



# REGIONAL WORKFORCE STRATEGY

Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**TIP STRATEGIES, INC.**, is a privately held economic development consulting firm with offices in Austin and Seattle. TIP is committed to providing quality solutions for public sector and private sector clients. Established in 1995, the firm's primary focus is economic development strategic planning.

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## INTRODUCTION

Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area (WSRCA) is 1 of 28 workforce development boards in the state of Texas that are charged with planning and oversight responsibilities for workforce programs and services in their areas. As such, it is the designated administrative entity and grant recipient for approximately \$26 million, annually, of federal and state funds for workforce development, employment, training, and childcare.

The WSRCA service area includes nine counties in Central Texas: Bastrop, Blanco, Burnet, Caldwell, Fayette, Hays, Lee, Llano, and Williamson (the RCA region). Each of these counties has a fairly distinct economy and workforce. Four of these counties—Bastrop, Caldwell, Hays, and Williamson—are part of the Austin–Round Rock–Georgetown Metropolitan Statistical Area (Austin MSA). Of these counties, Hays and Williamson share more urban or suburban characteristics, with development built around the major transportation corridors of the Interstate 35 corridor and Highway 183. Williamson County is home to some of the Austin region’s largest technology companies, while Hays County is home to Texas State University and a diverse mix of manufacturers, distribution centers, and destination retail. Most of the other counties have economies that reflect each of their unique histories, environmental features as well as natural resources and amenities—the Highland Lakes in Llano and Burnet Counties, the gateway to the Hill Country in Hays County, the birthplace of former President Lyndon B. Johnson in Blanco County, the Colorado River and state parks in Bastrop County, the fertile farmland and spring-fed San Marcos River in Caldwell County, the active oil and gas sector in Lee County, and the German and Czech cultural legacy in Fayette County.

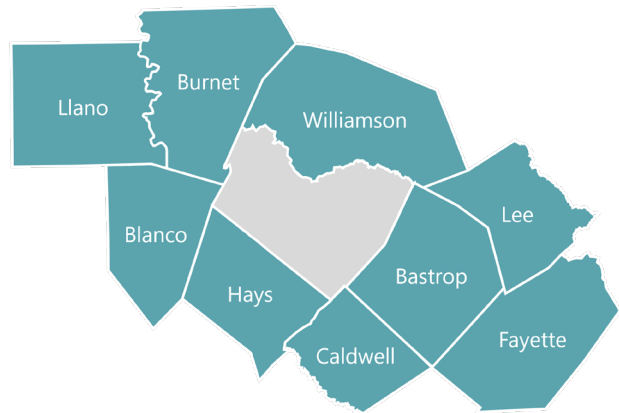
Providing workforce programs and services to such a diverse and large service area can be challenging and requires much more than a one-size-fits-all approach. It requires careful planning and a great deal of coordination to leverage the many resources and opportunities that each county has. It is with this in mind that WSRCA embarked on a planning process to create strategic plans tailored for each county and a common regional strategic framework and plan to enhance collaboration around workforce development and amplify the collective impact of workforce initiatives and programs across the region.

In spring 2020, WSRCA initiated the strategic planning process, hiring TIP Strategies to lead the process and assist in the development of the plans. The set of plans, which will guide WSRCA work over the next 3 years, includes a specific plan customized for each of the nine counties in the region and a regional plan that draws from the common elements across the various county plans.

Over the course of the planning process, the project team conducted a survey of stakeholders across the region and held a workshop in each of the counties to identify the workforce issues and challenges unique to each county. Through this process, common challenges and issues emerged that all or most of the counties in the region share. For these common challenges, a specific focus group was held with subject matter experts in the region to discuss potential solutions to these challenges and relevant initiatives already underway. This input informed the development of the goals and strategies that provide a shared agenda and common framework for the region and each of the counties.

When the planning process commenced, the regional economy was at the end of a record-setting period of expansion, and the labor market was experiencing historically low unemployment. The fundamentals of the regional economy were strong. However, even under these favorable conditions, worrisome trends loomed on the

FIGURE 1. WSRCA SERVICE AREA



horizon. The aging of the workforce and retirement exposure, the educational attainment of the working-age population, youth disconnection, and the digitalization of jobs were issues that significantly impact many of the counties. In the stakeholder survey and county workshops, issues such as housing, transportation, and childcare were highlighted as key structural barriers for jobseekers. A shortage of technical skills and talent, soft skills, and access to training were highlighted as challenges facing employers.

The economic shutdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent recession magnified many of the workforce-related challenges and issues. Overnight, broadband access became the primary enabler of workers and students in the new COVID-19-related economy, and digital skills became evermore essential. Unemployment skyrocketed to 11.5 percent, yet some employers still found it difficult to fill certain positions. Older and more vulnerable workers dropped out of the labor force, retiring early, or staying home for health safety reasons. School closures and remote work at a time when early education centers were forced to close or operate at reduced capacity made childcare an even greater challenge for working families.

While the pandemic certainly brought to light health and economic disparities, it also reiterated the importance of access to good education, workforce development, and economic opportunities as a means to lessen some of these disparities. It is in this context that WSRCA completed its strategic plans—with the understanding that now, more than ever, it must be a leader in the nine-county region in aligning and coordinating resources to support common workforce-related goals and to address longstanding structural barriers facing jobseekers and employers.

# REGIONAL STRATEGY

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The WSRCA regional strategy provides a common strategic framework for both the overarching organizational direction and the individual county plans. It starts by aligning the framework around the WSRCA mission and vision. The 2017–2020 *Strategic & Operational Plan* for Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area lays out the organization’s mission and vision.

## MISSION

*“Preserve our integrated, employer-driven workforce system by actively involving employers in workforce decisions that allows them to identify labor and economic trends, define skills and training standards, and hire high skilled workers, while simultaneously providing job seekers with information, advice, job search assistance, supportive services, and training in the employer identified industries and occupations so they will attain cutting edge skills that will lead to self-sufficient employment.”*

## VISION

*“Our employers will have a highly skilled and educated workforce and our residents will have the competencies, skills, and education to become self-sufficient and live a quality life.”*

A key element to the organizational mission is the concept of “employer-driven workforce system,” where employers play an active role in the workforce system by providing input on the skills and competencies that they need, feedback on the quality of workforce training programs and services, and resources to support career awareness and exploration opportunities. In other words, employers are active partners in the workforce system, which results in the better alignment of workforce and education programs with employer demand. This, in turn, should lead to improved workforce outcomes.

Another key element to the mission is the goal of “self-sufficient employment,” which means that workers can support themselves and their families without public assistance. This goal establishes a focus for the organization on careers that lead to family sustaining wages.

These two elements inform the direction of the strategic plan and bring to the forefront the structural issues that stand as significant barriers for both employers and jobseekers. In the context of this mission and vision, three goals were designed to serve as the backbone for the regional and county strategies.

1. **COLLABORATE ON SOLUTIONS FOR STRUCTURAL BARRIERS.** Strengthen the awareness of structural barriers and encourage more collaboration to address large-scale, workforce-related challenges.
2. **ENHANCE THE REGION’S EMPLOYER-LED AND DEMAND-DRIVEN WORKFORCE SYSTEM.** Infuse industry input and engagement throughout the workforce system to strengthen feedback loops among employers, education and training providers, and jobseekers.
3. **CREATE PATHWAYS TO SELF-SUFFICIENT EMPLOYMENT AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT.** Establish and strengthen well-defined pathways to help guide jobseekers into high-demand career opportunities that provide family-supporting wages and opportunities for advancement.

For each goal, there is a set of strategies and actions to guide the work of WSRCA over the next 3 years.

## GOAL 1. COLLABORATE ON SOLUTIONS FOR STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

*Strengthen the awareness of structural barriers and encourage more collaboration to address large-scale, workforce-related challenges.*

In prior convenings of regional stakeholders as well as the workshops that were held as part of this planning process, many of the same issues were cited as major structural barriers for the workforce—housing, childcare, transportation, and broadband. These are large-scale challenges that cannot be addressed by just one entity, but rather they require a collaborative effort to align resources around a shared goal. With the exception of childcare, these are challenges that WSRCA does not directly influence. However, WSRCA can use its position as a regional organization to convene and support the network of partners and stakeholders that can directly influence these issues. This network will be called the Workforce Matters Coalition.

### SAMPLE METRICS

- Number of coalitions by county
- Number of participants in the coalitions
- Coalition-specific metrics that are chosen by the members of the coalitions according to the roadmap they define

The collective impact model is a proven model for bringing stakeholders together in a structured way to achieve social change. Bastrop County Cares is an excellent example in the region of what can be achieved when everyone is working together toward common goals. They have formed coalitions around specific issues, developed plans, and executed these plans. As a result, they made strides toward addressing each of the structural issues. Multiple housing projects, including workforce, senior, and affordable units, are in some stage of development. An early childhood coalition has created a roadmap to increase the quantity and quality of childcare. The Capital Area Rural Transit System (CARTS) is working on a pilot program in Bastrop County for on-demand transit services. And it is working with Connected Nation to accelerate mapping and technology planning for broadband access in the county. It has shown the power of a collaborative, coordinated approach in addressing complex issues.

Replicating the Bastrop County Cares model across the region will not be an easy task, but WSRCA can meet each of the counties where they are and build on the blocks that are already in place. From leadership training and capacity building to technical assistance and peer learning, WSRCA can help build the infrastructure and plant the seeds needed for each of the counties to be empowered to launch and sustain their own collective impact initiatives. Each of these initiatives will be part of the Workforce Matters Coalition and will work actively and collaboratively to address the large-scale, workforce-related challenges.

In the childcare arena, WSRCA is well-positioned to take a leadership role in launching and supporting early learning coalitions in the region. WSRCA injects more than \$20 million annually into the regional childcare system, serving more than 5,000 children through its network of nearly 300 childcare providers. It has established relationships with a large percentage of childcare providers in the region and has an established network for coordination, organization, and advocacy work to advance the system. It also has a method of transparent communication with the childcare providers and is aware of the needs and concerns of the early learning community. This will allow WSRCA to more quickly organize and scale-up coalitions focused on increasing the quality and quantity of childcare in the counties.

Through its work to build the Workforce Matters Coalition, WSRCA will be able to help mobilize and align resources in each of the counties to work toward addressing these structural barriers.



- 1.1. Empower community leaders across the region to tackle large workforce-related challenges through the formation and launch of the Workforce Matters Coalition.
  - 1.1.1. **Leadership Training and Capacity Building.** Build the capacity of community leaders to affect change and improve their communities by training them in the collective impact approach, drawing on the regional best practice of Bastrop County Cares and other successful models in the region. This could be the Community Matters Academy.
  - 1.1.2. **Connect.** Make introductions and connections between the different groups and leaders who are working on the same issues and challenges.
  - 1.1.3. **Peer Learning.** Establish peer-learning networks in each of the primary workforce-related topic areas to support community leaders who are implementing solutions in these areas.
  - 1.1.4. **Community Matters Summit.** Convene an annual summit that highlights successful efforts and provides opportunities for stakeholders to share knowledge and troubleshoot together.
- 1.2. Encourage and inspire action among and across each of the county initiatives.
  - 1.2.1. **Data.** Document the importance of issues, including housing, childcare, transportation, and broadband, for jobseekers in the region to better quantify the challenges.
  - 1.2.2. **Spotlight Success.** Spotlight successful initiatives and provide opportunities for other stakeholders in the region to learn about these successes.
  - 1.2.3. **Toolkits.** Maintain toolkits for shared challenges that provide information on the tools available to address the challenges and examples of communities that have used these tools successfully.
  - 1.2.4. **Technical Assistance.** Assemble a team of experts who can assist community leaders in convening key stakeholders and assessing their community's readiness to launch. Help these leaders identify key partners, champions, and resources that can be drawn on for a successful launch and implementation.
  - 1.2.5. **Funding Access.** Create a database of potential funding resources both within and beyond the region and seek funding opportunities as a coalition where possible.
- 1.3. Engage employers in the Workforce Matters Coalition to participate in the planning and implementation of solutions to address.
  - 1.3.1. **Investment Fund.** Design an "investment vehicle," such as a funders collaborative, whereby employers can jointly invest in solutions to alleviate critical workforce challenges.
  - 1.3.2. **Volunteer Corps.** Create an employer-based volunteer corps of individuals who are willing to dedicate time to work on these big issues, ideally during work hours as part of their employer's community outreach program.

#### THE WORKFORCE MATTERS COALITION

The Workforce Matters Coalition will be a network of organizations modeled after Bastrop County Cares, which is a partnership of public, private, faith-based, and nonprofit organizations, institutions, and individuals. This coalition will work to address large, shared challenges facing jobseekers and employers such as housing, childcare, transportation, and broadband within each county and across the region.

**1.4.** Launch and lead the Childcare Workforce Matters Coalition to improve and enhance the system of early care and education across the counties.

**1.4.1. Early Learning Coalitions.** As part of the Workforce Matters Coalition initiative, create childcare coalitions in high-need areas to focus on recruiting additional (new or existing) providers to the Texas Rising Star (TRS) program, facilitate the implementation of Texas House Bill 3 (HB3), and address other childcare-related industry and workforce needs.

**1.4.2. Technical Assistance and Business Accelerator.** Partner with small business technical assistance providers to support existing and new childcare providers as they adapt their business models to the COVID and post-COVID environments, as they seek TRS certification, and as they assess opportunities for Early Learning Partnerships related to HB3.

**1.4.3. Shared Services.** Work with the provider network to identify areas where pooling resources or demand could yield significant efficiencies and savings to bolster the providers' financial sustainability. Consider ideas such as the cooperative purchase of health insurance, health and safety supplies, or curricula or outsourcing business functions, such as information technology (IT), human resources, training, or bookkeeping.

**1.4.4. Substitute Pool Pilot.** Work with providers to pilot a shared substitute pool model as an extension of the shared services initiative (see strategy 1.4.3). In this model, a suitable contractor would be identified to recruit, maintain, and place qualified early learning specialist substitutes to support providers in a particular geography.

**1.4.5. Early Care and Education Careers.** Actively advocate for increased professional development for childcare workers and for improving wages to make early care and education careers viable careers that pay family-sustaining wages.

**1.4.6. Employer Partners.** Explore ways to further involve employers in implementing creative solutions to support employees' access to high-quality childcare. This could include solutions such as employer-sponsored childcare, employer contributions/matches to dependent care flexible spending accounts (FSAs), or providing backup care options.

