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SMOOTHING THE PATH TO A FAMILY-SUSTAINING CAREER

SUPPORTING APPRENTICESHIPS IN RURAL AMERICA

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Apprenticeships are a successful and practical economic development solution to address the ever-growing need for a quality workforce and are a common-sense approach for employees to build their skills while simultaneously earning income to provide for their daily needs. These work-based learning programs provide industry-specific training through hands-on experience and related classroom-based instruction. Mentored by an experienced employee, apprentices earn a paycheck while training, ultimately completing proficiency tests and, in some cases, earning nationally recognized industry credentials. Businesses benefit from apprenticeship programs that enable them to recruit and upskill a high-quality workforce, reduce turnover, increase employee loyalty and productivity, and bring new voices into the workplace who can contribute to innovations. Approximately 94% of registered apprentices retain employment, with an average annual salary of $84,000, per the U.S. Department of Labor's Apprenticeship USA program.

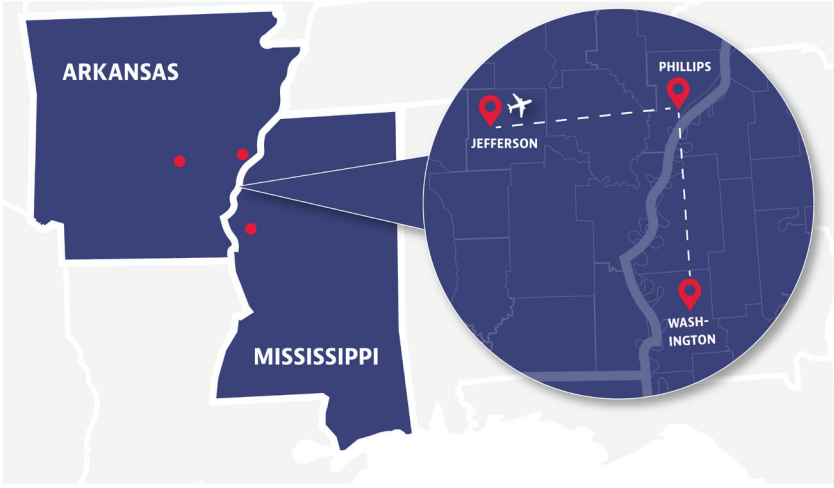
According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, rural areas have a higher unemployment rate than urban areas.[27] This is often due to a skills and opportunity gap for rural workers and the limited support services available for the workforce. Apprenticeship

27 Tracey Farrigan, Brandon Genetin, Austin Sanders, John Pender, Kelsey L. Thomas, Richelle Winkler, and John Cromartie, "Rural America at a Glance (Report No. EIB-282)," U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, November 2024, https://doi.org/10.32747/2024.8722498.ers.

programs in rural areas help address the opportunity gap by offering hands-on training to expand the talent pipeline for the industries that have jobs to fill. Traditionally, apprenticeships have been focused on skilled trades and construction jobs, but the model has seen expansion in education and health care career pathways, among others.[28]

/ FIGURE 1 /

REGIONAL COLLABORATIVES IN ARKANSAS AND MISSISSIPPI



Developing a robust selection of apprenticeships in a community can provide opportunities to upskill incumbent workers and create a group of highly skilled potential recruits. While apprenticeship programming can be impactful for a region, rural communities often struggle to develop an effective apprenticeship ecosystem with participation from area employers, educational institutions, training hubs, and job seekers.[29] Most potential anchor organizations are already at capacity, and the additional work of developing an apprenticeship program may seem daunting.

The term "rural" has no standard definition, even within the federal government, making it difficult to identify accurate and reliable data on the number of rural apprenticeships. One of the few apprenticeship sectors that can be assumed to be primarily rural — agricultural — had 4,332 registered apprentices in 2024, as reported by the U.S.

28 U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, "Broadening Registered Apprenticeships Can Boost America's Workforce and Grow the Middle Class," Issue Brief, September 2024, https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/c7f24858-09b4-4469-9d9e-5f8e87332048/jec-brief-registered-apprenticeships.pdf.

