

**Date:** December 13, 2024

**To:** Pathfinders RC&D

**From:** Delaney Behning, Abby Buls, Elijah Exley-Schuman, DeLaney Frater, and Nick Kamp

**Re:** Workforce Development in South Central Iowa

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## SUMMARY

Pathfinders RC&D asked us to better understand what employers need to succeed. The project aims to address the issues of a shrinking workforce, difficulty attracting workers, and lack of trained workers. We have provided information about existing employer- and employee-related data and development efforts, best practices in workforce development, and best practices on rural workforce data collection.

## BACKGROUND

South Central Iowa is facing a workforce shortage that has evolved and worsened over decades. A shift in both the economy and population patterns has contributed to a steady decline in rural populations. From 2016 to 2021, South Central Iowa saw a 4.1% decline in jobs, while the national rate grew by 0.7%.<sup>i</sup> Although this is a relatively short time frame, it points to regional challenges. The issue is not just the loss of jobs, but also the shrinking labor force available to fill remaining positions. Between October 2000 and October 2024, South Central Iowa's labor force shrank by 1.69%, while the number of employed individuals decreased by 2.01%. In contrast during the same 24-year span, Iowa's employment grew by 4.8%, and the state's labor force increased by 5.57%.<sup>ii</sup>

To provide further comparison, see Appendix I for a closer look at Keokuk County and similarly sized counties in states with comparable populations.<sup>iii</sup> These examples highlight a key issue: while South Central Iowa's labor force and employment figures have largely stagnated or declined, trends in both Iowa statewide and in similar-sized counties in a state of similar size to those in South Central Iowa have shown growth.<sup>iv</sup>

An important phenomenon contributing to these challenges is "brain drain." Nearly half of those who left rural communities in 2015 had no intention of returning.<sup>v</sup> Over the past decade, the region has experienced a 6% decline in residents under 18, while the senior population has grown by 22%.<sup>vi</sup> This accentuates a shrinking pool of young people who could potentially enter or return to the workforce. The impacts of brain drain are further evidenced by stagnant or rising unemployment rates in all six of the counties since 2000 (see Appendix I), and a report stating that 62.4% of Iowa employers state that finding qualified candidates is their biggest hiring challenge.<sup>vii</sup> Even when employers can find candidates, many applicants fail to show up for interviews. This ongoing challenge highlights the significant gap between employer needs and available talent, one of many factors exacerbating workforce shortages.

Looking ahead, this region faces promising, albeit challenging, prospects. Projections show job growth in several key sectors from 2023 to 2032, including health care (+33,215 jobs), education (+12,355 jobs), and construction (+8,880 jobs).<sup>viii</sup> These sectors offer significant potential for economic development. However, if the area cannot overcome its workforce development challenges, it risks losing more businesses and residents to urban areas with better access to talent. Without action, the cycle of population declines, worker shortages, and economic stagnation will continue to deepen, further undermining the region's long-term growth prospects.

## **CURRENT EFFORTS**

“Traction Thursdays” is a peer and technical support group for entrepreneurs in the city of Fairfield and Jefferson County area organized by the Small Business Administration.<sup>ix</sup> Every Thursday, this program provides a consistent space for entrepreneurs to connect, share experiences, and get presentational guidance from community mentors. It offers networking opportunities and provides a space for new entrepreneurs to present questions or issues they are facing, which is essential for small business growth. By fostering collaboration and support, Traction Thursdays helps reduce isolation among small business owners and builds confidence in taking on new challenges, encouraging them to remain rooted in the local community.

Pathfinders RC&D supports local entrepreneurs with resources like small business loan assistance and grant writing help.<sup>x</sup> They also offer a comprehensive resource guide, which includes how to access free one-on-one consultations through America’s Small Business Development Center (SBDC) Iowa or find other resources.<sup>xi</sup> These services make crucial financial and operational support accessible, helping entrepreneurs overcome barriers that often hinder small business growth. By building a strong support network, Pathfinders helps equip local entrepreneurs with the tools, funding opportunities, and community connections they need to thrive and contribute to the local economy.