#### CASE STUDY

##### ORGANIZING TO IMPROVE EARLY EDUCATION

According to a 2017 report by the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation (USCCF), "America is facing a childcare challenge that threatens the productivity and strength of the workforce today—as well as the quality of the workforce of tomorrow." The size and scope of this challenge requires a commensurate response that includes not only the public sector and nonprofits but also the private sector.

There are a number of ways a cross-sector coalition can work to improve the access and delivery of high-quality childcare.

- Support the business side of childcare providers through technical assistance and shared-services program.
- Pool philanthropic and corporate social responsibility dollars to programs that improve access to childcare—scholarships or a fund for tuition subsidies.
- Advocate for effective public policy to support transparency and accountability in the childcare system.
- Organize employers to implement policies to help parents access high-quality care.

For more information, visit [www.uschamberfoundation.org/reports/leading-way-guide-business-engagement-early-education](http://www.uschamberfoundation.org/reports/leading-way-guide-business-engagement-early-education)

## GOAL 2. ENHANCE THE REGION'S EMPLOYER-LED AND DEMAND-DRIVEN WORKFORCE SYSTEM

*Infuse industry input and engagement throughout the workforce system to strengthen feedback loops among employers, education and training providers, and jobseekers.*

A key element of the mission of WSRCA is an employer-led workforce system, a system in which employers actively participate and provide timely input to other stakeholders in the system to ensure that the system is driven by the needs of employers, or by demand. WSRCA has already invested a great deal of resources and effort into tools and approaches that create a more demand-driven system. It can expand these efforts and introduce new ones to continue to enhance the regional workforce system and infuse industry input and engagement throughout the system.

### SAMPLE METRICS

- Number of industry partnerships
- Number of employers participating in Workforce Matters Coalition
- Number of employers in the employer database that participate in three or more activities annually

One of the areas to which WSRCA contributes is the publication and distribution of labor market information. WSRCA can continue to refine its labor market resources to enhance the regional understanding of the labor market and the associated career opportunities. It will also need to continue its active outreach to partners and stakeholders to build a distribution network for this labor market information, ensuring that the information is integrated into workforce programs and initiatives across the region.

Industry partnerships are pillars of an employer-led system. In these partnerships, employers lead conversations about their needs and challenges, set their own agendas, and take action. In the RCA region, the geographic territory is large, and the county economies are all different, which makes typical industry partnerships more difficult to establish. However, WSRCA can work to identify specific industries that are of significance to the RCA region that are experiencing common pain points unique to a more rural setting and work to launch partnerships in those sectors.

While industry partnerships serve as a mechanism for employer engagement, they also serve as an input platform to validate labor market information, including the identification of high-demand occupations. Using this information to coordinate regional education and training providers and other nonprofits can ensure that the infrastructure is in place to support robust talent pipelines for high-demand occupations and careers.

Another pillar of an employer-led system is business engagement. Expanding the depth and breadth of business engagement in the workforce system will be a critical factor in enhancing the demand-driven nature of the system. Creating a more uniform and unified business engagement program that supports workforce organizations and training providers across the region can improve the reach and the quality of the engagement activities.

Taken together, these strategies will continue to enhance the employer-led and demand-driven workforce system across the RCA region.

- 2.1. Continue to publish and distribute robust and informative labor market data about the nine-county region to make information about labor market demand more widely available and easily accessible.
  - 2.1.1. **Headlight.** Continue to make labor market information available through Rural Capital Headlight ([www.ruralcapitalheadlight.com](http://www.ruralcapitalheadlight.com)).
  - 2.1.2. **Workforce Profile.** Using the data compiled in Rural Capital Headlight, revise the workforce profiles for each county to be more accessible and easier to interpret, while summarizing key labor market characteristics and trends that can be used to enhance community and employer understanding of the local labor market.

- 2.1.3. Hot Careers.** Update Hot Careers information annually and share this with school counselors, career navigators, students, and jobseekers to better inform career decision-making.
- 2.1.4. Career Lattice.** Integrate and maintain current labor market information into the Career Lattice system.
- 2.1.5. Customized Research.** Provide customized labor market profiles to support regional economic development efforts, as needed.
- 2.2. Target programs to support high-demand industries, occupations, and careers.**
- 2.2.1. Existing Industry Partnerships.** Support existing industry groups, such as sector partnerships, associations, and roundtables in high-demand industries, to leverage existing business relationships and initiatives already underway. Partnerships already exist for manufacturing and healthcare. For existing industry partnerships, evaluate the feasibility of having a rural working group that could focus on rural workforce issues and solutions related to that industry.
- 2.2.2. New Industry Partnerships.** Launch new partnerships in industries or areas where groups do not exist for the high-demand industries using employer-led models such as the Next Generation Sector Partnerships and the USCCF Talent Pipeline Management. Consider launching partnerships related to local governments and education (including early care and learning), which are two of the most important employers in the rural counties.
- 2.2.3. High-Demand Occupation Training.** Ensure that training is available and accessible for high-demand occupations. Where training is not available, work with industry representatives to identify a high-quality training provider that could serve the area.
- 2.2.4. Career Lattice.** Create an assessment device that allows people to assess their current skills and where that would place them on the career lattice system. This will expand and enhance the development of the Career Lattice system that provides opportunities for upward mobility and skills-based hiring. In many of the counties, fast food and counter workers, cashiers, retail salespersons, waitstaff, and janitors and cleaners are some of the highest-demand occupations. These common entry-level occupations could be the starting point for a new set of Career Lattices that can guide workers on transitions into higher opportunity careers.
- 2.3. Enhance and expand the role and participation of employers in the workforce system through meaningful input and engagement.**
- 2.3.1. Inventory of Opportunities.** Document the ways employers can get involved in the workforce system in an online brochure or video that presents the engagement opportunities and benefits. Opportunities for involvement can include any of the following.
- *Advisory roles*—serving on the workforce board, serving on business advisory committees, participating in the Workforce Matters Coalition or industry partnership at a chamber or economic development organization (EDO).
  - *Career awareness and exploration*—participating in a career expo, speaking to a class, teaching a career-related hands-on learning activity, hosting a tour of the workplace or a job shadow day, hosting a teacher extern.
  - *Career connections and training*—participating in a career fair, hosting interns or apprentices or other work-based learning activity, providing customized training or on-the-job training.
- 2.3.2. Knowledge Sharing.** Provide opportunities for the organizations and individuals planning the above activities to share best practices, knowledge, and feedback related to designing activities that effectively engage employers.

- 2.3.3. Information Distribution.** Partner with chambers of commerce and EDOs in the region to distribute this information to employers, identify employers who are already participating, or recruit employers who would like to participate in the workforce system.
- 2.3.4. Employer Database.** Create a database of these employers and record the ways they would like to participate. Use this information to help connect employers with organizations that are planning any of the above activities and seeking employer participants.

#### **CASE STUDY**

##### ***AUSTIN CHAMBER TALENT AMBASSADORS***

In 2019, the Austin Chamber launched its talent ambassador program as a way of facilitating employer engagement with local schools, postsecondary institutions, and nonprofit organizations. Through the program, the chamber collects information on how the employer wants to engage and maintains this information in a centralized database. Engagement activities could include any of the following.

- Offering internships, mentorships, apprenticeships, job shadow opportunities, classroom speakers, site tours, or teacher externships.
- Participating on business advisory councils or with career fairs.

The chamber liaison facilitates connections between the talent ambassadors and the educational institutions that are offering those activities. This provides businesses with ways to give back to the community while homing in on their future workforces and provides students with meaningful career exploration opportunities.

The Austin Chamber has recruited more than 60 ambassadors.

## GOAL 3. CREATE PATHWAYS TO SELF-SUFFICIENT EMPLOYMENT AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT

*Establish and strengthen well-defined pathways to help guide jobseekers into high-demand career opportunities that provide family-supporting wages and opportunities for advancement.*

Another key element of the WSRCA mission is self-sufficient employment. This element is carried forward in the third goal as a baseline and is coupled with career advancement and opportunity to ensure that WSRCA is working to help jobseekers into careers that provide opportunities not only for self-sufficiency but also for upward mobility.

Achieving this goal starts with building greater career awareness and connections among jobseekers, potential workers, and employers in the region. WSRCA will continue to work with its network of partners to make sure that students and adults who are looking for new careers are aware of the range of opportunities in their county, have opportunities to explore high-demand careers in the region and access training, and can connect with employers who are hiring for those careers.

In addition, WSRCA can work to ensure that training programs for high-demand careers can be accessed in the region and that these programs are training for the right skills that regional employers need. Assisting in recruiting participants to business advisory committees, supporting communities in expanding access to postsecondary training, and providing funding for training in high-quality programs related to high-demand careers are all ways WSRCA can improve the alignment of talent pipelines around the needs of employers.

Finally, WSRCA can assist jobseekers in transitioning to and training for high-quality careers that provide advancement opportunities. It can encourage employers to examine their hiring and human resource practices to put in place policies that support skills-based hiring and upskilling. WSRCA can also actively partner with economic development organizations to collaborate on initiatives to assist small businesses and support business expansion and job creation in the counties.

- 3.1.** Raise awareness of the full range of career opportunities in the region and create opportunities for regional employers to connect with prospective workers.
  - 3.1.1. Tools and Toolkits.** Create toolkits and online tools to support regional school districts and workforce centers in raising awareness of the specific career opportunities available in their county.
  - 3.1.2. Training Inventory.** Explore the development of a database of training opportunities related to high-demand careers that are accessible to jobseekers and workers in the region, including the eligible training provider list and other established regional career programs.
  - 3.1.3. Events and Activities.** Partner with local organizations to host career awareness events and work-based learning activities across the region that provide opportunities for students and jobseekers to explore high-demand careers in a hands-on exploratory format (see strategy 2.3.4).

### SAMPLE METRICS

- Participants in career exploration, internships, work-based learning, and other activities
- Enrollment in high-demand training programs at high schools, community colleges, or other training providers
- Placement rates for Eligible Training Providers and other training partners
- Business participation on advisory committees
- Access to training opportunities for high-demand occupations
- Enrollment in programs related to advancement (Tier 1+ in Career Lattice)
- Wage gain after training
- Job creation by industry and median hourly wage

- 3.1.4. Untapped Populations.** Create working groups to target hard-to-reach populations to help raise career awareness among these populations and connect them with training programs or employment opportunities.
- 3.2.** Ensure that regional education and workforce programs are training for the right skills.
- 3.2.1. Business Advisory Committees.** Assist education and training providers in recruiting employers to their business advisory committees and in making their business advisory committees function more effectively as input tools.
- 3.2.2. Curriculum Review.** Partner with education and training providers to better align their programs with the skills and competencies sought by employers by using a curriculum review process that documents the common needs of employers and reports that information back to training providers.
- 3.2.3. Training Program—Employer Connections.** Foster connections between training providers that have programs related to high-demand occupations and employers that are hiring for those occupations, using the training inventory referenced in Strategy 3.1.2.
- 3.2.4. Program Accessibility.** Ensure high-quality training is available and accessible in all the high-demand occupations in the region (see strategy 2.2.3).
- 3.2.5. Community College/Technical College Access.** Work with counties and communities to strengthen partnerships with their community colleges and technical colleges to improve accessibility to workforce training in the region.
- 3.2.6. Funding Support.** Support training for high-demand occupations through training grants and other funding.
- 3.3.** Encourage and support career advancement and the creation of better economic opportunity.
- 3.3.1. Career Readiness.** Ensure that new workers entering the labor force have the knowledge and skills to succeed in the workplace. This can be done indirectly through partnerships with school districts (see Case Study: Future Career Academy) and directly through WSRCA services.
- 3.3.2. Career Transition.** Provide support for jobseekers and workers looking to move into higher opportunity careers through the use of Career Lattices and tools such as Metrix Learning that can help individuals identify and address their own skills gaps.
- 3.3.3. Skills-Based Hiring.** Promote the practice of skills-based hiring among regional employers to provide better access to opportunities for regional workers.

**CASE STUDY*****FUTURE CAREER ACADEMY***

In recognition that a sizeable portion of each high school graduating class goes directly into the workforce, the Future Career Academy began in Plant City, Florida, as a way to better prepare those students for the workforce and connect them to great jobs and career paths in their community.

All English 4 and English 4 Honors students are enrolled in the Future Career Academy. These students are often not planning to go to college. In the Future Career Academy, the required state curriculum has been refocused on career readiness and includes topics such as résumé writing, interview skills, and soft skills. The program introduces students to the industry sectors that are thriving in the area, the certification and internship programs that support those sectors, and the companies that represent those sectors. Financial literacy education is another feature of the program that prepares students with good money management skills.

Community and business connections opportunities are offered twice a semester and culminate with the Future Fair, which is a hiring event, and Signing Day, which celebrates students' decisions.

For more information, visit [plantcitycareeracademy.com/](http://plantcitycareeracademy.com/)

- 3.3.4. Employee Advancement.** Work with employers to encourage their promising employees to acquire new skills to advance in their careers.
- 3.3.5. Upskilling.** Connect jobseekers with training opportunities to retool and upskill to prepare them for next-tier careers.
- 3.3.6. Job Creation.** Support local chambers of commerce and EDOs in their efforts to strengthen small businesses and to assist business expansion, particularly those businesses that provide family-sustaining employment opportunities. The development of a regional business retention and expansion partnership could be one way to support their efforts (see Case Study: Larimer County Economic and Workforce Development).

#### CASE STUDY

##### *LARIMER COUNTY ECONOMIC AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT (LCEWD)*

As part of its combined economic and workforce development program, Larimer County, Colorado, leads a regional business retention and expansion partnership to support job creation across the county.

LCEWD convenes regional economic development organizations and business organizations to collaborate on their business retention and expansion programs. The program is meant to enhance business relationship building, increase information sharing among partners to deepen the understanding of regional business needs, and improve responsiveness to those needs through collaboration and scale.

The partners agree to rules of engagement to ensure confidentiality of information shared by businesses. They also use a common business visit interview form and short questionnaire to collect information on primary and non-primary employers. Data collected through these interviews and questionnaires are aggregated and analyzed on an annual basis and presented in an annual report ([https://northerncoloradoprospers.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2242-BRE-Annual-Report\\_8.5x11\\_Final.pdf](https://northerncoloradoprospers.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2242-BRE-Annual-Report_8.5x11_Final.pdf)).