29 U.S. Department of Labor, Chief Evaluation Office, "Approaches to Expanding Registered Apprenticeship in Rural Areas: Takeaways from Seven States," December 2024, https://www.dol.gov/resource-library/approaches-expanding-registered-apprenticeship-rural-areas-takeaways-seven-states.

Department of Labor.[30] However, not all agrarian programs are rural, and agricultural apprenticeships are not the only available apprenticeships in rural America.

Through its workforce development program, Rural LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation) has partnered with programs in 25 states and two territories. The network's current apprenticeship programs include health care, construction, manufacturing, education, hospitality, and transportation. The most common apprenticeships in their partner network are in manufacturing, construction, and agriculture; however, there is a growing interest and demand for apprenticeships in the health care and sustainability sectors.

Regardless of the challenges in launching an apprenticeship in rural communities, studies show that most apprentices remain employed after completing their programs, which can contribute to long-term economic growth.[31] For rural communities, retaining workers at sponsoring apprenticeship employers also means they stay in their communities, rather than migrating to larger cities that may appear to offer more job opportunities. By equipping residents with in-demand and transferable skills, apprenticeships can foster local talent retention and enable rural communities to thrive in an increasingly competitive job market while maintaining the small-town culture most rural communities prefer.

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UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS: RURAL LISC AND THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA APPRENTICESHIP STEERING COMMITTEE DEVELOPED A RESOURCE

With these needs in mind and funding from Ascendium Education Group and Walton Family Foundation, Rural LISC brought together three regional collaboratives in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta with national apprenticeship consultants, Thomas P. Miller & Associates (TPMA), to create a ready-to-use toolkit explicitly designed for rural areas that included digestible definitions of the types of

30 U.S. Department of Labor, Apprenticeship USA, https://www.apprenticeship.gov/apprenticeship-industries/agriculture.

31 Daniel Kuehn, Siobhan Mills De La Rosa, Robert Lerman, and Kevin Hollenbeck, "Do Employers Earn Positive Returns to Investments in Apprenticeship? Evidence from Registered Programs under the American Apprenticeship Initiative," report prepared for U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, August 2022, https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/publications/ETAOP2022-36_AAI_ROI_Final_Report_508_9-2022.pdf. For more on the economic impact of apprenticeships, please refer to chapter 1 of this volume: "Can Pay for Success Scale Apprenticeships in the US?"

apprenticeships, case studies of successful rural apprenticeships, and information on the possible steps to developing an apprenticeship ecosystem. The three area collaboratives served the areas around Jefferson County and Phillips County in Arkansas and Washington County in Mississippi. Each collaborative was comprised of the area's workforce ecosystem stakeholders, including K-12 schools, higher education institutions, vocational and technical schools, economic development organizations, local workforce investment boards, workforce-facing nonprofits, area employers, community foundations, and agencies providing support services to workers and job seekers.

The project design required that Rural LISC and TPMA rely on the representatives of these area collaboratives to lead the way in identifying the resources they needed to participate and the challenges they were facing in their communities. The three area collaboratives were created and provided with funds to address any organizational capacity issues they may have in building apprenticeships. Each of the three area collaboratives also provided four to five representatives to participate in the Mississippi Delta Apprenticeship Steering Committee, which met virtually once a month in the fall of 2022 and winter of 2023 and once in person in November 2022. Each area collaborative was also committed to utilizing the toolkit in their communities and developing one to three registered apprenticeship pathways with their partners, with the goal of serving five to 10 potential workforce members per year on each path.

By the end of the project period, the Apprenticeship Steering Committee had identified the necessary information for the toolkit to be used in their communities, thereby better educating employers and job seekers on the benefits of apprenticeships. They also identified the priority issues facing their workforce and the conditions that needed to be present to support a reliable workforce ecosystem in their communities, benefiting employers, job seekers, upskillers, and the surrounding community.