The Workforce Needs Assessment for South Central Iowa is an example of a recent effort in data collection pertaining to workforce development. Conducted during the Fall of 2022 and the Spring of 2023,<sup>xii</sup> its aim was to better understand the challenges faced by employers in this region. The counties measured include the Area 15 counties, as well as Appanoose, Hardin, Lucas, Marshall, Monroe, Poweshiek, Tama, and Wayne Counties. The most significant workforce challenges faced by employers were:

1. Finding qualified job candidates (60.9%)
2. General lack of applicants (60.1%)
3. Turnover/attrition (25.5%)
4. Hiring new employees (process/cost) (12.6%)

Many high schools in this area have implemented workforce development solutions. According to Ottumwa’s School Board President Christina Schark, they have a variety of programs to prepare students for life after high school, beginning with career counseling in middle school and programs like IJAG at the high school level. Students have a chance to job shadow professionals and tour college campuses, including the University of Iowa. Dual-enrollment classes are offered through Indian Hills Community College, which allows participating students to earn an associate's degree by the time they graduate high school. Many students take advantage of this in the trades department or as a CNA. Counselors also help with FAFSA forms and college scholarship applications. The district also hosts job fairs.

## **BEST PRACTICES**

### *Innovate 120*

Innovate 120 is a co-working space in Maquoketa, Iowa, that allows the community to foster innovation and entrepreneurship among local businesses.<sup>xiii</sup> They provide space for meetings and amenities that are

designed to serve students and businesses alike. In addition to this space, they operate and host several programs:

- *UX Design Internships*: These provide high schoolers the opportunity to learn in a professional environment and assist clients in developing their career success. This program offers a system of mutual benefit for Innovate120, high schoolers, and local employers.
- *Lecture Series*: A weekly speaker series provides space for local entrepreneurs to learn and network.
- *Summer Science Camp*: With the help of local member sponsors, Innovate120 hosts a Summer Science Camp for elementary school students. This seems like a realistically accomplishable partnership in a comparable community that could be adopted in communities in South Central Iowa.

#### *Cedar Rapids Workforce Retention Project*

Another best practice deals with data collection. Outlined here is the Cedar Rapids Workforce Retention Project, which was created partly by graduate students in the Iowa Initiative for Sustainable Communities (IISC) at the University of Iowa.<sup>xiv</sup> This project focused on worker and resident retention of people 25-40 years of age in Cedar Rapids. This age group was surveyed about what amenities this group sought in order to stay in the area, and what might attract newcomers. The surveys were administered through a variety of methods including on project partners' websites, by groups interested in sharing the survey, in the local newspaper, on social media, at Kirkwood Community College, and at multiple professional networking events in the area.

Responses found that popular priorities with this age group were:

- "Better jobs"
- "Downtown growth & development"
- "Shopping"

The statements they ranked Cedar Rapids most poorly on were:

- "Cedar Rapids a good place for gays and lesbians."
- "Cedar Rapids is a good place to meet people."
- "Cedar Rapids has a vibrant nightlife."

From these responses, the students held focus groups in centrally located Cedar Rapids areas. These were tailored to allow the respondents to clarify and develop their answers and offer potential solutions. Participants identified the following roadblocks to remaining in or relocating to Cedar Rapids:

- Lack of housing diversity in the downtown area
- Inadequate transportation modes
- Lack of unique shops and neighborhoods
- Lack of entertainment options aimed at this age group.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **(1) Innovate 120 Model Program Story Map**

Based on the design of Innovate120, the best practice listed above, we recommend that Pathfinders implements scaled-down hub-based entrepreneurial and business education centers across Area 15. Such programming would be important to each county or the area as a whole.