Through this combined effort, the Partnership reaches more than 300 businesses.

For more information, visit [www.larimer.org/ewd/business/expand-your-business/regional-economic-development-partnership](http://www.larimer.org/ewd/business/expand-your-business/regional-economic-development-partnership)



# IMPLEMENTATION STRUCTURE

To implement the regional strategy, the WSRCA can utilize its current committee structure and expand the scope of each committee to encompass elements of the strategic plan. WSRCA has four established committees: Community Awareness & Outreach, Business & Education Services, Governance & Finance, and Untapped Populations. Together these committees can contribute through active participation to the successful implementation of the plan and can provide oversight related to the plan implementation.

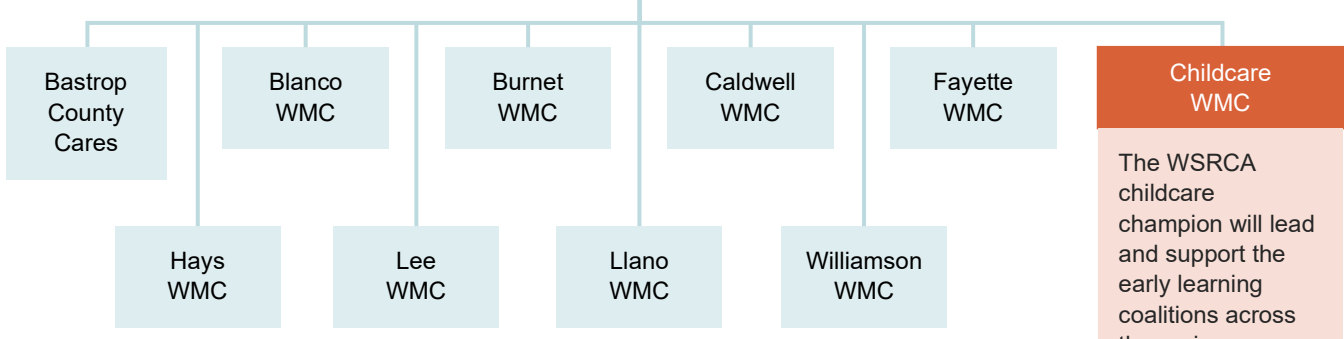


Another important piece of organizing for implementation is the structure of the Workforce Matters Coalition (WMC). This coalition will eventually have representation in each of the nine counties in the RCA region, though that will take time. Some of the counties have initiatives underway that can be leveraged and scaled to do the work of that county’s Workforce Matters Coalition. Other counties will need to start with the identification of leaders and capacity building, laying the groundwork for collaboration, and then launching gradually and slowly, one coalition at a time.

One or two leaders or champions will be selected in each county. These designated county champions will come together in the Workforce Matters Coalition Leadership Council, which will plan regional activities to support the work of the WMCs, share resources, fundraise, and track metrics. The Childcare WMC, led by the WSRCA Childcare Champion, will lead the work of the Early Learning Coalitions in the counties.

Each county’s WMC will choose which issues to prioritize and will launch and manage the coalitions in that county. Each of these coalitions will define its goals, develop a roadmap, and track its progress to report to the Leadership Council.

**WORKFORCE MATTERS COALITION LEADERSHIP COUNCIL**  
 (Chief Strategy Officer and WSRCA Childcare Champion and County Champions)



**Childcare WMC**

The WSRCA childcare champion will lead and support the early learning coalitions across the region, providing technical assistance to improve the quality and quantity of childcare providers in the region.

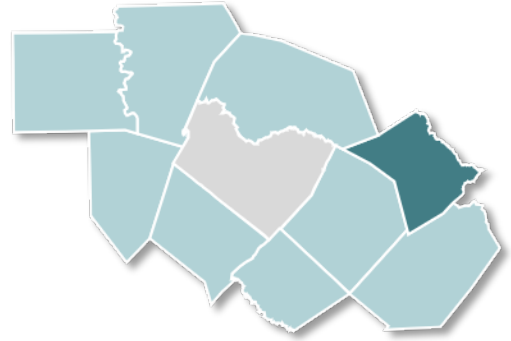
The chief strategy officer/office members will meet and support the counties where they are to help launch WMCs. Some counties might have established organizations that can take the lead. Others might need to start with leadership and capacity building.

# COUNTY STRATEGIC PLANS

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# LEE COUNTY

This Lee County plan is part of the Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area (WSRCA) regional strategic planning effort to enhance workforce development, employment, and training in the WSRCA service area. In addition to a regional plan, this effort includes individual plans for the nine WSRCA counties to meet the individual county needs and to better leverage the resources and opportunities in each county. This county plan is informed by input from the stakeholder survey conducted in the summer of 2020, the county workshop held in July, topic-specific regional focus groups held in August and September, any relevant strategic plans and studies, and economic and labor market data.



*WSRCA's strategic plan has set three ambitious goals: (1) to help address big structural barriers such as housing, childcare, transportation, and broadband; (2) to enhance the employer-led and demand-driven workforce system; and (3) to create stronger pathways to self-sufficient employment and career advancement.*

We hope that Lee County will join us in this collective effort to improve the workforce system and address workforce challenges across our region.

## KEY FINDINGS:





- An aging workforce, a lack of housing, a shortage of childcare, and a high poverty rate were highlighted as significant workforce issues in the county.
- Successful workforce programs such as summer internships, career fairs, and scholarships have strengthened the county's talent pipeline and demonstrated the community's willingness to support workforce development. Growing and scaling these types of programs provide an opportunity to further strengthen the talent pool.
- Creating additional economic opportunity through the support of small businesses, remote work, and infrastructure such as broadband will also be important.

## PRIORITIES:

- Support the launch of the Workforce Matters Coalition to help address structural barriers across the region, including housing, transportation, childcare, and broadband.
- Strengthen and align partnerships with chambers of commerce and economic development organizations to engage employers more meaningfully in the workforce system and improve the understanding of the local labor market.
- Increase the awareness of high-demand careers and the opportunities to connect with Lee County employers while ensuring educational programs in the region are training for the right skills.

## SWOT ANALYSIS

The following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis is the summary of input from the workshops, surveys, and interviews conducted as part of the strategic planning process as well as key findings from labor market data.

 <h3>STRENGTHS</h3>	 <h3>WEAKNESSES</h3>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Swift recovery of unemployment rate during the COVID-19 pandemic</li> <li>• Relatively high labor force participation rate for the RCA region</li> <li>• High median hourly wage</li> <li>• Opportunity Zone in Giddings, also qualified for the federal New Market Tax Credit program</li> <li>• Successful summer internship program</li> <li>• Career fairs and financial literacy training in junior high—partnership with AgriLife, school district, chamber, and the Giddings EDC</li> <li>• Scholarships to fund students' pursuit of college degree</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High poverty rate (14.2%)</li> <li>• Higher retirement exposure (41.0%)</li> <li>• Fairly high percentage of adults without a high school diploma</li> <li>• Lack of housing</li> <li>• Shortage of technical and soft skills</li> <li>• Not enough affordable, quality childcare</li> <li>• Youth disconnection is perceived to be high</li> <li>• Substance abuse hampers people's ability to get and keep a job</li> </ul>
 <h3>OPPORTUNITIES</h3>	 <h3>THREATS</h3>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting small businesses and entrepreneurs</li> <li>• Providing additional training for skilled trades related to construction and oil and gas</li> <li>• Coordination with CTE programs to encourage growth of skilled trades training</li> <li>• Remote work</li> <li>• Additional apprenticeship training</li> <li>• Further extension of fiber network(s) to improve broadband access</li> <li>• Improved connections between local employers and students who plan to go directly into the workforce</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of college graduates to other communities with higher opportunities</li> <li>• Cannot attract new businesses if do not have any housing for employees</li> </ul>

## STRATEGIC PLAN

Based on this input and analysis, the following strategies were identified for Lee County in alignment with the Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area (WSRCA) overall regional workforce strategy. These strategies will guide the work of WSRCA in Lee County through a strong partnership with elected officials and public servants, economic development organizations, chambers of commerce, school districts, and community-based organizations.

### GOAL 1. COLLABORATE ON SOLUTIONS FOR STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

*Strengthen the awareness of structural barriers and encourage more collaboration to address large-scale, workforce-related challenges.*

- 1.1. Convene stakeholders in Lee County to gauge interest in joining the Workforce Matters Coalition, identify a community champion(s) to spearhead the initiative in the county, and prioritize which coalition to launch first. Housing, childcare, and youth disconnection were three issues that emerged as top priorities in input sessions.
- 1.2. Help engage employers in the Workforce Matters Coalition as volunteers and potential funders, especially in those initiatives that represent significant barriers to workers and jobseekers in Lee County.

### GOAL 2. ENHANCE THE REGION'S EMPLOYER-LED AND DEMAND-DRIVEN WORKFORCE SYSTEM

*Infuse industry input and engagement throughout the workforce system to strengthen feedback loops among employers, education and training providers, and jobseekers.*

- 2.1. Strengthen partnerships and participation with business organizations in Lee County, including the Giddings EDC, the Lexington EDC, and the Giddings Chamber of Commerce.
- 2.2. Encourage the Giddings EDC and other Lee County stakeholders to establish a Workforce Matters Coalition countywide to serve as a forum for business engagement in the workforce system.
- 2.3. Raise awareness of opportunities for Lee County employers to participate in the Workforce Matters Coalition to identify/articulate their joint training needs, serve in advisory roles for CTE programs, and participate in other career awareness and readiness activities.
- 2.4. Distribute Lee County's workforce profile and make presentations on labor market conditions and trends in Lee County to the above partners and other essential stakeholders, such as school districts and interested community organizations.
- 2.5. Consider developing new Career Lattice system based on other entry-level jobs that are common entry points for workers in Lee County, including occupations in mining/extraction, agriculture, retail, and building grounds and maintenance.

#### TOP INDUSTRY SECTORS

##### TOP 5 LARGEST, 2019

- Construction
- Government
- Trade, Transportation, and Utilities (includes Retail)
- Natural Resource and Mining
- Manufacturing

### GOAL 3. CREATE PATHWAYS TO SELF-SUFFICIENT EMPLOYMENT AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT

*Establish and strengthen well-defined pathways to help guide jobseekers into high-demand career opportunities that provide family-supporting wages and opportunities for advancement.*

- 3.1.** Work with Lee County school districts—Dime Box, Giddings, and Lexington—to ensure their endorsements and career and technology programs are linked with and aligned to the high-demand careers that exist in the county. These could include pathways in the architecture and construction, agriculture, transportation, and energy career clusters.
- 3.2.** Partner with school districts to recruit Lee County employers to serve on their business advisory committees, to review curricula as needed, and to participate in career awareness and connections activities, such as teacher externships, internships, and other work-based learning opportunities. Explore the possibility of centralizing input for programs that are offered in more than one of the school districts.
- 3.3.** Continue to partner with the school districts, the Giddings Chamber of Commerce, and the Giddings Public Library on youth-oriented career fairs and hiring events. Expand these events to include other parts of the county and more career exploration events as well as work-based learning activities to ensure that high school students going directly into the workforce are career ready and well connected with regional employers.
- 3.4.** Partner with the chambers of commerce and other employers to establish a scholarship fund that would provide financial support for students who enroll in training programs related to high-demand careers in Lee County. Consider linking this program with training-related internships at Lee County–based employers.
- 3.5.** Continue to partner with Giddings EDC to fund critical training needs for Lee County employers, including small businesses.
- 3.6.** Expand opportunities for adult basic education and job training through partnerships with Adult Education and Literacy, Blinn College, the school districts, and other relevant community-based organizations.

# APPENDICES

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## APPENDIX A. LABOR MARKET CHARACTERISTICS AND TRENDS

Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area provides a comprehensive resource for labor market information through its Rural Capital Headlight data portal, which was consulted throughout this project. However, some additional data analysis was performed as it related to specific workforce trends or issues that emerged as important workforce issues. This data is presented on the pages that follow.