The most significant challenge was getting interested workers to the training centers. Public transportation is relatively nonexistent, and the training locations are not always easily accessible. Participants may be able to arrange some shared ride options with their family and friends; however, reliable transportation for the entire program is challenging. The area collaboratives identified several solutions to address this obstacle, including providing gas stipends, offering shuttle services from centralized locations, and incentivizing participant ride shares. This issue persists, and the collaboratives continue to explore various solutions. While none of the collaboratives felt they had "solved" this issue, their recommendation for future workforce ecosystem

collaboratives is to utilize ecosystem members to identify possible solutions collectively and to set this as an agenda point early and often.

In this same vein, the collaborators also identified the need for a broader area workforce assessment to better understand the barriers faced by the workforce in their area, including availability of child or elder care, proximity to healthy food and other essentials, and affordable housing. They concluded that utilizing the same collaborative problem-solving process to address the issues identified in an area's assessment will ensure that any apprenticeship or work-based learning program launched or expanded will succeed.

While the specific challenges and potential solutions these collaboratives focused on are not included in the toolkit, they prioritized collectively identifying these challenges and streamlining the data collected to ensure consistent analysis and success.

To increase awareness of the structure and benefits of apprenticeships, the Apprenticeship Steering Committee identified the need for the toolkit to feature a significant amount of information on the different types of apprenticeships, the process involved in registering an apprenticeship, the terminology associated with apprenticeships, and case studies that were directly comparable to the communities they were representing. With abundant data and case studies featuring urban communities, the Committee was eager to present only information relevant to their size and types of opportunities. The resulting information enabled the area collaboratives to meet with local employers and municipalities, addressing any concerns and hesitations about launching apprenticeships. They were also able to utilize the information to enhance their collaboration with community colleges and training centers.

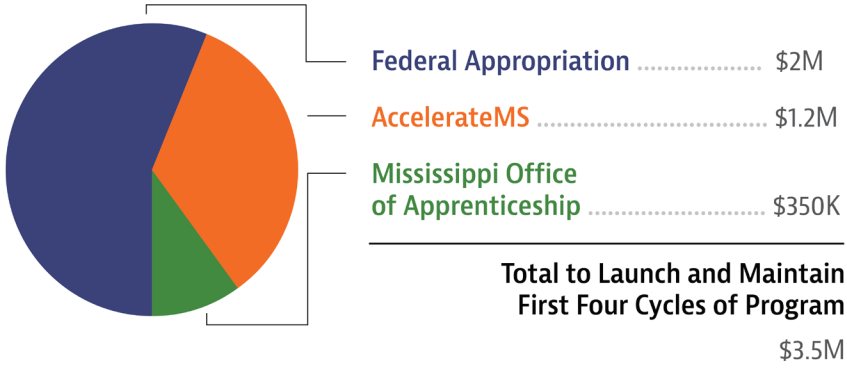
BUILDING A RURAL APPRENTICESHIP: THE SOUTH DELTA PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT'S DELTA AERIAL APPLICATOR (AG PILOT) APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM EXAMPLE

The majority of the resulting apprenticeships were focused on traditional pathways in skilled trades and manufacturing, but one innovative program in Mississippi concentrated on agricultural pilot careers in aviation. The South Delta Planning and Development District (SDPDD) led the development, launch, and evaluation of the Delta Aerial Applicator (Ag Pilot) Apprenticeship Program. They built upon the foundation created with Rural LISC's Apprenticeship Steering Committee and Apprenticeship Toolkit and brought together a collaborative with Delta State University and local employers to build

the apprenticeship program by braiding together multiple certificate curriculums, hands-on training in the specific aircraft needed for the specialized aerial work, and support funds to ensure that participants did not need to pay out of pocket to participate. Each partner signed a sponsored agreement to align program goals, metrics, and financial commitments. Metrics included the number of participants, the wages at the start and end of the program, and the types of social support available to the participants.