The success of Maquoketa's Innovate 120 suggests this approach would enhance collaboration, provide a support network, and lead to employer innovation across Area 15. The story map provides the analysis of Innovate120, model program designs, and locations for the hubs, as well as how projected participation. We recommend that one hub be placed in the county seat of each county, and that each hub offer three programs: entrepreneur education, internships for regional high schools, and lectures/learning for business owners.

Included in the story map are a cost analysis, a summary of available funding opportunities, and an implementation timeline are provided. To roll out this policy recommendation to its fullest, the total cost would be approximately \$500,000, but each hub can be implemented individually. This allows Pathfinders to invest in this program model in phases, especially given that costs for each hub are dependent on calculation. For example, the cost to run a pilot hub in Keokuk or Davis counties would cost \$63,000 compared to Wapello, which would cost \$111,000. This story map will be included as an attachment along with the package.

## **(2) Employers Contact List and Focus Group**

From the Iowa Workforce Development's Employment Database and the South Central Iowa Workforce Needs Assessment, we have generated a policy recommendation to better understand employers' and facilitate a working relationship with them. The first component of this recommendation is an Area 15 employer contact list, which is included in the package sent with this memo. This contact list includes a county breakdown of employers by industry. Apart from this list is the contact information for 1,239 employers from all six counties. This contact information would ideally be used for record-keeping purposes and for the second component of this recommendation: focus group discussions.

Appendix II includes an outline of the focus group process. In this outline, we have provided different options for contacting and facilitating the focus groups, an estimated cost analysis, a question bank, an outreach email, and a consent form. This focus group strategy aims to connect the concerns faced by employers to Pathfinders while also allowing Pathfinders to better understand how they should be directly utilizing their resources and programming to assist these employers. While the Workforce Needs Assessment has provided a good background, these focus groups will provide more information to Pathfinders while allowing discussion for them to expand on issues they are facing and what they want and need to be successful.

## **(3) Young Residents Outreach and Survey**

The goal of this survey is to gather insight into why people choose to stay, leave, or return to their rural communities. This is important because with this understanding, communities can better accommodate, retain, and attract residents. The target audience for the survey is individuals aged 16-24. To reach those within the lower end of that age range, high schools and educational institutions within the area (see contact information included along with the package) should distribute and collect the survey to students during the school day. Institutions should also make the survey available on their official websites to increase visibility. In addition, we suggest working with school districts to expand reach to parents and alumni. Reaching people who have left the area is important and more difficult. This survey should also be distributed to those in fields such as trade. Contacts for the schools and trade organizations can be found in the attached document. The survey should cost less than \$2,000 and does not require hiring any additional staff. There are two options for administering the survey: a virtual survey which could be

administered through Google Forms or Microsoft Forms for free (Appendix III) and a physical survey (Appendix IV). With this information, Pathfinders can hopefully better understand what the area needs to maintain a strong workforce and work to facilitate appropriate programming to support this workforce.

## **STAKEHOLDERS**

- Robert Abbott—Director of Innovate120
- Ed Malloy—Director of Grow Fairfield Economic Development Association
- Zach James—Assistant Director of the Southeast Iowa Rural Planning Commission
- Christina Scharck—Ottumwa School District School Board President

## APPENDIX I

All the following data is based on comparisons from October 2000 to October 2024.

Zooming out, the median population of the six counties we're examining falls between Keokuk County and Jefferson County. Looking at Keokuk County, there is an estimated population of 9,914 as of 2023—there, the labor force decreased by -11.82%, employment dropped by -11.98%, and the unemployment rate increased by 0.1%.

In comparison, White Pine County, Nevada (population: 8,298)—located in a similarly sized state to Iowa (Nevada's population: 3,210,930 vs. Iowa's 3,214,320)—saw its labor force grow by 26.85%, while employment increased by 27.19%. The unemployment rate there decreased by 0.3%.