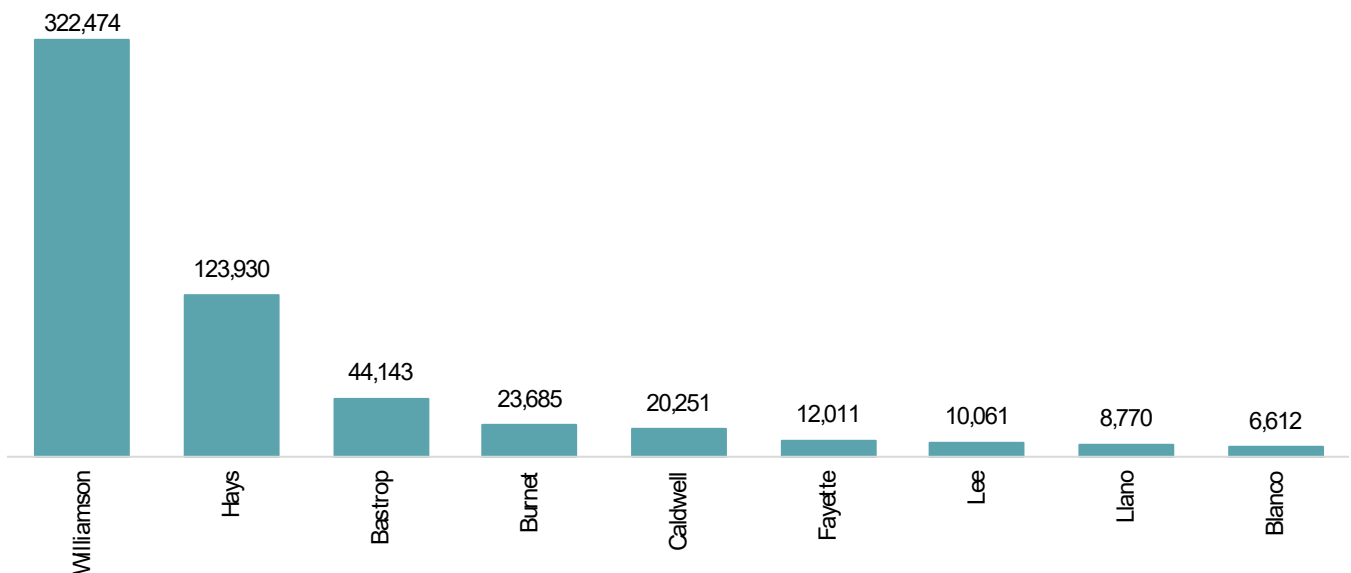
### KEY FINDINGS

- The civilian labor forces of the counties in the Rural Capital Area (RCA) region vary vastly, ranging from 322,474 in Williamson County to 6,612 in Blanco County. This is reflective of the county's geographic proximity to Austin (Travis County) and relative urbanization, with the highest concentration of workers along the Interstate 35 corridor.
- One of the trends that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic was a sharp contraction of the labor force in response to layoffs, business closures, childcare issues, and health risk/vulnerability. By August 2020, the labor forces had recovered or begun to grow again in Llano, Williamson, Bastrop, Caldwell, and Hays Counties. However, the labor forces remained smaller than they were in February 2020 in Lee, Blanco, Fayette, and Burnet Counties.
- As of August 2020, unemployment remained elevated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of unemployed ranged from 16,385 workers in Williamson County to 223 in Blanco County. The unemployment rate ranged from a high of 5.7 percent in Caldwell County to a low of 3.4 percent in Blanco County. All the counties in the Rural Capital region had unemployment rates below the state of Texas (7.0 percent) and the US (8.4 percent).
- The labor force participation rates of the counties vary from a high of 69.2 percent in Williamson County to a low of 46.7 percent in Llano County. With the exception of Hays and Williamson Counties, all the Counties have lower participation rates than Texas and the US.
- The median hourly wage ranges from a high of \$18.08 in Williamson County to a low of \$14.89 in Llano County. All nine counties have lower median hourly wages than the Austin MSA (\$19.89) and Texas (\$18.23).
- The rate of households living in poverty vary from a high of 17.7 percent in Caldwell County to a low of 6.7 percent in Williamson County. With the exception of Caldwell County, all the counties have poverty rates lower than the state of Texas.
- The share of families living in poverty with a householder who works full-time varies significantly across the region. Lee, Llano, and Caldwell Counties have the highest shares of families living in poverty with a householder who works full-time—4.4 percent, 4.2 percent, and 3.9 percent, respectively. Williamson County has the lowest share of working poor families.
- In many of the counties, a relatively large share of the working-age population does not have a high school diploma. Caldwell and Bastrop Counties have the largest shares of the working-age population without a diploma, 20.1 percent and 19.5 percent, respectively. Caldwell, Bastrop, Llano, Fayette, Lee, and Burnet Counties all have larger shares than the US average.
- Not all the counties had large enough sample sizes to estimate the share of youth age 16 to 24 who are not enrolled in school and not employed. Of the counties that did, Caldwell has the largest share of disconnected youth—18.7 percent of youth age 16 to 24 in Caldwell County are not enrolled in school or employed. In Bastrop County, the rate of youth connection is 13.8 percent. These two counties have higher rates of youth disconnection than the Austin MSA overall as well as Texas and the US. Hays County has a relatively low rate

of 6.6 percent, likely due to the large student population at Texas State University. Williamson County has a rate of 9.8 percent, which is higher than the rate for the Austin MSA but lower than the rate for Texas and the US.

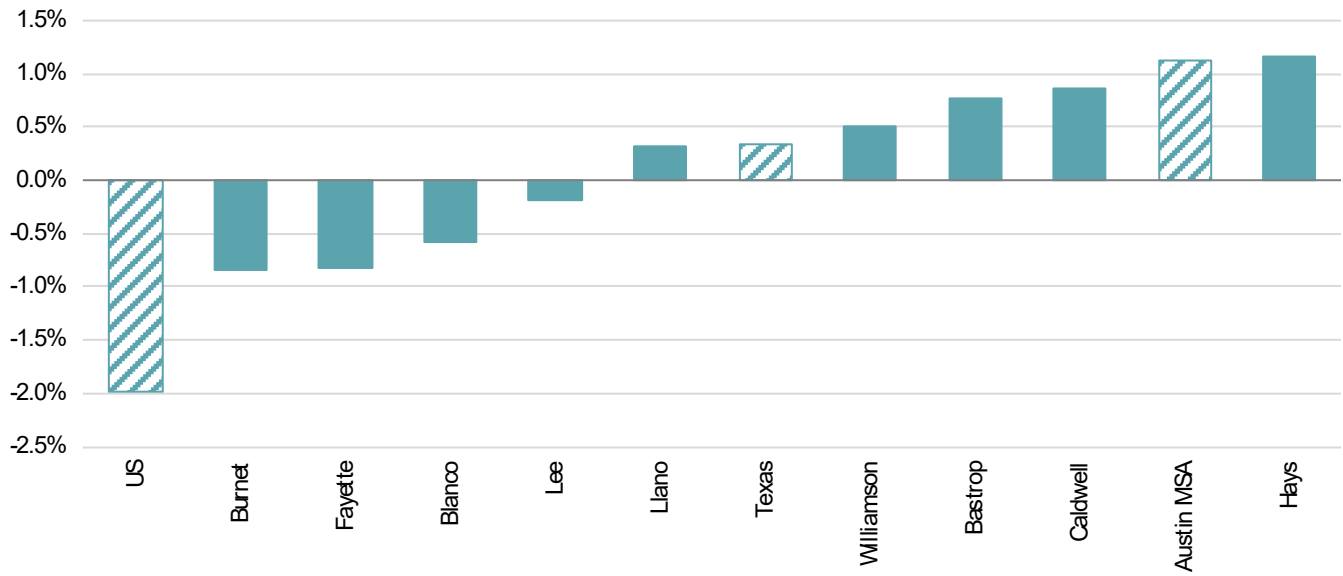
- There are 34 school districts in RCA region. The largest districts in Williamson County—Round Rock and Leander—graduate more than 2,500 students each year. The smallest districts graduate fewer than 50 students. Of the more than 12,000 students in the region who graduate, more than one-quarter go directly into the workforce. When considering the students who are also enrolled in a postsecondary institution, about 45 percent of high school graduates are employed in the fall semester following high school graduation. Among the districts for which the data was available, the share of high school graduates employed ranged from a low of 15.3 percent in Florence ISD to a high of 37.5 percent in Jarrell ISD.
- Retirement exposure is measured by the share of the adult population (age 16 years and older) who is 55 years and older. In general, the more urban counties in the RCA region, Hays, and Williamson Counties, have a younger population, while many of the more rural counties have extremely high retirement exposure. In Llano County, slightly more than 60 percent of the adult population is 55 years and older. Llano, Blanco, Fayette, Burnet, Lee, Bastrop, and Caldwell all have higher retirement exposure than Texas overall, where 30.1 percent of the adult population is 55 years and older.
- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a relatively high percentage of households in the counties did not have broadband access and a computer (or other device). Fayette, Caldwell, Lee, Burnet, and Llano Counties all had connection rates below the Texas and US averages of 79.3 percent and 80.4 percent, respectively. Williamson County had the highest connection rate—91 percent of households had a computer and broadband internet access. Blanco, Bastrop, and Hays Counties all had rates above 80 percent. Fayette County had the lowest connection rate of 59.7 percent. These rates have likely changed during the pandemic, though many of the connections provided through the school districts for online learning might be only temporary.
- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the share of workers who work from home in the counties in the RCA region ranged from a high of 9.5 percent in Blanco County to a low of 3.8 percent in Caldwell and Fayette Counties. Only three counties—Bastrop, Caldwell, and Fayette—have shares of remote workers lower than the Texas and US average. These rates have likely also changed during the pandemic.

FIGURE 2. CIVILIAN LABOR FORCE, AUGUST 2020



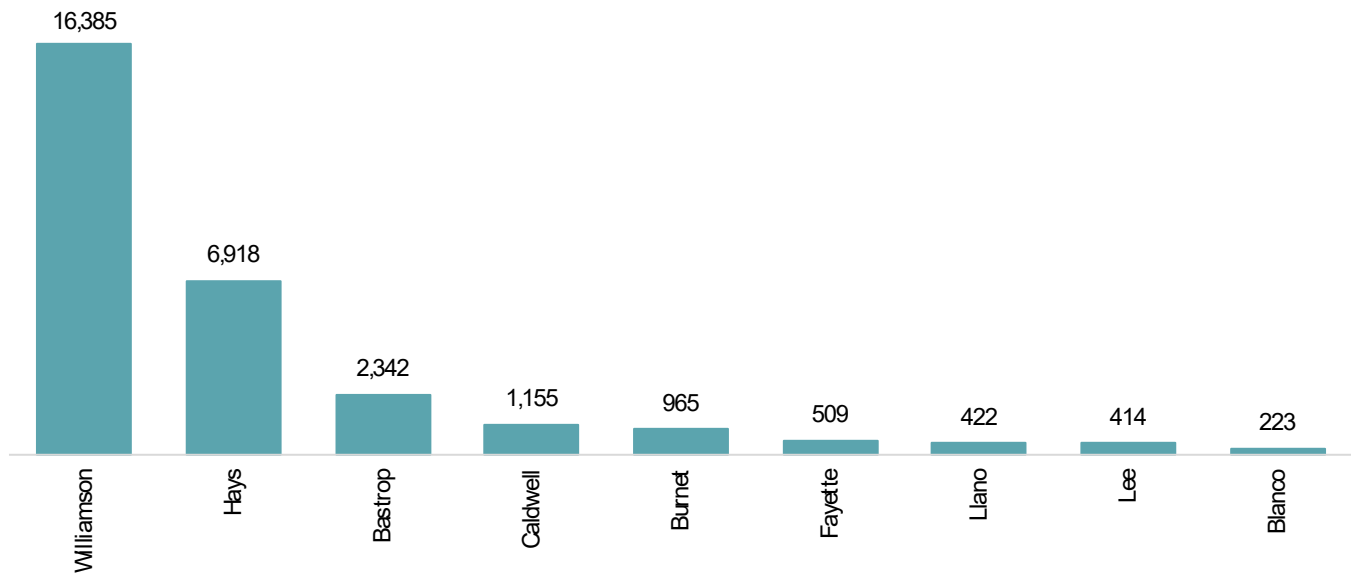
Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

FIGURE 3. CHANGE IN CIVILIAN LABOR FORCE, FEBRUARY TO AUGUST 2020



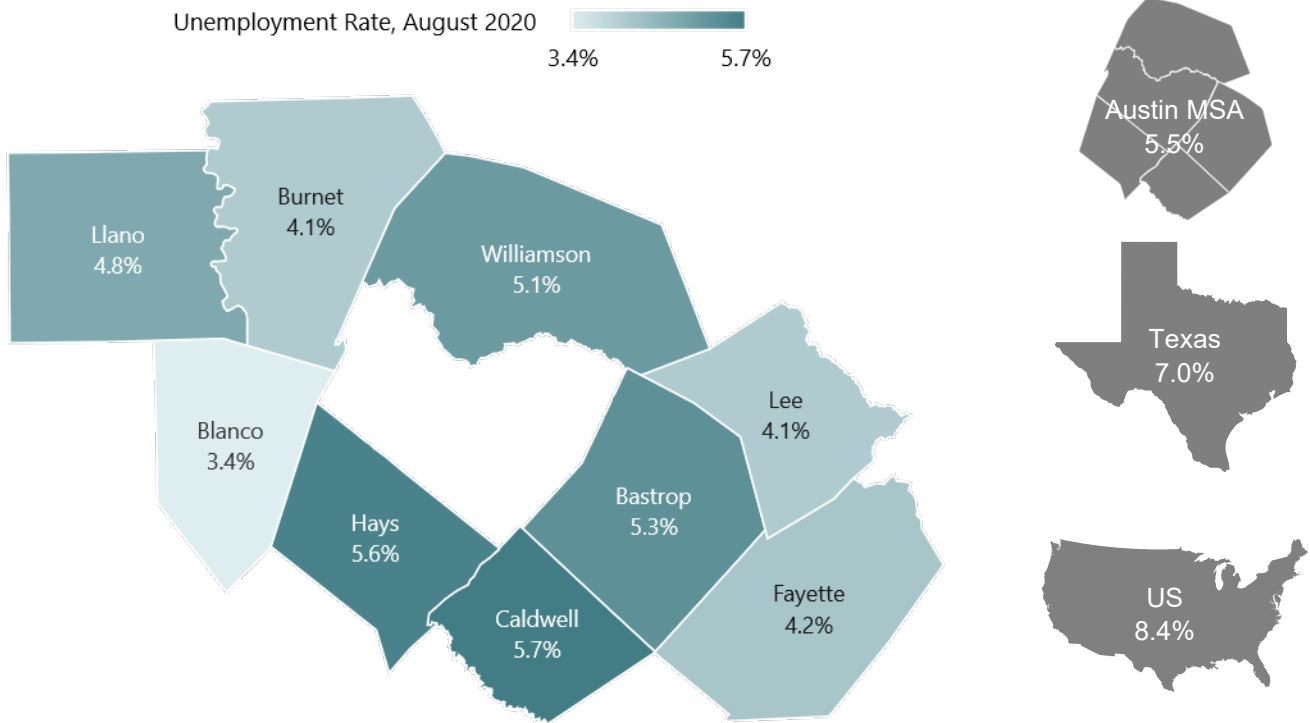
Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

