know that I would say it’s a top priority. I think it’s an issue that they are aware of and I think there is at least a plan in place to try and do something, but is it a top priority? No. But it is on folks’ radar. Anytime people are willing to commit dollars to addressing an issue, it has to be somewhat of a priority.”

--Health Care Sector Interviewee

“I think they are getting bypassed, because people in my world can pretty much read this on a resume: large gap, people get shuffled around and probably have issues.”

--Manufacturing Sector Interviewee

“For some employers I don’t think it’s a top priority. It all depends on the job and what’s needed for the job.”

--Financial Sector Interviewee

“I would say it’s a low priority. The reason I say that is because at the end of the day you need people to get the job done and it would just be a revolving door. When you’re staffing a position you want to keep a person in there, you don’t want to hire if someone is not going to stay.”

--Hospitality Sector Interviewee

THEME 6:

Priorities and skills needed vary by sector: soft skills greatly outweigh hard skills in some fields, while other fields have certification or other mandates that rule out some workers.

The desired skill sets and employee resumes vary across the five sectors examined for this assessment. There may be a disconnect between what prospective employees are doing or learning and what is ultimately needed in the workforce. In construction, for example, prospective employees may not understand that the work hours may be long and start very early in the day, and job sites might also vary in accessibility by public transit. Prospective employees may sometimes rule themselves out of jobs based on their own assumptions that job skills in one field do not transfer to another, when in some cases, they actually do.

“Not meeting the educational requirements (rules out people from health care fields). Also, not meeting the drug screening requirements, and lack of soft skills all contribute to it.”

--Health Care Sector Interviewee

“There are some obstacles—the challenge of hiring irregular workers is that the contractors need to hire people sufficiently trained, ready to go into the industry. Guess what? You’re really going to be starting at \$13/hour. Guess what? Work starts at 6 AM. What are you going to do with your children?”

--Construction Sector Interviewee

“Let’s say they’re working with someone who has a million dollars and if they don’t have the right soft skills there’s a chance they could lose that account ... For job history, limited experience isn’t that big of a chance for us to not hire them. If someone has unstable history it won’t stop me from hiring them, but they need to have good reasons. We put in time to train them and don’t want them to leave in a couple months.”

--Financial Sector Interviewee

“Every day we have a challenge just interacting and engaging folks in the talent pool. It’s a lack of understanding of what’s required in the field. Especially as you move up the ranks and increase the customer service contact. Say in laundry [having limited soft skills] it’s not a great issue, but they’re not in contact with a guest who might be worth \$50,000 or more to us. As you move up in positions these skills are more important. It’s something we all talk about.”

--Hospitality Sector Interviewee

“I guess the misconception is people not realizing how important those soft skills are. We can take someone with limited employment history and train them. You can get past that if you’re willing to come to work every day and have a good attitude. I think that’s a misconception and people don’t understand how important the soft skills are.”

--Manufacturing Sector Interviewee

THEME 7:

There is an almost total lack of leadership in political and business decision-making groups that could influence greater employment for individuals with a lack of soft skills and/or irregular work histories.

There were very few interviewees who named individuals outside of their company as leaders on this issue. There were almost no interviewees who named elected officials, though one interviewee felt that Scott Walker had been good on the subject while he was the Milwaukee County Executive.

“I don’t see that the middle management piece of diversity is there, so you have the same people doing the same jobs with limited access to getting the skills sets needed to be promoted into other positions.”

--Hospitality Sector Interviewee

“Any meeting I’ve gone to I haven’t seen anyone like Common Council people.”

--Hospitality Sector Interviewee

“We have contracts with many different agencies, but I’m not sure those are leaders so much as they are funders.”

--Construction Sector Interviewee

“I just think like the leadership, even the communities today, aren’t really overly concerned with the entry level candidates in the world. It would be, if they had more programs that were well known, and made to be successful, it would make everything more successful, more people working, everything else.”

--Financial Sector Interviewee

JOB SEEKER DISCUSSIONS

Having heard from employers in this readiness assessment across five sectors, the YWCA augmented the current assessment by conducting focus groups of its own program participants and other workers. We asked about what they perceive to be their barriers to employment, how they believe employers view them as a workers or job candidates, and their experiences in the workforce.