Similarly, Kane County, Utah (population: 9,928) experienced a 36.33% increase in its labor force, while employment rose by 35.77%. However, the unemployment rate did in fact see a rate increase of 0.4% during that period.

Over the same period in the six-county Pathfinders RC&D Service Area, the overall employment dropped by -2.01%, while the unemployment rate increased in five of the six counties, with an area wide rise of 0.36%. Additionally, the labor force saw a decline of -1.69%.

Area	Year	Period	Adjusted	Laborforce	Employment	Unemployment: %	Unemployment: ..
Filter...	...	October		Filter...			
Kane	2000	October	Seasonally not Adjusted	3,083	3,000	83	2.7%
Filter...	...	October		Filter...			
Kane	2024	October	Seasonally not Adjusted	4,203	4,073	130	3.1%

### Employment and Unemployment Statistics - LAUS

State	Region	Area Type	Area	Year	Period Type	Period	Adjustment		
Nevada	NV	County	White Pine County, N...	2000	Monthly	October	Not Adj		
Region	Area	Year	Period	Adjustment	Preliminary	Employed	Labor Force	Unemployed	Unemployment Rate
NV	White Pine County, Nevada	2000	October	Not Adj	No	3,611	3,750	139	3.7%

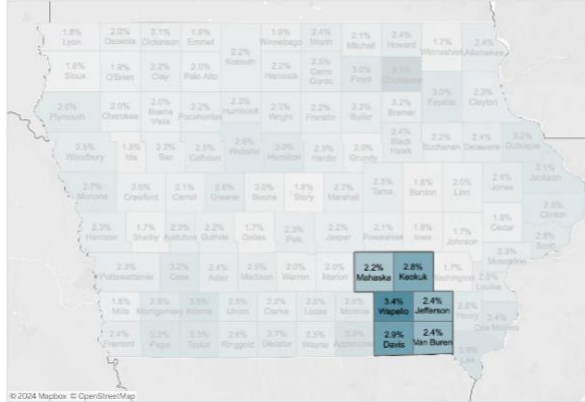
### Employment and Unemployment Statistics - LAUS

State	Region	Area Type	Area	Year	Period Type	Period	Adjustment		
Nevada	NV	County	White Pine County, N...	2024	Monthly	October	Not Adj		
Region	Area	Year	Period	Adjustment	Preliminary	Employed	Labor Force	Unemployed	Unemployment Rate
NV	White Pine County, Nevada	2024	October	Not Adj	Yes	4,593	4,757	164	3.4%

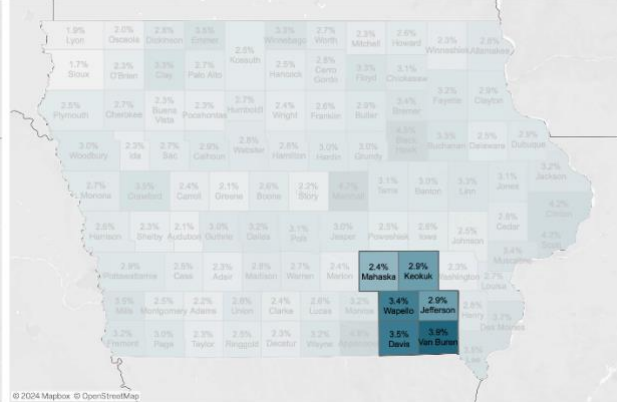
# Briefing Memorandum Workforce Development

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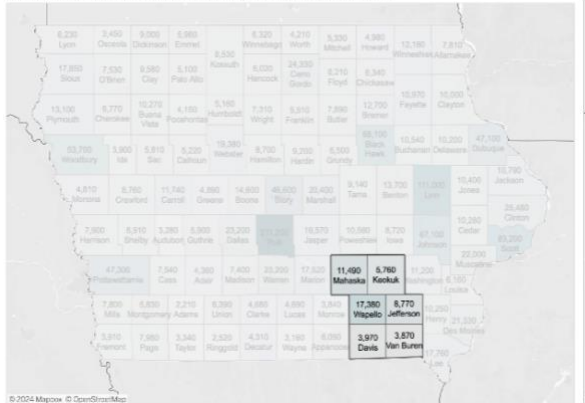
Map of Unemployment Rate (%) in October 2000 (Statewide: 2.3%)  
(Not Seasonally Adjusted) Filter the line chart by selecting counties on the map