FIGURE 4. UNEMPLOYED, AUGUST 2020



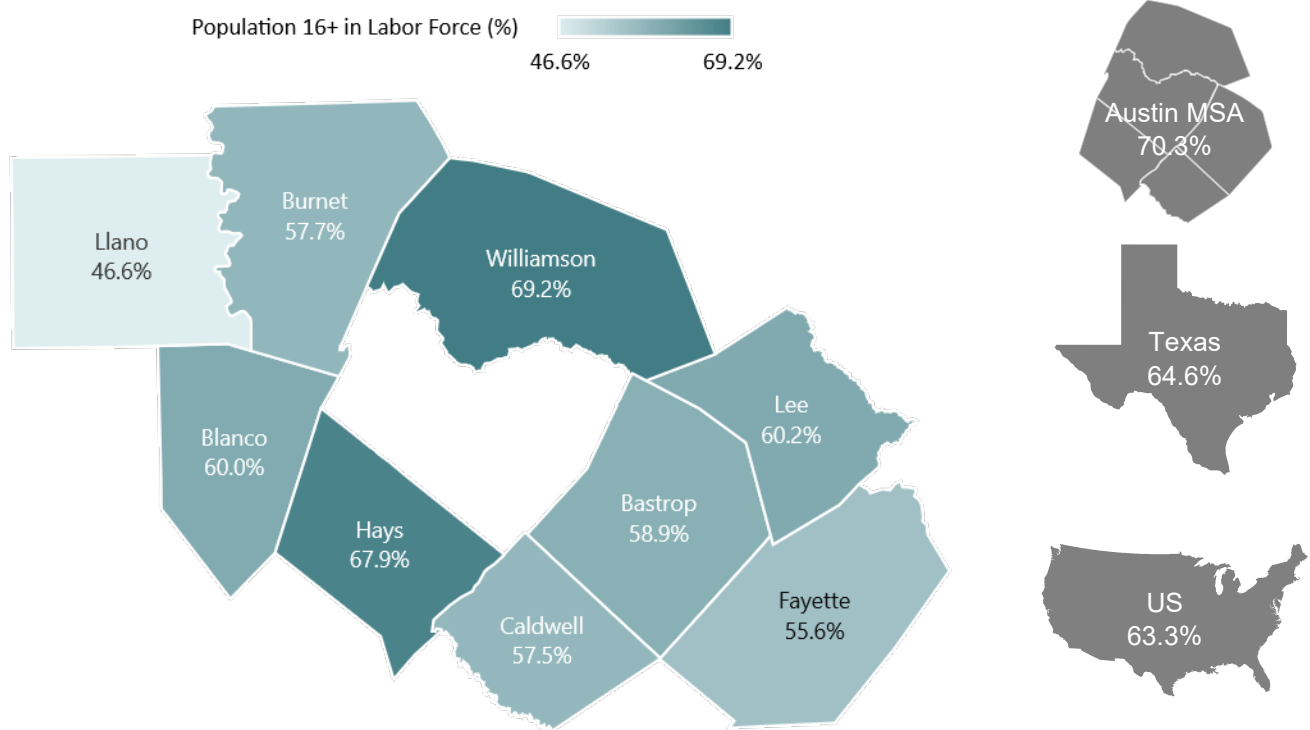
Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

**FIGURE 5. UNEMPLOYMENT RATE, AUGUST 2020**



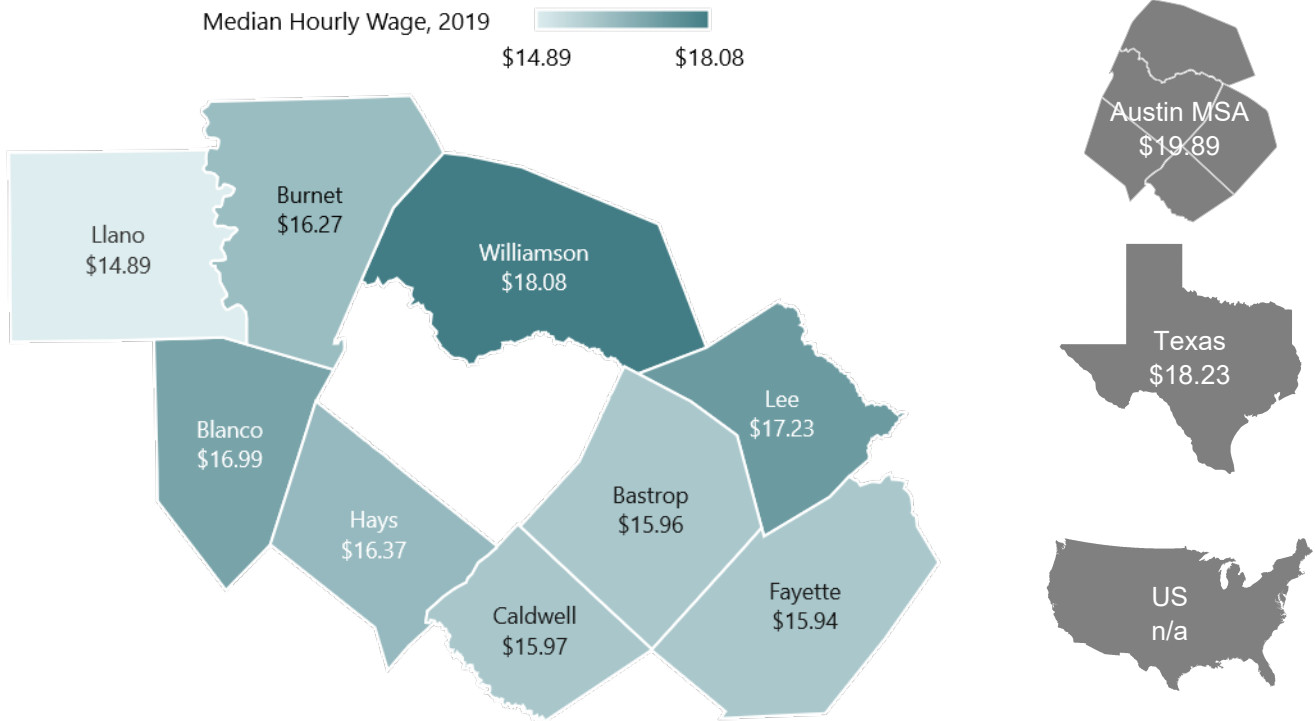
Sources: US Bureau of Labor Statistics; maps powered by Bing © Geo Names.

**FIGURE 6. LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE**



Source: 2018 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates; maps powered by Bing © Geo Names.

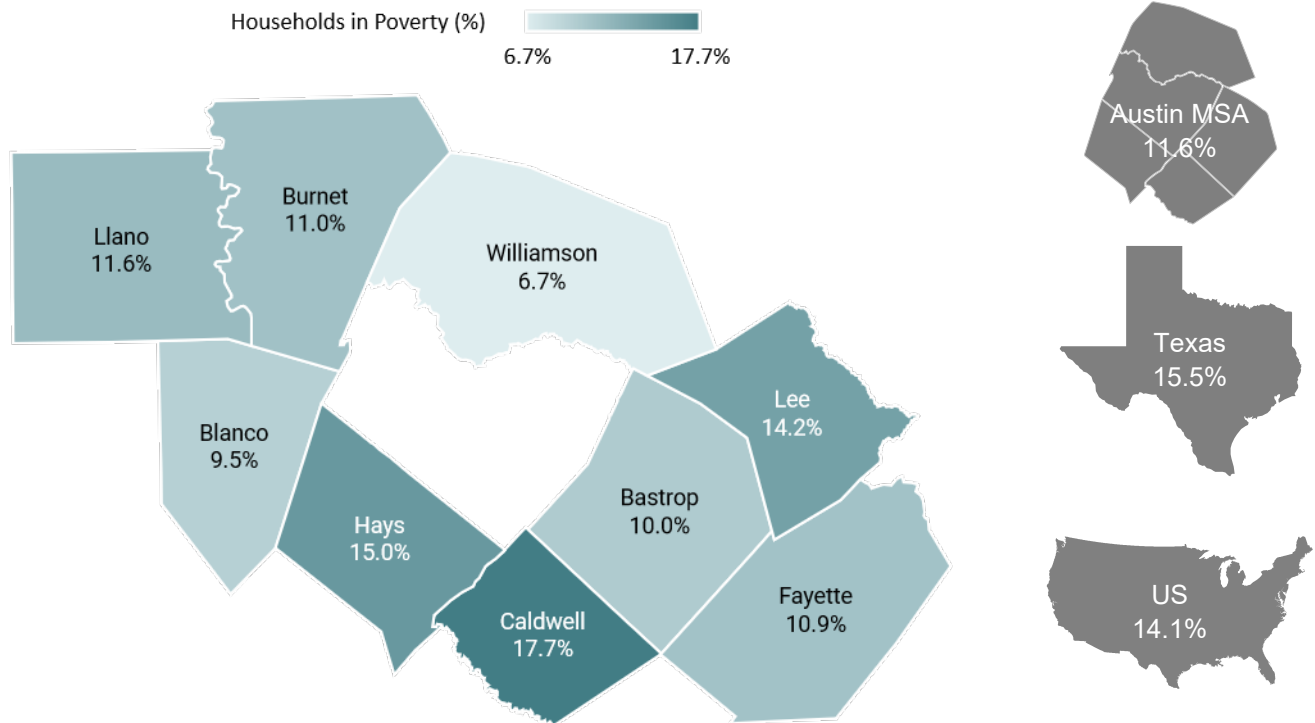
**FIGURE 7. MEDIAN HOURLY WAGE**



Source: Economic Modeling Specialists International (Emsi) 2020.4—Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) Employees, Non-QCEW Employees, and Self-Employed; maps powered by Bing © Geo Names.

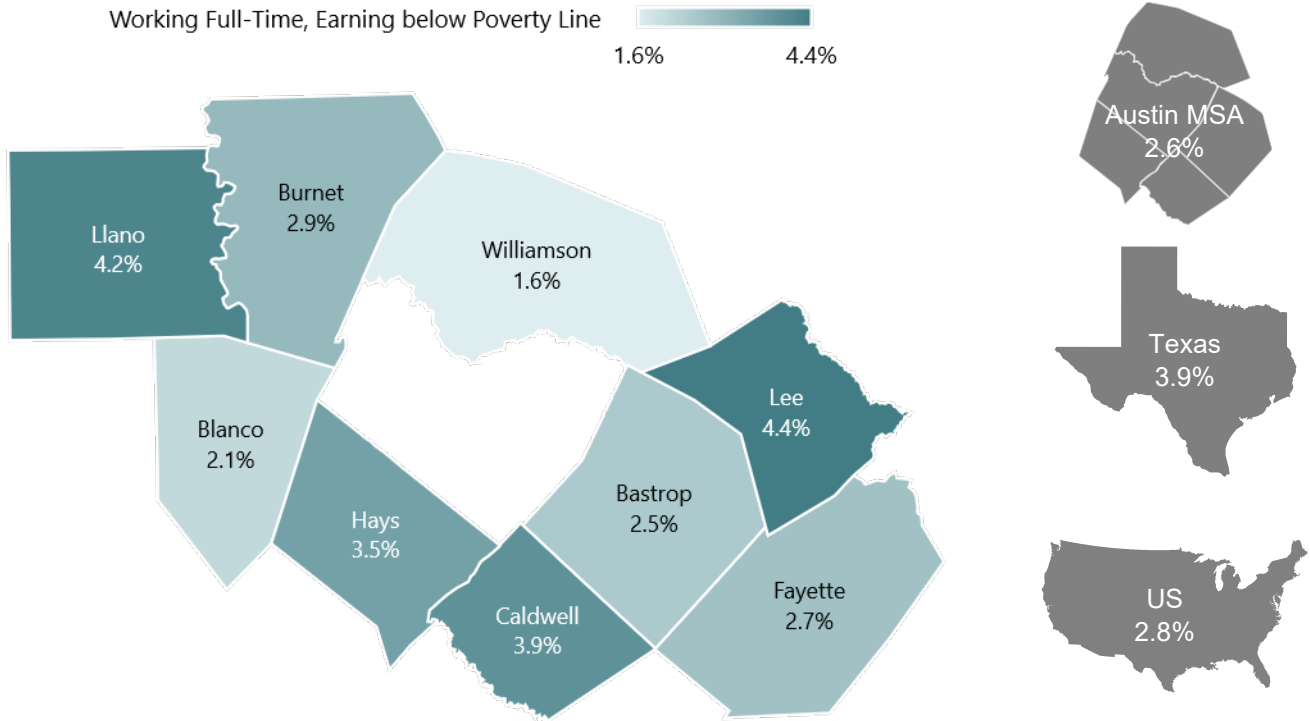
**FIGURE 8. POVERTY RATE**

PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS LIVING AT OR BELOW THE FEDERAL POVERTY LEVEL



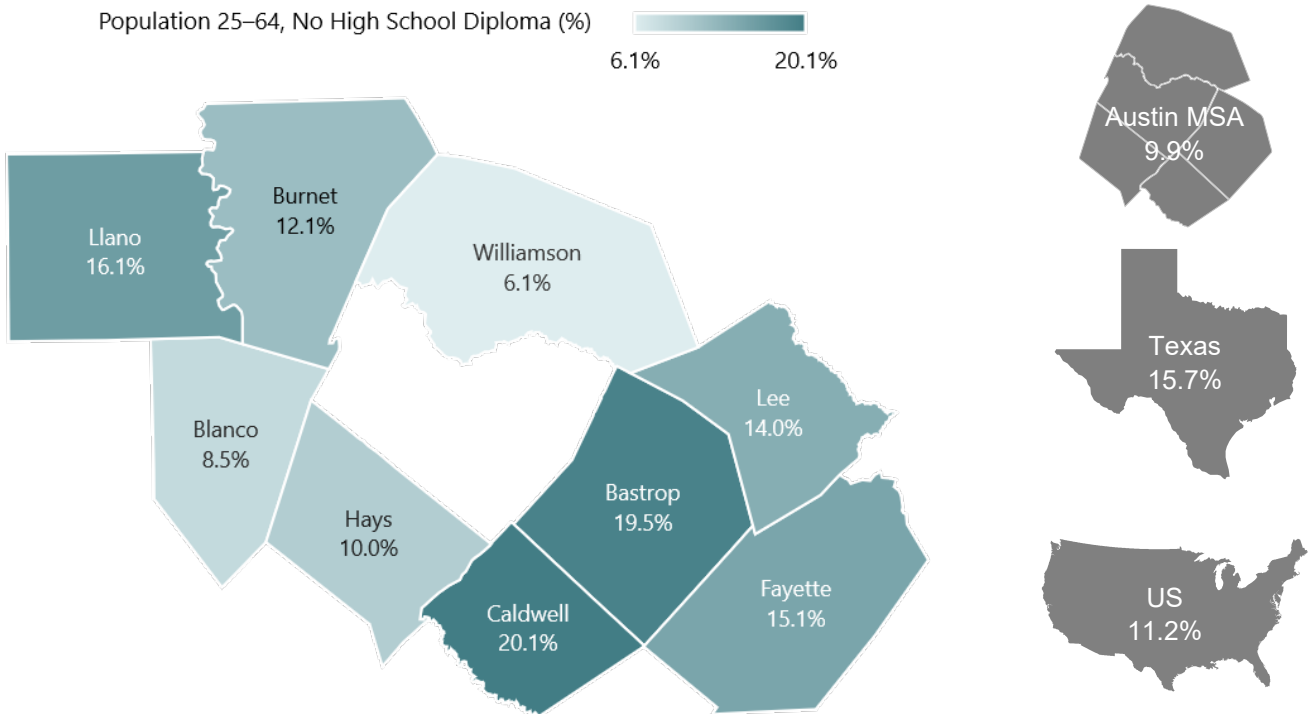
Source: 2018 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates; maps powered by Bing © Geo Names.