These discussions were conducted in structured focus groups with facilitators trained in the methodology. All group discussions were transcribed and analyzed by independent reviewers. Taken as a whole, these discussions challenge widely held beliefs in Milwaukee that workers with limited soft skills and/or irregular work histories don’t want to work, want jobs for which they are not qualified, or lack any personal accountability for their employment challenges.

Focus Group Theme 1

Participants felt that they had enough job experience to apply for many jobs, but lacked sufficient experience to be truly competitive for the jobs they sought. Also, their experience was often limited to entry-level jobs because of interruptions in the work history because of illness, family disruptions, incarceration, and seasonal employment. Some found that their need for even modest pay raises – even a few cents per hour – prompted them to change jobs, leaving them with a patchwork of employment.

Focus Group Theme 2

Participants identified several barriers to attaining and keeping employment, including but not limited to: a history of incarceration and/or felony-level convictions, a lack of child care or other family caregiving obligations that precluded them from taking certain jobs, a lack of access to transportation to job sites, the cost of training and/or education necessary for jobs, and a lack of financial resources to pay for items needed for work attire.

Focus Group Theme 3

Working for temporary services, at seasonal jobs, or in a cash-basis has not translated, in the eyes of prospective employers, into a solid job history. Many focus group participants commented on their ongoing need for employment of any kind. Because of this, they have patched together an array of construction, outdoor, casual labor, and childcare positions that do not or cannot appear on a resume.

Focus Group Theme 4

A history of (or current) substance use or abuse limits work opportunities for some participants. Focus group participants were quick to identify their own perceived shortcomings. Regular marijuana or alcohol abuse were viewed by them as personal delimiters in their success in gaining employment. Unlike their working peers with equal or greater substance use, these workers had court citations for it.

Focus Group Theme 5

Racism, stereotypes, and bias in the hiring process leads many participants of color to conclude that the workforce is at times rigged against them. It should be noted that workers were very reluctant to bring up bias, but they questioned again and again how they could seem to do so well in an interview, but then were not the finalist.

Focus Group Theme 6

Participants often remain optimistic in the face of nearly insurmountable odds, with many reporting sending out dozens of resumes for even one call-back. Some had devoted significant effort in getting training in areas like asbestos removal only to be told in the end that those positions were fewer and fewer in number. Others earned certifications and learned they would also need two years of workplace experience in that field to qualify for a position. They had no financial resources to wait for other opportunities to show up.

Overall, worker comments reflected high levels of effort despite infrequent successes, and they expressed desire for work that fits their acquired skills but where they know they need experience. These unemployed workers agree with employers that their histories of incarceration make them less appealing. They also agree that childcare, family caregiving obligations, and transportation challenge their ability to succeed in the workplace, especially as they await their first few payroll checks. For some, their limited resources have gone for training, attainment of minimum education requirements, and work-ready attire. A few with longer periods of unemployment reported that they needed to decide if they were going to make their limited purchases for clothing to wear to work when they had not had wage-earning job in years, or were they going to buy clothes that were more fitting their neighborhood and daily needs.

“You cannot give up, Brother. Dust yourself off. You messed up in the past, but you got to tell yourself every day, ‘This one will turn that corner. This one.’ Hang in there.”

--Male job seeker, over 35

Despite these setbacks, barriers, and personal challenges, these job seekers often remain hopeful in the face of apparently insurmountable odds.

In the end, employers and job seekers alike recognize an intolerable situation, are unsure about what to do about it, and don't see an alternative right now.

OUR OPPORTUNITY

Milwaukee employers are currently vaguely aware that something can be done to address our pressing employment needs for people with limited soft skills and/or challenging work histories. Understandably, their focus is on accessing qualified workers for open positions that require significant skills. Many employers recognize that to address their needs they must have a more racially and ethnically diverse workforce. However, fewer employers recognize that the individuals they need are a part of communities struggling to get by, communities in which family supporting wages have been increasingly rare.

To address this situation, we will need to:

- Provide sufficient, relevant information to area employers and others interested in our city's workforce about the surplus of workers interested in their unfilled jobs. They need to understand the situation, meet willing workers, and hear their enthusiasm and interest in working hard. Employers need to know the barriers that job seekers face in accessing the employment pipeline.
- Energize the perspective among stakeholders that something can and must be done to effectively address the needs of employers for additional workers while matching the interests of unemployed or underemployed workers to find work. A decade or more of the apparent impasse between employers and job seekers has led to discouragement and disappointment on all sides. Early wins by willing champions must be shared widely to foster enthusiasm for investments.
- Explore what is possible in resolving Milwaukee's workforce challenges over the next four years. There is opportunity to research, design, and thoughtfully implement tactics that have worked elsewhere so that they can be brought to scale over a reasonable period of time.