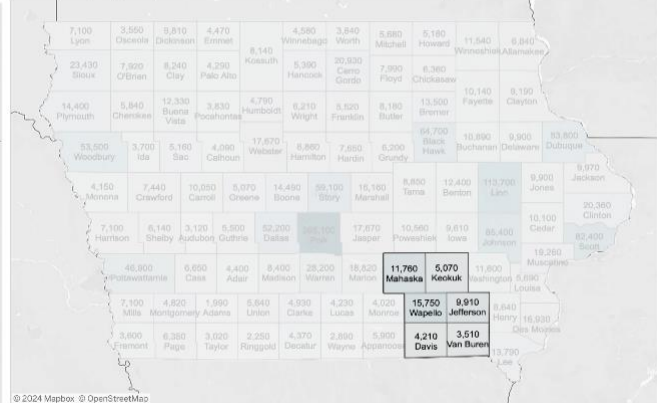
Map of Unemployment Rate (%) in October 2024 (Statewide: 3.0%)  
(Not Seasonally Adjusted) Filter the line chart by selecting counties on the map



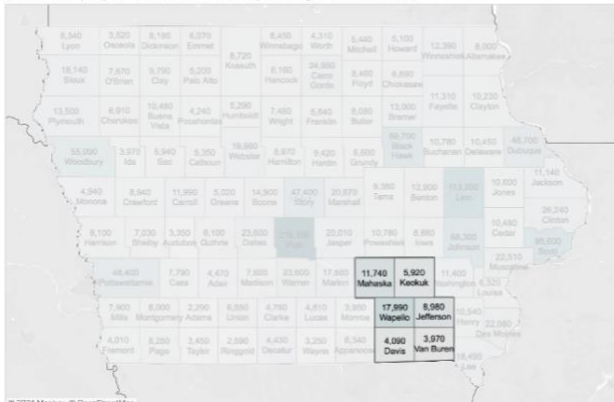
Map of Employment in October 2000 (Statewide: 1,565,280)  
(Not Seasonally Adjusted) Filter the line chart by selecting counties on the map



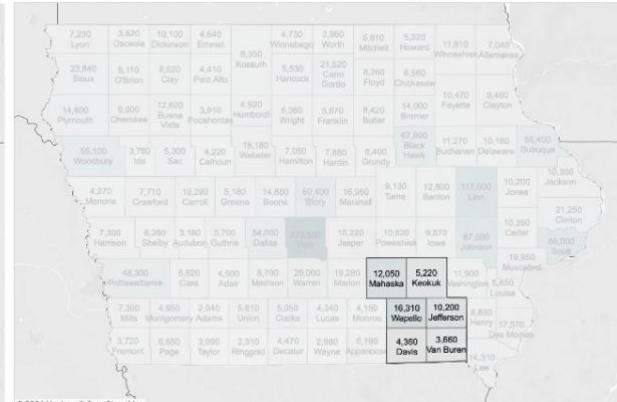
Map of Employment in October 2024 (Statewide: 1,640,470)  
(Not Seasonally Adjusted) Filter the line chart by selecting counties on the map



Map of Labor Force in October 2000 (Statewide: 1,602,900)  
(Not Seasonally Adjusted) Filter the line chart by selecting counties on the map



Map of Labor Force in October 2024 (Statewide: 1,692,170)  
(Not Seasonally Adjusted) Filter the line chart by selecting counties on the map