**FIGURE 9. WORKING POOR**  
 PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES BELOW THE POVERTY LINE WITH A MEMBER WORKING FULL-TIME



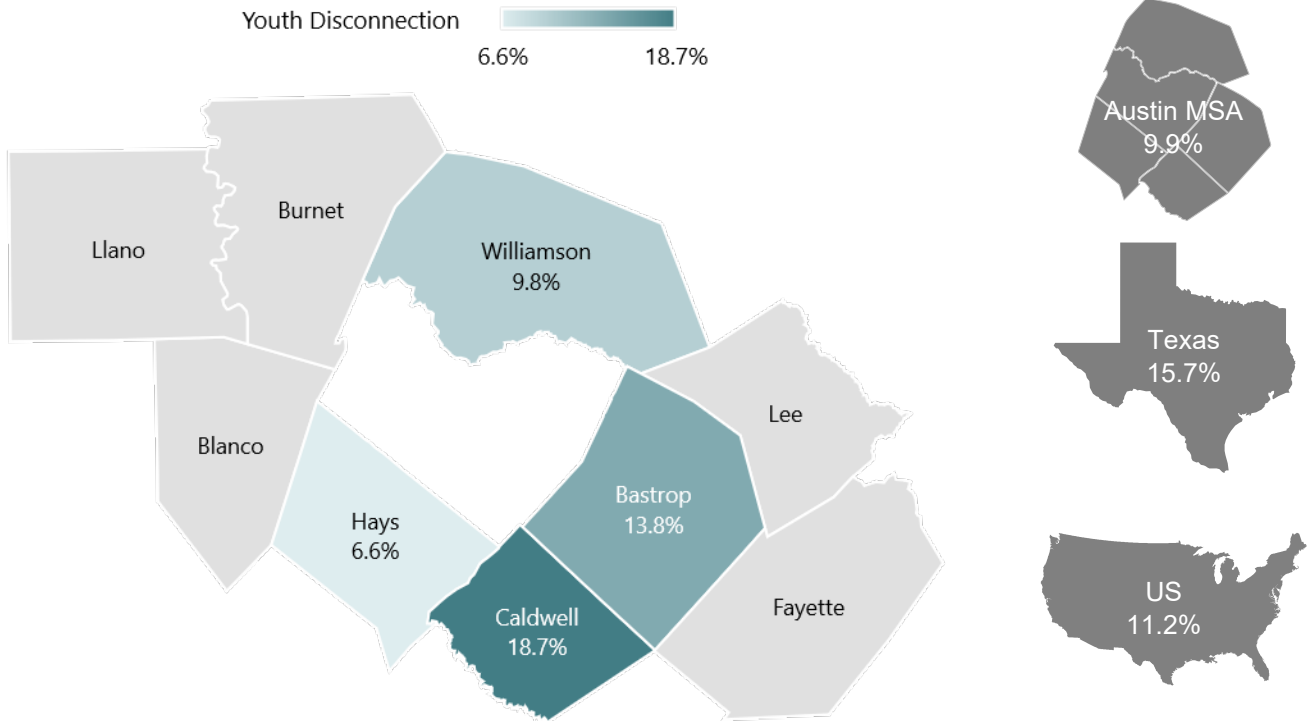
Source: 2018 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates; maps powered by Bing © Geo Names.

**FIGURE 10. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT**  
 PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION WITHOUT A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA



Source: 2018 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates; maps powered by Bing © Geo Names.

**FIGURE 11. YOUTH DISCONNECTION**  
 PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH AGE 16–24 NOT ENROLLED AND NOT EMPLOYED



Source: 2018 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates. 2020 Measure of America, a project of the Social Science Research Council; maps powered by Bing © Geo Names.  
 Note: Blanco, Burnet, Fayette, Lee, and Llano Counties have populations too small to make reliable estimates.

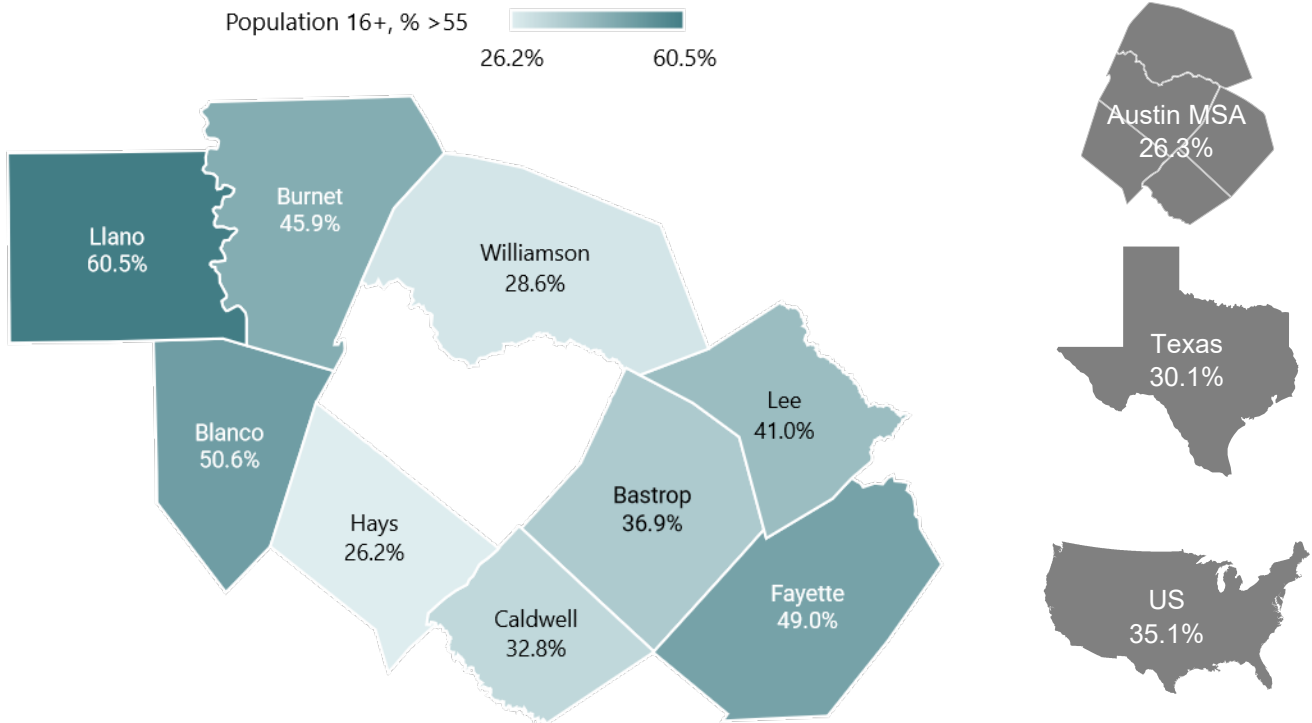
**FIGURE 12. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES EMPLOYMENT, 2017-2018 ACADEMIC YEAR**  
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES EMPLOYED ONLY AND EMPLOYED + ENROLLED IN COLLEGE

DISTRICT	COUNTY	TOTAL HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES	EMPLOYED ONLY	EMPLOYED AND ENROLLED	% EMPLOYED ONLY	% ALL EMPLOYED
Jarrell	Williamson	96	36	20	37.5%	58.3%
Elgin	Bastrop	288	106	50	36.8%	54.2%
San Marcos	Hays	533	194	107	36.4%	56.5%
Luling	Caldwell	105	38	13	36.2%	48.6%
Hays	Hays	1,115	400	239	35.9%	57.3%
Bastrop	Bastrop	679	237	101	34.9%	49.8%
Marble Falls	Burnet	263	88	35	33.5%	46.8%
Lockhart	Caldwell	350	117	49	33.4%	47.4%
Hutto	Williamson	412	136	93	33.0%	55.6%
Flatonia	Fayette	46	15	8	32.6%	50.0%
Granger	Williamson	37	12	5	32.4%	45.9%
Taylor	Williamson	204	66	40	32.4%	52.0%
Thrall	Williamson	50	16	10	32.0%	52.0%
Smithville	Bastrop	124	38	22	30.6%	48.4%
Georgetown	Williamson	838	255	142	30.4%	47.4%
Schulenburg	Fayette	56	16	16	28.6%	57.1%
Burnet	Burnet	236	63	40	26.7%	43.6%
Giddings	Lee	139	36	25	25.9%	43.9%
Lexington	Lee	58	15	13	25.9%	48.3%
Blanco	Blanco	79	19	16	24.1%	44.3%
Llano	Llano	98	23	16	23.5%	39.8%
Liberty Hill	Williamson	263	61	56	23.2%	44.5%
Round Rock	Williamson	3,290	745	610	22.6%	41.2%
Johnson City	Blanco	58	13	9	22.4%	37.9%
Leander	Williamson	2,590	560	493	21.6%	40.7%
La Grange	Fayette	116	25	27	21.6%	44.8%
Dripping Springs	Hays	406	74	77	18.2%	37.2%
Wimberley	Hays	152	24	26	15.8%	32.9%
Florence	Williamson	72	11	7	15.3%	25.0%
McDade	Bastrop	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Prairie Lea	Caldwell	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Round Top-Carmine	Fayette	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Dime Box	Lee	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Coupland	Williamson	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>12,753</b>	<b>3,439</b>	<b>2,365</b>	<b>27.0%</b>	<b>45.5%</b>

Source: Texas Public Education Information Resource (TPEIR).

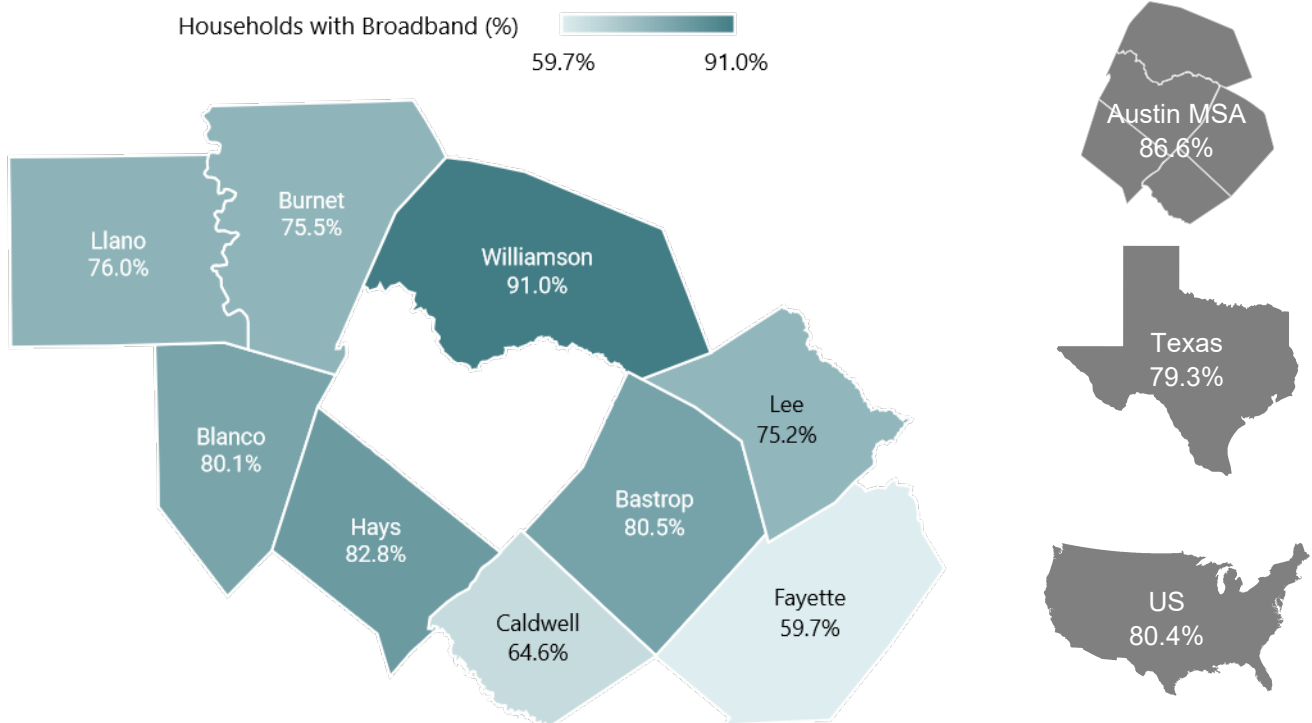


**FIGURE 13. RETIREMENT EXPOSURE**  
 PERCENTAGE OF THE ADULT POPULATION AGE 55+ YEARS



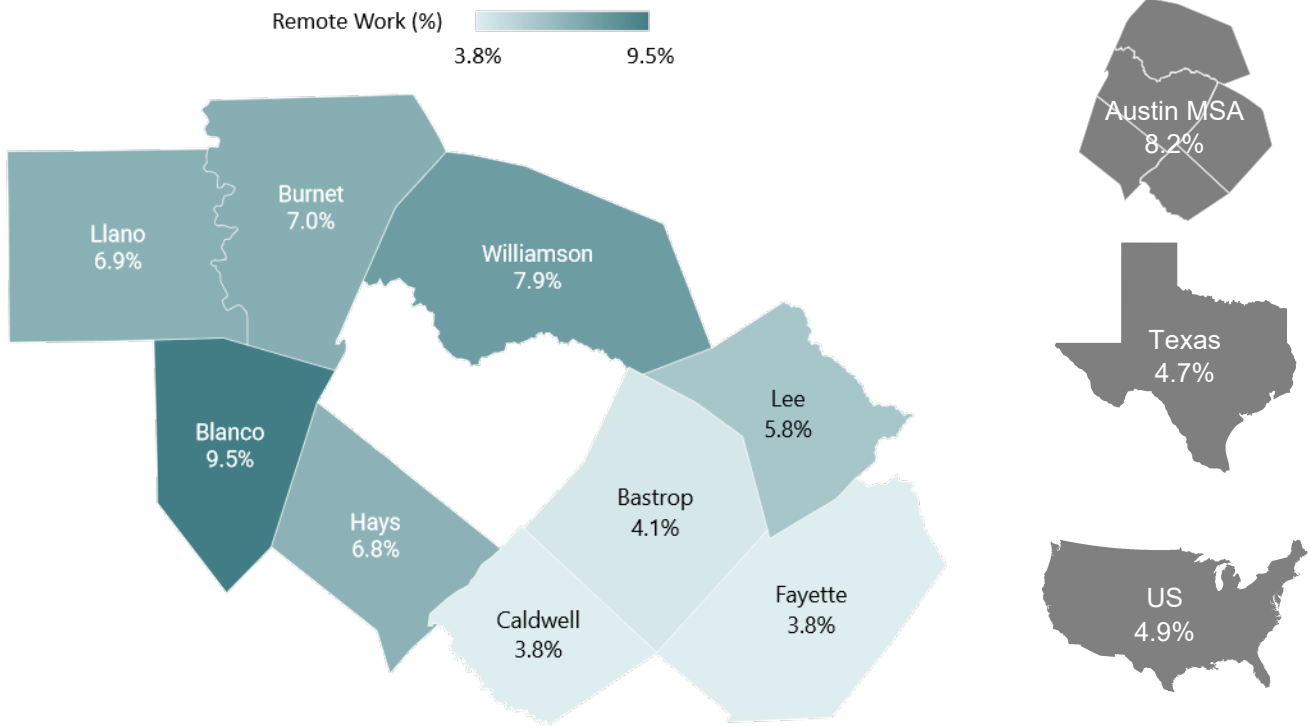
Source: 2018 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates; maps powered by Bing © Geo Names.