/ FIGURE 2 /

FUNDING SOURCES OF AG PILOT APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM



Currently in its third cycle of implementation, 100% of participants have been retained by employer sponsors investing in their professional development and providing jobs at the completion of the program. Twenty-one people have graduated from the program so far, and eight more graduating in May 2025, including two women, with a waitlist for future participants to fill at least three more cycles. Participants received an apprentice salary by the employer sponsor, individual coaching and mentorship by experts in the field, and financial support to pay for job-required tools and address social support needs, including travel costs and learning materials. The training is designed specifically for a high-demand position as a pilot to support agriculture initiatives across the country; however, these skills are transferable to additional employment opportunities with several federal agencies to monitor drug trafficking and fire protection. Whether the participants work as agricultural pilots or use their aviation skills to work for the federal government, their salaries jumped significantly at the completion of the program. Most participants started the program earning between $40,000 and $50,000. The minimum salary for the resulting positions is approximately $100,000-$175,000, which has led

the SDPDD team to estimate that the salary of participants will jump by at least 50% above their current earnings.

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One participant, John Reece Jackson, shared, "Without this opportunity that this program has offered me, I would not have been able to afford this training program, and it has helped me out in the long run to afford flight school and all the credentials that come with it."

Jackson was one of the rising stars in the second class of the Ag Pilot Apprentices in Delta State University's (DSU) Aerial Applicator Pilot Certification Program. Jackson earned his instrument and commercial ratings, as well as his pilot's license, while in the program. Beyond Basic Ag Pilot Training, he also received training in Turbine Transition, Advanced Turbine, GPS Guidance System, Light Bar, and Flying in the Wire and Obstruction Environment for Agricultural Operators. He earned his Certified Flight Instructor I and II credentials and is now poised to transition from apprentice to mentor and educator within the same program in which he participated. Each training moved him further up his career ladder and increased his earning potential.

BARRIERS OR OPPORTUNITIES: SHARING THE LESSONS LEARNED AND WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN LAUNCHING A RURAL APPRENTICESHIP IN RURAL AMERICA

"It took almost a year of working closely with our employer partners, Delta State University, state apprenticeship team, local and federal officials, and Rural LISC to get our first apprenticeship off the ground. There were no major fumbles or delays; it simply took time to coordinate everything. By the time we started working on the second apprenticeship program for electrical residential and commercial electrical contractor, we had figured out what questions to ask, who needed to be at each meeting, and what activities were just going to take more time than others." — Mitzi Woods, South Delta Planning and Development District's workforce director and the anchor of the Washington County area collaborative.

Through working with all three apprenticeship collaboratives, the Rural LISC team learned important lessons that have shaped future workforce strategies. While apprenticeships seem like a perfect fit for addressing the job gap in rural spaces, significant access barriers remain. Some barriers are educational, with potential trainees lacking

the basic skills in math, literacy, and technology necessary to learn more complex skills usually related to apprenticeships. Some barriers are economic, with potential apprentices expected to already have the right tools, uniforms, and other equipment.

Other barriers are cultural, where potential apprentices do not feel welcome in the potential work environments or do not appear to fit the perceived mold of the specific career pathway. The apprenticeships that Rural LISC supported all included social support funds for apprentices to address accessing foundational training sessions and providing necessary physical tools. Still, cultural barriers can only be addressed by employers and the educational spaces where the apprentices are gaining new skills. Women make up half of the workforce but only 14% of the pool of apprentices.[32] In recent years, the number of apprentices who self-identify as an individual with a disability has grown to over 3,000[33] — about 1% of all apprentices — and they are more concentrated in construction, educational services, and transportation/warehousing. And, despite participation at rates consistent with their percentage of the population, Black apprentices are less likely than white apprentices to complete an apprenticeship program.[34] Facts like these show employers need to consider their practices to be able to recruit and retain a diverse apprenticeship pool, which has been shown to be more productive and better for the bottom line.[35]

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32 Barbara A. Butrica, Daniel Kuehn, and Madeleine Sirois, "Women in Apprenticeships and Nontraditional Occupations in the United States: Apprenticeship Evidence-Building Portfolio," May 2023, https://www.apprenticeship.gov/sites/default/files/WANTO-knowledge-report-508%206.15.23.pdf.