## APPENDIX II

### Contacting Participants in Focus Groups:

Employers should be contacted based on the contact list. (It may also be beneficial to use the contacts of those who responded to the Workforce Needs Assessment to gather for the focus group to give more of their insight). There could be two different routes to take for this:

#### 1. A Focus Group per County

- In each county, there should be a focus group held at a central location in the county.
  1. Jefferson County, this could be in Fairfield either at Pathfinders' office or [Fairfield Public Library](#) if more space is needed.
  2. Mahaska County, this could be in Oskaloosa at [Oskaloosa Public Library](#)
  3. Davis County, this could be in Bloomfield at the [Mutchler Community Center](#).
  5. Van Buren County, this could be in Keosauqua at [Keosauqua Public Library](#).
  6. Wapello County, this could in in Ottumwa at [Bridge View Center](#) for rental. (\$190).
  6. For Keokuk County, this could be in Sigourney at the [Sigourney Public Library](#).
- This focus group method would be beneficial to understanding the needs of each county if there is thought to be variations between each county's economy.
- Each county's focus group should include employers from ranging and varying industries and sizes.
- An example of this focus group might look like:

Employer Name	City	Size	County	Sector	Contact Email	Contact Number
Golden Dome Market & Cafe	Fairfield	20-49	Jefferson	Accommodation and Food Services	<a href="mailto:gdmarket@miu.edu">gdmarket@miu.edu</a>	(641) 470-1376
Stephen Sondheim Theatre	Fairfield	10 to 19	Jefferson	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	<a href="mailto:info@fairfieldacc.com">info@fairfieldacc.com</a>	(641) 472-2000
Insultec	Fairfield	10 to 19	Jefferson	Construction	<a href="mailto:dorian.punj@insultec.com">dorian.punj@insultec.com</a>	(641) 472 7246
Barclay Hedge Ltd	Fairfield	10 to 19	Jefferson	Finance and Insurance	<a href="mailto:mpech@barclayhedge.com">mpech@barclayhedge.com</a>	(641) 472-3456
Fairfield Public Library	Fairfield	5 to 9	Jefferson	Information	<a href="mailto:circ@fairfield.lib.ia.us">circ@fairfield.lib.ia.us</a>	641-472-6551 ext. 1
Fairfield Castings	Fairfield	100-249	Jefferson	Manufacturing	<a href="mailto:marketing@faircastinc.com">marketing@faircastinc.com</a>	(641) 209-4000

#### 2. A Focus Group per Class Size

- Each focus group would be comprised of employers of the same class size:
  - One for employers of a class size greater than 500 employees.
  - One for employers of a class size between 250 and 499 employees.
  - One for employers of a class size between 100 and 249 employees.
  - One for employers of a class size between 50 and 99 employees.



- One for employers of a class size between 20 and 49 employees.
- One for employers of a class size between 10 and 19 employees.
- One for employers of a class size between 5 and 9 employees.
- This type of focus group would be beneficial to understanding the different needs of different sized employers, but in making the focus groups, it should also be considered different locations and different sectors that would have an impact on employers’ experiences as well.
- An example of this focus group might look like:

Employer Name	City	Size	County	Sector	Contact Email	Contact Number
Kelderman Manufacturing	Oskaloosa	50-99	Mahaska	Agriculture	<a href="mailto:info@kelderman.com">info@kelderman.com</a>	(800) 334-6150
Fairfield High School	Fairfield	50-99	Jefferson	Education Services	<a href="mailto:mallory.mahon@fairfielddsfuture.org">mallory.mahon@fairfielddsfuture.org</a>	(641) 472-2059
Southern Iowa Mental Health Center	Ottumwa	50-99	Wapello	Health Care and Social Assistance	<a href="mailto:Simhc@SimhcOttumwa.org">Simhc@SimhcOttumwa.org</a>	641-682-8772
Second Street Cafe	Ottumwa	50-99	Wapello	Accommodation and Food Services	<a href="mailto:sales@hotelottumwa.com">sales@hotelottumwa.com</a>	(641) 684-5626
Davis County Hospital & Clinics	Bloomfield	50-99	Davis	Health Care and Social Assistance	<a href="mailto:marketing@dchc.org">marketing@dchc.org</a>	641-664-2145
Sigourney Junior/Senior High	Sigourney	50-99	Keokuk	Education Services	<a href="mailto:shannon.webb@sigourneyschools.com">shannon.webb@sigourneyschools.com</a>	641-622-2010