**FIGURE 14. BROADBAND ACCESS (PRE-COVID-19 PANDEMIC)**  
 PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH A COMPUTER AND BROADBAND INTERNET ACCESS



Source: 2018 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates; maps powered by Bing © Geo Names.

**FIGURE 15. REMOTE WORK (PRE-COVID-19 PANDEMIC)**  
 PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO WORK FROM HOME



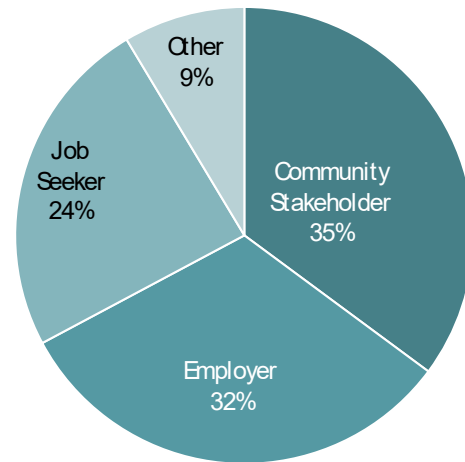
Source: 2018 American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimate; 5-Year Estimates; maps powered by Bing © Geo Names.

## APPENDIX B. STAKEHOLDER SURVEY

In May and June 2020, a brief survey was distributed to stakeholders across the nine-county region. The purpose of the survey was to capture the primary workforce challenges facing employers and jobseekers and gain insights into how some of these challenges are being addressed. There were 128 responses—32 percent of the respondents were from Williamson County, 25 percent were from Hays County, and the rest were distributed across the other seven counties. Respondents represented community stakeholders, employers, and jobseekers.

FIGURE 16. SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESPONSES

COUNTY	RESPONSES	
	Number	Percent
Bastrop	15	12%
Blanco	5	4%
Burnet	6	5%
Caldwell	10	8%
Fayette	3	2%
Hays	32	25%
Lee	8	6%
Llano	6	5%
Williamson	41	32%
Unknown	2	2%



Across the region overall, the challenges facing employers that were ranked the highest by respondents were as follows.

- There is a shortage of workers with the technical or hard skills we need.
- Our education system has been pushing students toward four-year degrees, but we need more people with technical skills that could be acquired through a postsecondary certificate, apprenticeship, or associate's degree.
- The younger generation of workers lack basic employability skills, such as showing up to work on-time, communications, professionalism, etc.
- We need more training programs that develop leadership and management skills to help our workers advance.
- A lot of our workers commute to other counties to work.

The challenges facing jobseekers that were ranked highest by respondents were as follows.

- Housing is very expensive in the county in comparison to the wages people can earn here.
- There are not enough jobs in the county that pay high enough wages to only have one job.
- There is not enough affordable, quality childcare.
- Many of our workers who are old enough to retire have to continue working.
- Young people must move away to find good career opportunities, especially if they're college educated.

**FIGURE 17. WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST WORKFORCE CHALLENGES FACING EMPLOYERS IN THE COUNTY?**  
 PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES THAT RATED THE STATEMENTS AS CHALLENGING OR VERY CHALLENGING, 128 RESPONDENTS

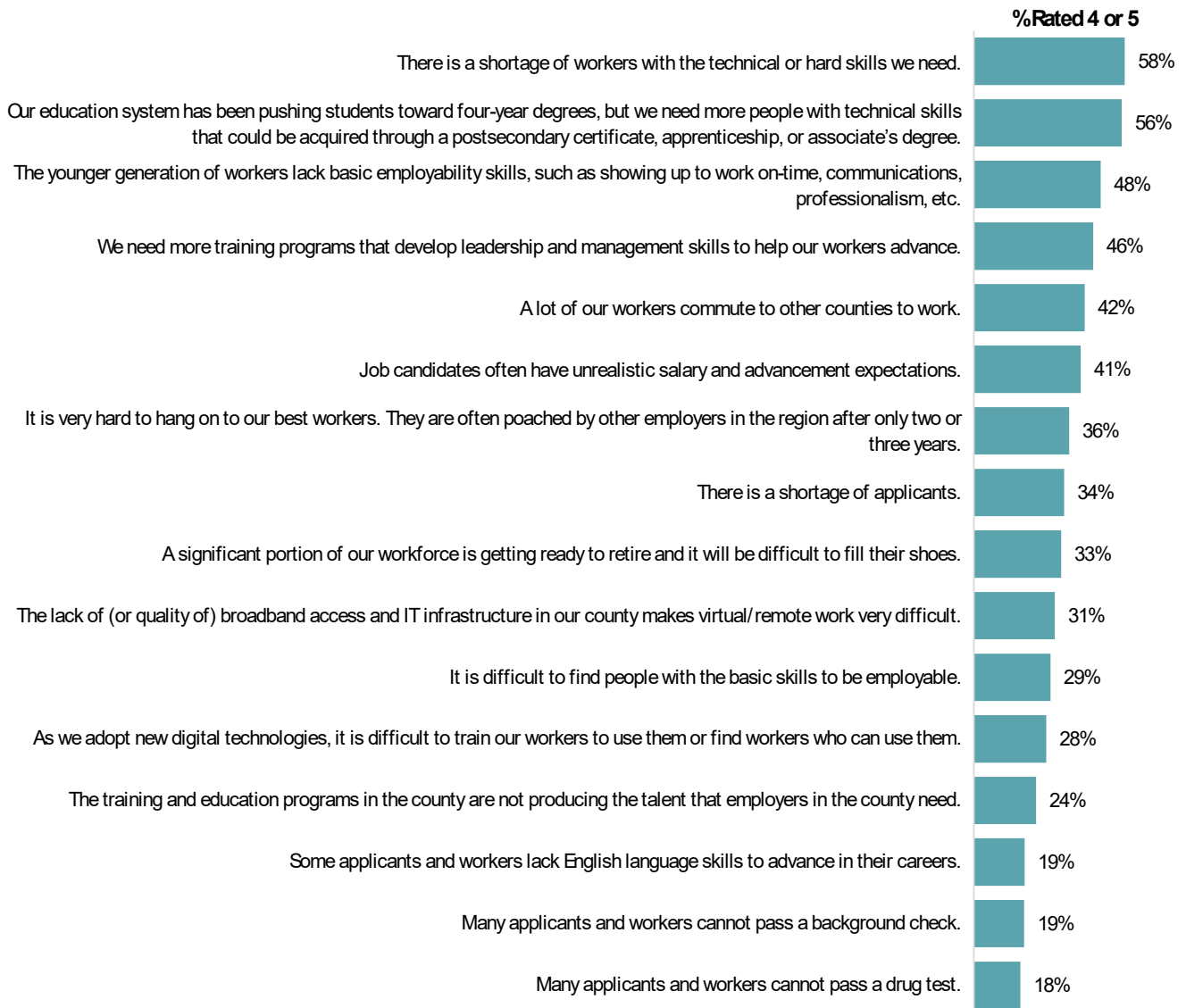


FIGURE 18. WHAT ARE EMPLOYERS IN YOUR COUNTY DOING TO ADDRESS THEIR CHALLENGES?



**FIGURE 19. WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES RELATED TO JOBSEEKERS, WORKERS, AND POTENTIAL WORKERS IN THE COUNTY?**  
 PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES THAT RATED THE STATEMENTS AS CHALLENGING OR VERY CHALLENGING, 128 RESPONDENTS

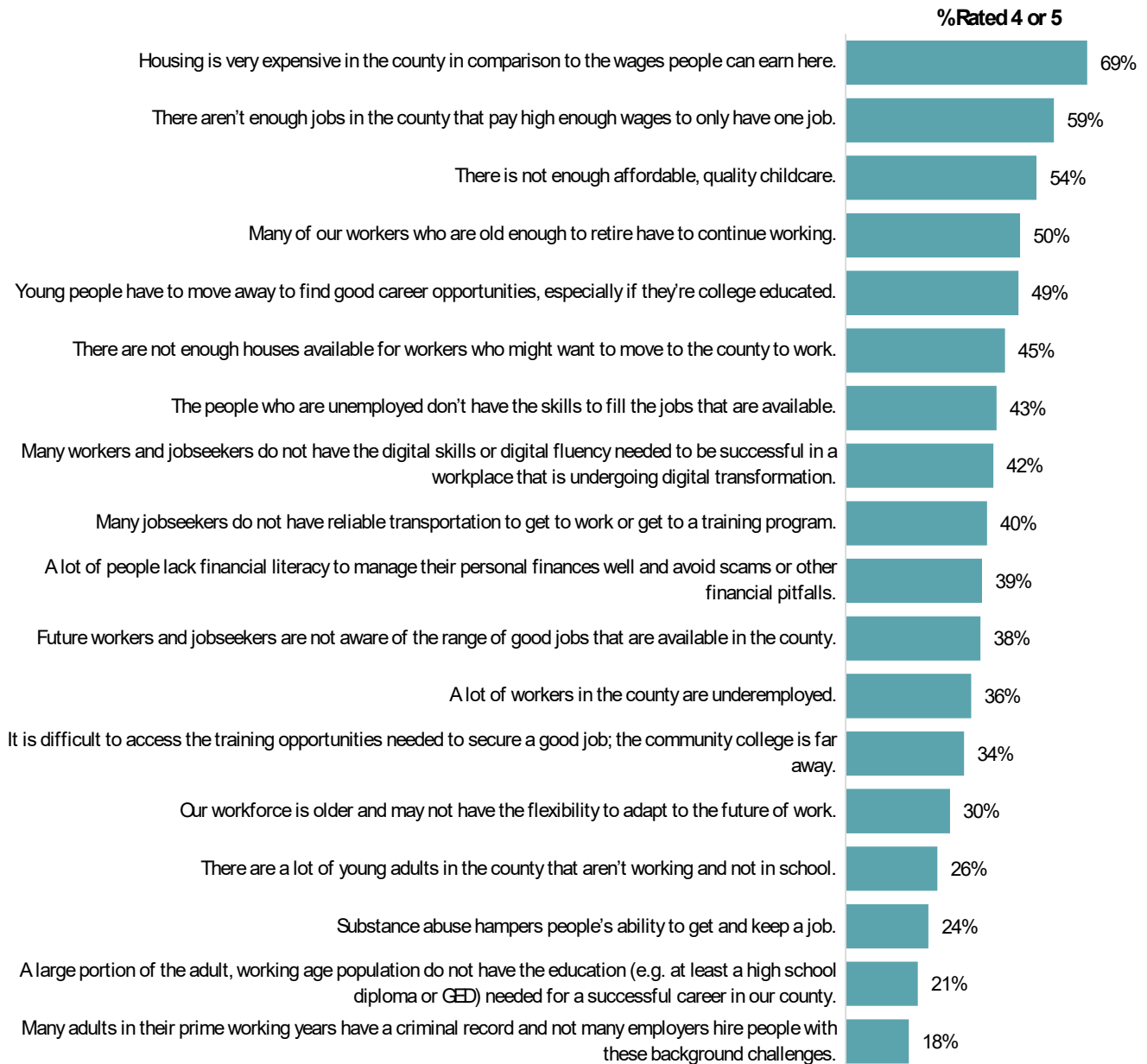


FIGURE 20. WHAT ORGANIZATIONS ARE WORKING TO ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES?

Universities—Texas State University, Texas Tech	Chambers of Commerce	Professional Associations and Civic Clubs—Austin Regional Manufacturers Association
Community/Technical Colleges—Austin Community College, Central Texas College, Blinn College, Texas State Technical College	Economic Development Organizations	Small Business Development Center and Service Corps of Retired Executives
Public Schools—CTE Programs	United Way of Hays and Caldwell Counties	Literacy Councils
Gary Job Corps Center	Community Action—Adult Basic Education	Capital Idea
Workforce Solutions	Workforce Network	Goodwill
Cities and Counties	Bastrop County Cares	Opportunities for Williamson and Burnet Counties
Public Libraries	Texas Housing Foundation	The Georgetown Project
Texas AgriLife Extension Service	Skillpoint Alliance	

## APPENDIX C. LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

As part of the input process to support the strategic planning effort, a workshop was held for each of the nine counties in the WSRCA region that included stakeholders such as elected officials, economic development organizations, chambers of commerce, representatives from educational institutions and school districts, WSRCA staff, members of the WSRCA board, and other community leaders. At these workshops, participants discussed workforce challenges and what was being done in the county to address these challenges. They identified opportunities to improve workforce development outcomes in their counties.

Over the course of these conversations, several common themes emerged that were significant challenges or structural barriers in all the counties. The common themes that arose are listed below.