33 Nanette Goodman, Nick Canfield, and Michael Morris, "Disability Inclusion in Registered Apprenticeship Programs," n.d., https://disabilityinclusiveemployment.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/2024-goodman-apprenticeship.pdf. Note: individuals who self-identify as disabled make up 13% of the population but only 1% of the pool of apprentices.

34 U.S. Department of Labor, "U.S. Apprenticeship Overview," November 3, 2021, https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OPA/files/20211103-apprenticeship-equity.pdf.

35 Daniel Kuehn, John Marotta, Bhavani Arabandi, and Batia Katz, "Inclusive Apprenticeship: A Summary of What We Know about Apprentices with Disabilities," Urban Institute, May 2021, inclusive-apprenticeship-a-summary-of-what-we-know-about-apprentices-with-disabilities.pdf; PIA—Partnership on Inclusive Apprenticeship, https://inclusiveapprenticeship.org/resources/the-value-of-inclusive-apprenticeships/calculate-the-return-on-investment-of-inclusive-apprenticeship/.

In addition, Rural LISC and its apprenticeship partners discovered that there is still much resistance to hosting apprenticeships by employers. Some employers are hesitant to engage in apprenticeships due to existing union relationships. Others are resistant to exploring alternative models to support their workforce. Still other employers are reluctant or lack the capacity to develop or host a comprehensive apprenticeship program.

Who is at the table? Educating local employers about the benefits of apprenticeships and connecting them to their successful peers have been the most effective strategies to overcome preconceived negative perceptions. Two of the Apprenticeship Steering Committee collaboratives hosted informational sessions for community employers, utilizing the Rural LISC Apprenticeship Toolkit, to share best practices for employers and gauge which partners are ready to sponsor an apprenticeship.

Part of the collaborative learning process has been identifying which partners should be included in any workforce ecosystem discussion. For apprenticeships, this has included the addition of local support nonprofits to provide insight into the obstacles that potential apprentices face outside of work that impact their ability to complete their apprenticeships. These nonprofits include local food pantries, workforce boards, Boys & Girls Clubs, social service benefits offices, and faith-based organizations. Adding these voices to the collaboratives increased the completion rates of apprenticeships.

Who is in charge? The opportunity gap in rural regions also requires time and effort to identify partnerships that will work toward developing and implementing the apprenticeship program. Employer partners are a must, but the education and workforce partners in the community are also important to identify the actual skills already in the local labor force, the training and instructors in place, and the open positions available. The host of the apprenticeship program can be any of these partners, but having an anchor like a local economic development agency or community college with dedicated staff focused on developing the apprenticeship program and managing the partnership collaboratives (workforce ecosystem) is key.

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With the Apprenticeship Toolkit,[36] the Apprenticeship Steering Committee collaboratives were given a road map on how to recruit and maintain relationships in rural committees, along with guidance on creating data-sharing agreements, identifying regional career pathways, and providing role descriptions for partners in workforce ecosystem collaboratives. Connecting with the state apprenticeship program is also essential to tapping into additional funding resources and receiving support in the federal registration process. Every single area collaborative credits the relationship they develop with their state office as crucial to launching a rural apprenticeship, which includes inviting these officials to their community and interacting with potential apprentices. Intermediary partners like Rural LISC can be instrumental in organizing the initial meetings and connections, but local anchors need to dedicate ongoing efforts to maintain this crucial relationship.

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How much does it cost? A significant challenge in launching and running an apprenticeship like the Ag Pilot program is the cost and labor involved. The SDPDD braided the financial and technical assistance investment from Rural LISC with a $2 million federal appropriation, a $1.2 million AccelerateMS[37] grant, and $350,000 from the Mississippi Office of Apprenticeship to launch and maintain the first four cycles of the program. Initial costs were focused on the time spent by the SDPDD team to coordinate efforts between the partners, register for the national apprenticeship designation, and provide up-front materials to the participants. The costs have decreased as the program continues, but funding will continue to be required as more cycles are held. The program costs approximately $95,000 per participant for training, testing fees, access to equipment and planes, instructor costs, and some supplemental expenses, for which the participants do not have to pay a single cent. However, they do commit to fully engaging in the program within the designated timeline.