### 3. A Focus Group per Sector

- A focus group could be conducted to collect data on different sectors.
- These sectors or industries include:
  - Accommodation and Food Services
  - Administrative and Waste Services
  - Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing & Hunting
  - Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation
  - Construction
  - Education Services
  - Finance and Insurance
  - Health Care and Social Assistance
  - Information
  - Manufacturing
  - Mining
  - Other Services
  - Professional and Technical Services
  - Public Administration
  - Real Estate and Renting and Leasing
  - Retail Trade
  - Transportation and Warehousing

- Utilities
- Wholesale Trade
- This type of focus group would be beneficial to understanding the different needs within industries and could lead to industry-tailored solutions; location as well as class size should also be taken into consideration when looking at responses.
- An example of this focus group might look like:

Employer Name	City	Size	County	Sector	Contact Email	Contact Number
Fairfield High School	Fairfield	50-99	Jefferson	Education Services	<a href="mailto:mallory.mahon@fairfieldsfuture.org">mallory.mahon@fairfieldsfuture.org</a>	(641) 472-2059
North Mahaska School	New Sharon	50-99	Mahaska	Education Services	<a href="mailto:HUDSONK@nmwarhawks.org">HUDSONK@nmwarhawks.org</a>	(641)-637-4187
Fremont Middle School	Fremont	20-49	Mahaska	Education Services	<a href="mailto:jill.schmidt@rocketsk12.org">jill.schmidt@rocketsk12.org</a>	641-969-4288
RHCHC Sigourney Elementary	Sigourney	50-99	Keokuk	Education Services	<a href="mailto:deanna.spence@sigourneyschools.com">deanna.spence@sigourneyschools.com</a>	641-622-2350
Indian Hills Community College	Ottumwa	250-499	Wapello	Education Services	<a href="mailto:Zeke.Flick@indianhills.edu">Zeke.Flick@indianhills.edu</a>	(641) 683-5111
Ottumwa Christian School	Ottumwa	20-49	Wapello	Education Services	<a href="mailto:ocsofficemanager@gmail.com">ocsofficemanager@gmail.com</a>	<a href="tel:641-683-9119">641-683-9119</a>

**Contact Script:**

Pathfinders should contact these employers by email (or by phone if no email contact is available). A draft email for this looks like this:

Dear [employer],

Pathfinders RC&D is a non-profit organization focused on improving workforce development in South Central Iowa, notably in Davis, Jefferson, Keokuk, Mahaska, Van Buren, and Wapello Counties.

We are conducting a focus group to better understand employers’ needs and how Pathfinders can help meet those needs. Your input would be incredibly valuable. We invite you on behalf of [organization] to attend the focus group on [date and time] located at [address]. We are committed to furthering a strong economy for South Central Iowa, and we thank you for considering sharing your perspective with us.

We are contacting you to see if you are interested in participating in a focus group to better understand your needs and how we could be of assistance in meeting those. It is a key part of our mission to strengthen local economies, and we look forward to hearing your thoughts on the best way to do this.

By participating in this focus group, we can provide [some incentive] for your participation. Please respond to this email to confirm that a representative from your organization can attend this focus group. If you have any questions about this, do not hesitate to reach out to this email or call xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Thank you for your time,  
[name of direct contact]  
Pathfinders RC&D

### **Recap IWNA Questions**

Recap of the questions from the Iowa Workforce Needs Assessment to see which applies to employers, either for further discussion or demographic questions.