To advance these goals, it is recommended that in 2017 we:

1. Engage existing employer groups in five employment sectors (construction, finance, health care, hospitality, and manufacturing) to share and discuss current challenges and opportunities in hiring and retaining workers who have irregular work histories or limited soft skills;
2. Convene opinion leaders to learn about promising practices in supportive employment and lend their endorsement to efforts that would implement those practices locally;
3. Recruit a small cohort of medium and large employers to help adapt approaches that have been tried and worked elsewhere to Milwaukee's workforce challenges; and
4. Use existing mechanisms to more broadly share information about workforce challenges and opportunities to garner increased public support for workplace efforts elsewhere that could be implemented or expanded locally.

The investment by employers, government, foundations, and nonprofits over the following four years would seek to test and implement promising practices and to advance those interventions which show the most significant job placement and job retention results in Milwaukee.

The YWCA has a rich history of providing workforce development services that include job-driven training programs, job placement, retention and advancement services. The YWCA's comprehensive services help build earning capacity for more than 10,000 individuals each year. The organization has extensive experience in administering programs for economically disadvantaged individuals and has offered employment and training programs since 1995. This experience makes the YWCA a leading workforce development organization in Milwaukee.

The YWCA also has significant experience working with several local employers providing racial justice training to human resources and management level professionals through its Unlearning Racism: Tools for Action workshop series and tailored trainings.

Because of the unique positioning of the YWCA in this arena, it is poised to advance this opportunity with its partners in the construction, financial services, health care, hospitality, and manufacturing sectors.

OUR TEAM

A great many people have been instrumental in moving this project from idea to fruition. Paula Penebaker, President and CEO, and Martha Barry, Racial Justice Director, YWCA Southeast Wisconsin, along with Gary Hollander, PhD, consultant, directed this project and continued to emphasize the importance of the assessment to Milwaukee. They also shared early findings with key government, foundation, and corporate partners who expressed enthusiasm for the effort.

The CRA process was guided by a team of business advisors and their companies. Their thoughtful reflection on the process and its products were critical to the project's overall success. This team included:

Joel Brennan, Discovery World; Ellen Demos, Aurora Health Care; Paul Jansen, BMO Harris Bradley Center; Theresa Jones, formerly of Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare, now with Parklawn Assembly of God; Cheryl Kern, Johnson Controls; Renee Kirnberger, formerly of Potawatomi Bingo Casino; Sarah Schneider, Northwestern Mutual; and Ed Seaberg, Rockwell Automation.

This advisory team and YWCA staff, Jennifer deMontmollin, Chief Program Officer; and Chad Bunker, Communication and Marketing Director advised and provided detailed attention to the project. Focus groups of job seekers were ably facilitated by YWCA case management staff. Support from Mike Jones and Steve Radlinger of AmericaWorks Wisconsin opened doors to additional employers.

Deep gratitude is extended to Melissa Ugland, Ugland Associates, for coordinating the community readiness assessment interviews and for providing scoring and analysis of interviews. Her associates' precision and care in reviewing all the transcripts allowed this team to reach our conclusions with confidence.

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This report and the information it contains are the work product and property of the YWCA Southeast Wisconsin (YWCASEW). Any use of the report/ information is prohibited without written permission of the YWCASEW.

OUR NOTES

¹ <http://www.homefacts.com/unemployment/Wisconsin/Milwaukee-County/Milwaukee.html>

² <http://247wallst.com/economy/2015/10/07/why-milwaukee-is-the-worst-city-for-black-americans/>

³ <http://247wallst.com/special-report/2015/10/06/the-worst-cities-for-black-americans/>

⁴ http://worknet.wisconsin.gov/worknet_info/downloads/CP/milwaukee_profile.pdf

⁵ http://triethniccenter.colostate.edu/docs/CR_Handbook_8-3-15.pdf

⁶ http://triethniccenter.colostate.edu/docs/CR_Handbook_8-3-15.pdf

⁷ <https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2016/01/25/back-in-time-60-years-americas-most-segregated-city.html>