The success of this apprenticeship program has led the SDPDD team to start developing another innovative apprenticeship, focusing on a residential and commercial electrician pathway, which launched

36 Thomas P. Miller & Associates, "Rural LISC Apprenticeship Toolkit," January 2023, https://www.lisc.org/media/filer_public/3c/de/3cde3724-8c1a-4e8f-9560-ccd7c370bd9e/rural_lisc_apprenticeship_toolkit.pdf.

37 AccelerateMS is the leading office for workforce development strategy and delivery in Mississippi; see https://acceleratems.org.

in November 2024 with 15 participants enrolled in the first cycle. Collaborative partners in this electrician apprenticeship include local employers, Build Mississippi,[38] Mississippi Delta Community College, and AccelerateMS. While the braiding of these different funding sources may seem unique to SDPDD, it is the most common method to fully launch a new apprenticeship. Few funders or donors in rural areas can fully fund a new apprenticeship, so bringing together multiple public and private sources is necessary.

How can the workforce ecosystem support the apprentice? The unique challenges of establishing a new apprenticeship in a rural region have required all the Apprenticeship Steering Committee members to include supplemental social support for participants in the apprenticeship program. While an apprentice is paid a salary by design — so there is no wage disruption — it is likely that participants will need to travel great distances to attend classes or reach the experiential spaces where they learn best (e.g., air base, manufacturing plant, field). Any supplemental funding or support for participants in apprenticeship programs must include travel costs to training centers for both participants and their educators, as well as consideration of costs to the personal support system for the participant (rent, child or elder care, food, and the job requirements and hours of their support system). Participants received a child care stipend for one of the programs based in southeast Arkansas or could enroll their child in on-site child care. In another location, a shuttle bus was procured to provide transportation for participants and connect the training center to the center of the community. Compared to urban areas, rural communities have significantly fewer funding source opportunities, so it is necessary to braid together multiple funding streams to fund a successful rural apprenticeship program, starting with the area employers that are hosting the opportunity.

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LOOKING FORWARD

In rural areas, where educational and job opportunities can be limited, apprenticeships provide a vital pathway to stable, well-paying careers.

38 Build Mississippi is an initiative powered by Mississippi Construction Education Foundation (MCEF), a nonprofit educational foundation that provides the National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) with craft training and credentialing in almost 200 career and technical programs across the state while offering workforce training and credentialing in construction and industrial maintenance trades; see https://buildmississippi.com.

Moving forward, Rural LISC is continuing to partner with regional workforce collaboratives to offer support in developing, implementing, and growing apprenticeship opportunities in various sectors, including jobs in clean energy technology and installation. Rural LISC is expanding its toolkit, based on the first two years of use, to include more details about the apprentice and employer perspective and highlight the best practices of the first three participants in the Apprenticeship Steering Committee. The toolkit has already been utilized by community colleges, and the second edition will include more information to support these educational institutions as potential anchors for apprenticeship development and maintenance.

Funding will continue to be the biggest barrier and opportunity. Providing assistance and guidance in accessing and managing multiple funding sources from public and private sources will continue to be a significant part of the Rural LISC strategy when supporting apprenticeship programs. These efforts will include working with the LISC Policy team to elevate workforce concerns to state and federal legislators and supporting community partners in accessing local and state funding.

In conclusion, apprenticeships can serve as a cornerstone for the growth and sustainability of rural communities. By fostering local talent, enhancing workforce development, and addressing skill gaps, they create a ripple effect that benefits individuals and the broader economy. As rural areas continue to face unique challenges, strengthening and expanding apprenticeship programs will ensure long-term prosperity, reduce unemployment, and provide the next generation with the tools they need to thrive.

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Julianne Dunn is the Senior Program Officer on the Workforce + Financial Prosperity team at Rural LISC.