- **Workforce housing:** the supply of and cost of housing for low- and middle-wage workers.
- **Childcare:** the availability of affordable, high-quality childcare.
- **Broadband:** internet access to support remote work, job searching, and virtual job training.
- **Transportation:** the ability of low-wage workers, in particular, to commute to their jobs with a reliable source of transportation.
- **Small business:** development and entrepreneurial ecosystem assistance for business owners and founders as a means of supporting job creation, wealth building, and financial self-sufficiency.

The consulting team then organized focus groups around each of these themes with community leaders and subject matter experts to discuss what is already being done to address these challenges in the WSRCA region and what could be done.

This next section summarizes the lessons learned through these focus groups. There is a wealth of knowledge and expertise in the region, and communities are showing that these issues can be addressed when a common goal is set, and a group collectively works to achieve that goal.

WSRCA can make great strides in building the region's capacity to address these and other big challenges by connecting these efforts, facilitating knowledge sharing, and helping to train additional community leaders on how to do this work.



## WORKFORCE HOUSING

**The Issue:** In every county, the availability and cost of housing was highlighted as a major workforce challenge. A wide range of workers cannot afford to live in the county where they work or cannot find housing due to a lack of supply.

**Secrets to Success:** The communities and housing developers that have successfully completed projects or have projects in progress shared a few secrets of their success.

- *Choose words wisely.*

Historically, the term “affordable housing” elicited images of housing projects for low-income residents and concentrated poverty, and this perception continues today. Many of the communities have found that using the term “workforce housing” can help them overcome these perceptions and focus on the fact that even households with one or more full-time workers and professionals can have difficulty affording housing in the current market. This helps cultivate more community support for the housing developments.

- *Build in time for education and use effective, well-messaged communications tools.*

To successfully complete a housing development, it is necessary to change the perception of what affordable housing is to generate the support needed to get approval for any project. The group recognized the importance of educating elected officials and the community about the need for housing that is more affordable and showing them what these kind of housing developments look like today. The education process take time and involves many conversations—group conversations and one-on-one conversations.

Some communities found that conducting a housing study that quantifies the number of units needed and quantifies the potential financial benefits to the community can be a valuable tool to use in the education process. Housing studies can cost \$7,000 to \$10,000. The Texas A&M University Real Estate Center recently conducted a study for Bastrop County Cares. Neugent & Helbing, Inc., recently did a housing study for the Development Corporation of Snyder, where Texas Housing Foundation is currently working on a project.

The “Can I Be Your Neighbor?” campaign was highlighted by Bastrop County Cares as a good model for raising awareness and changing the perception of affordable workforce housing. It originated in 2004 in Fort Collins, Colorado, and has since been used in more than 26 communities in 18 states. More recently, this campaign was used in 2017 to shift the conversation about affordable housing in Houston. The campaign features photographs of professionals who do not earn enough to afford to live in the community.



- *Pick good projects and find great partners.*

Public-private partnerships are a great tool to successfully complete a housing project that adds to the stock of affordable units in a community. In this model, the public sector partners with a private housing developer. Choosing the right developer is key to success. The end product must be something that accomplishes the goals of the project, is high quality, and can help to generate more community support for future projects.

The Texas Housing Foundation is an example of a developer that many of the communities in the WSRCA region have worked with. Texas Housing Foundation owns and manages projects in Blanco, Burnet, Bastrop, Llano, and Williamson Counties.

- *Get creative with funding.*

In many of the counties, the market forces no longer support affordable housing. Thus, the capital stack and sources of funding really determine the feasibility of the project. Most projects involve a complicated combination of tax credits, low-cost financing, ad valorem tax exemption, cost sharing, and/or equity investments. In addition, Type B EDCs are allowed to support workforce housing projects and have been valuable partners in some Texas communities. They can fund construction costs, infrastructure, and maintenance/operating costs related to projects. No matter what approach is used or what combination of partners, it takes a team effort to pull together the combination of funding sources to make a project pencil out.

**Projects, Programs, and Tools in the Region:** In the course of the conversation during the focus group, a number of projects or programs in the region were mentioned. These include the following.

- Capital Area Housing Finance Corporation researched and published the *Housing Infill Program Handbook*, which can serve as a guide for community revitalization through infill housing. Because they are already served by infrastructure, existing lots in a town or city can offer an attractive opportunity for housing developers. This type of infill housing can offer an attractive return on investment for cities/towns or EDCs that are looking to expand their tax base. See <http://cahfc.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/housinginfillprogram.pdf>.
- The city of LaGrange has launched a housing incentive program through its economic development office to encourage residential development in the historic downtown. Its **Second Floor Development Grant Program** is designed to encourage the conversion of upper floors of existing commercial structures in the historic district to residential units.
- Blanco County has partnered with a quasi-governmental agency and the private sector to get a workforce housing project underway. They have worked with Johnson City on affordable units and have an active partnership with the Blanco County Community Resource Center to provide social services.
- In Bastrop County, the Bastrop EDC, the city of Bastrop, and Bastrop County Cares have been actively working on the issue. As a result, multiple projects are underway or recently completed.

## CHILDCARE

**The Issue:** The availability of high-quality, affordable childcare is a significant and persistent issue across the region. This challenge was compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, as parents found themselves facing school and early learning center closures at the same time that the operating models of early learning centers were stretched by lower child-to-staff ratio requirements, higher expenses related to sanitation and personal protective equipment, and the prospect of overseeing school-age children needing oversight while school districts were online. In addition, communities and school districts are in the process of implementing Texas House Bill 3, requiring all prekindergarten that is offered to eligible 4-year-old students in school districts and open-enrollment charter schools be full day, and that the prekindergarten meet the high-quality requirements adopted by the legislature in 2015.

**Programs and Ideas:** Focus group participants discussed what they are currently working on and shared ideas. These are summarized below.

- WSRCA Child Care Services has been working to bring providers into the Texas Rising Star system, which is the quality rating system of Texas. It has also been working with providers to realize operational efficiencies so it can pass savings on to teachers to improve teacher quality and compensation. The program has an incentive to encourage teachers to further their education (from a certificate to a bachelor's degree). It offers and supports the Frog Street curriculum, which is approved by the Texas Education Agency, and offers training on the Conscious Discipline curriculum.
- The Texas Association for the Education of Young Children is working to facilitate informal and formal partnerships between childcare centers and school districts. It has a partnership development training program—a six-module symposium. In addition, it is involved in forging partnerships, which can range from sharing information on school readiness expectations to professional development to having dual-enrolled classrooms. It has three active partnerships in the WSRCA region—the Lockhart independent school district (ISD) area, La Grange, and Leander.
- Bastrop County Cares Early Childhood Coalition recently conducted a study on the childcare needs of families in the county and has developed strategic recommendations based on that study. One thing the study found was that family and home care are really important in the community. A high need area is in the birth-to-three-age range, especially around language development.
- United Way of Williamson County supports early care and education through grants to various providers, including Opportunities for Williamson and Burnet Counties. It also funds Dolly Parton's Imagination Library to gift books to children in the birth-to-five-age range.
- Community Action, Inc. of Central Texas takes a broader approach to early learning beyond childcare. It recently held a meeting for childcare centers in Hays County. This meeting highlighted the need for more community building among childcare providers and for relationship building with school districts.
- Ideas
  - WSRCA could provide back office support for smaller centers and in-home care providers to help realize operational efficiency.
  - Small business development to strengthen existing centers and support the expansion of childcare across the region.

- A teacher pay requirement could be a feature of a formal partnership to improve teacher quality and pay. This model was used by United Way and Workforce Solutions Capital Area in a partnership with Austin ISD for prekindergarten expansion. It required teachers to be paid at least \$18 with benefits or \$20 without benefits.
- Raising awareness of the importance of early care and education is needed to attract more recognition of the investments needed to right size the sector to support the needs of working families. Articulating the return on investment and making the link to workforce development can help policymakers and the private sector understand the importance. In addition, reframing “childcare subsidies” as “scholarships” or “tuition assistance” would be helpful in generating more support for early learning. A policy idea is that employer tuition assistance programs could be applied for childcare as well. A recent study by TexProtects provides good data to support this information campaign: <https://www.texprotects.org/ECBD/>.
- Connecting with school districts is helpful for school readiness integration and fostering a more seamless transition from early learning centers to school districts. The Texas Education Service Centers can be a helpful partner in convening the early learning leaders from school districts in the region. Using the right terminology is really important and it helps to be familiar with the way school districts talk about items. For example, family engagement is something school districts are interested in. Finding a champion on the inside of the district is also helpful.

## BROADBAND

**The Issue:** While households that are within the city limits of many of the towns and cities of the WSRCA region have broadband access, households that are outside of these areas have limited to no access. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the digital divide as internet access is a requirement for working and learning at home.

**Projects and Initiatives:** Participants in the focus group discussed the various projects and initiatives they are working on. These are summarized below.

- ZochNet covers 15 counties, providing broadband to 6,000+ customers in rural areas. It worked with school districts to bring fixed wireless using the 2.5 GHz license to reach students. It is laying fiber in towns, including Giddings, Lexington, and Somerville. Outside the towns, it is putting up towers. It has provided free internet to all churches, parks, food banks, and libraries in its service area. (Information on the 2.5 GHz band is here: <https://www.fcc.gov/wireless/bureau-divisions/broadband-division/broadband-radio-service-education-broadband-service>.)
- Connected Nation is working with Bastrop, Blanco, Burnet, and Llano Counties to collect data on service gaps to create more accurate coverage maps. Once it has this information, it works to help communities pursue strategies to support broadband investments to address these service gaps. Bastrop County Cares is involved in the Connected Nation project in Bastrop County.
- At the time that schools were closed in March 2020, about 40 percent of students in Lockhart ISD did not have internet access. The lack of access was not strictly due to socioeconomic; in some areas of the district there were dead zones. The district began conversations in April 2020 about how it could address the issue to prepare for the start of school in August. One of the first things it did was conduct a survey of families to determine gaps in geographic coverage. It then worked with a company to build seven towers for \$750,000 to provide fixed wireless internet to the largest service area gaps in the district. The district paid for the construction of the towers and limited access for 500 households (\$60,000/year). As a result, student engagement in online learning rose dramatically. In May, 65 percent of students were engaged. By September, 95 percent of students were engaged.
- The Giddings EDC and the city of Giddings applied for a grant from the US Economic Development Administration (EDA) to bring utilities to their business park and included the installation of fiber optic cable as part of that project. In addition, Giddings EDC provided a \$50,000 grant earlier in the spring to assist a provider in bringing broadband to underserved areas of the community to support remote work and learning.

## TRANSPORTATION

**The Issue:** The lack of reliable transportation is a significant barrier to low-income workers, which often impedes them from getting and keeping a job. However, public transit options are limited in the WSRCA region and generally in most rural areas.

**Projects and Initiatives:** Participants in the focus group discussed the various projects and initiatives they are working on. These are summarized below.

- The city of San Marcos is developing a comprehensive multimodal transit plan. The plan entails coordinating with the Texas State University Bobcat Shuttle to create a more seamless transportation system that better serves the community. The city of San Marcos is using funds from a tax increment reinvestment zone to pilot ways to address first mile/last mile issues. This project will run 18 months and be for electric-only cabs that travel between downtown and a remote parking lot.
- In addition to its fixed route services and existing reservation-based pickup service, the Capital Area Rural Transportation System (CARTS) is piloting an on-demand service in the city of Bastrop. The funding for the microtransit pilot is from Lone Star Clean Fuels Alliance, Texas Department of Transportation, and the US Department of Energy.
- Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority (CapMetro) has launched its on-demand program called Pickup. It currently serves seven service zones, including Leander in Williamson County. CapMetro is getting ready to launch a pilot in a new service zone in Pflugerville, which is outside its service territory. The Pickup service in Pflugerville is provided through an interlocal agreement and funded by the city of Pflugerville in a grant from the Federal Transit Administration. CapMetro has a vanpool program called MetroRideShare that could potentially be a model for some areas of the WSRCA region. The program can be used for vanpool groups that originate or end outside the CapMetro service area.
- The Blanco County Community Resource Center is piloting a program that provides transportation vouchers for people without access to transportation to use to get to their destinations. The vouchers can be used so that drivers can be reimbursed for their mileage expense. The program is modeled after a similar voucher pilot conducted by the Deep East Texas Council of Governments.

## SMALL BUSINESS

**The Issue:** Small business and entrepreneurship can offer a pathway to self-sufficient employment, and an ecosystem of support services and resources can be an effective means of supporting small business owners and entrepreneurs. However, resources and services in many parts of the WSRCA region are fragmented, disconnected, and/or nonexistent outside the urbanized areas.

**Programs Ideas:** Participants in the focus group discussed the various projects and initiatives they are working on and brainstormed ideas to improve the delivery of small business services across the region. These are summarized below.

- T-Werx Coworking offers virtual bootcamps to clients.
- The San Marcos Chamber of Commerce is working with the San Marcos Main Street Program and the city of San Marcos economic developer to create a website on how to start a business. This will be the first step to create a platform to serve as a one-stop shop for the small business community.
- The Texas State University Small Business Development Center recently pivoted its services to focus on a more efficient delivery model aimed at growth-oriented businesses and at a targeted set of industries.
- Texas State University recently launched the Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, which brings the many elements of the university that are related to entrepreneurship under one umbrella. The objective is to create more of a one-stop shop for students, faculty, and alumni who are interested in starting a new venture or commercializing a discovery.
- Hutto EDC has a small business loan program.
- Georgetown created a small business resource guide, which has proven to be a great resource and has been well received.
- Vista Ridge High School in the Leander ISD has an incubator program for students. The program starts with juniors, who compete in a pitch competition. The six winning teams move into the incubator for their senior year.
- Ideas
  - Create an ecosystem map of services available in the WSRCA region, especially outside the urbanized areas, and focus on ensuring a strong ecosystem and good access to the ecosystem across the WSRCA region. A virtual ecosystem might be the best solution, but building trust among ecosystem partners and entrepreneurs virtually could be more difficult. Broadband is a necessary condition of virtualization.
  - Partners/service providers need a better platform for collaboration, outreach, and service delivery. Better coordination, messaging, and marketing could help the partners reach more small business owners and entrepreneurs at a lower cost.
  - A virtual incubator model could help provide support services to small business owners and entrepreneurs in the rural areas.
  - Build a database of subject matter experts in the community and a means of connecting and accessing this network of experts.
  - Rural coworking spaces and support for remote work could support small business owners and entrepreneurs.