Survey Questions and Answers: <https://workforce.iowa.gov/media/1304/download?inline=>

Most significant workforce challenges faced by employers

- Finding Qualified Job Candidates (60.9%)
- General Lack of Applicants (60.1%)
- Turnover/Attrition (25.5%)
- Hiring New Employees (Process/Cost) (12.6%)

Top employee retention strategies

- Offer Competitive Wage/Salary
- Create a Culture of Open Communication
- Fostering Teamwork
- Employee Training & Development
- Provide Comfortable Work Environment & Culture
- Foster Respect in Workplace
- Establish Expectations & Policies
- Provide Positive Feedback
- Offer Competitive Benefits Package
- Established Personal Safety Protocols
- Hire Selectively
- Encourage Healthy Work Life Balance
- Have System for Evaluating Performance
- Evaluating Performance On-Boarding & Orientation
- Promote Diversity

### **The Estimated Costs**

Calculations Key:

- Rental Space Costs other than the Public Library are based off Wapello County's [Bridge View Center rental](#).
- Reimbursement/Incentive: \$10-15 per person for lunch or gift card for Zoom.
- Rental space at the public library would be free.

In-person cost per one focus group using Public Library or Pathfinders Fairfield office: \$120

In-person cost including space used other than Public Library or Pathfinders Fairfield office: ~\$190

Rental Space Alone for Total Focus Group Grouping:

- County:  $\$190 \times 6 = \$1,140$
- Business Size:  $\$190 \times 7 = \$1,330$

- Sector:  $\$190 \times 19 = \$3,610$

Costs per One In-Person Rental Space other than rental free space: \$310

Total In-Person Costs in Rental Space other than Main Library:

- County:  $\$15 \text{ reimbursement} \times 8 \text{ participants} \times 6 \text{ focus group} + 1,140 = \$1,860$
- Business Size:  $\$15 \text{ reimbursement} \times 8 \text{ participants} \times 7 \text{ focus groups} + 1,330 = \$2,170$
- Sector:  $\$15 \text{ reimbursement} \times 8 \text{ participants} \times 19 \text{ focus groups} + 3,610 = \$5,890$

Costs per one Zoom Focus Group: \$120

Total Zoom Costs per Focus Group Grouping:

- County:  $\$15 \text{ reimbursement} \times 8 \text{ participants} \times 6 \text{ focus group} = \$720$
- Business Size:  $\$15 \text{ reimbursement} \times 8 \text{ participants} \times 7 \text{ focus groups} = \$840$
- Sector:  $\$15 \text{ reimbursement} \times 8 \text{ participants} \times 19 \text{ focus groups} = \$2,280$

### **Administer & Assistant Requirements:**

- Accustomed to business jargon/some sort of knowledge in relation to the participates but also can learn from the discussion itself/themselves
- Welcoming/comforting
- Observational
- Can navigate/direct focus group based off present conversation
- Consider participate gender makeup

**Note** – Assistant to take notes and record – pay attention to who may or may not be participating: why is that? Comfort in the group? Is it potentially related to their business?

### **Strategy Options:**

**Note:** OVER INVITE! Expect participants to forget or not show up. If everyone shows up, go with focus group layout 2.

Send a reminder to participant's form of contact a week prior, then either one or two days in advance.

Reininclude consent form, date, time, and directions/zoom link invitation.

1. In-person Location --- Reserve Room at Public Library
  - a. Pros
    - i. Face to face
    - ii. Cost friendly (depending on if meeting time works with the Public Library or another free/community space)
    - iii. Snack and drink Incentives
  - b. Cons
    - i. Time away from work. Would food and drink incentives be sufficient?
    - ii. Driving costs (time and milage money)
    - iii. Weather (dependent on season and the facility's functioning qualities)
    - iv. Limited library hours could lead to scheduling difficulties and low participation rate
    - v. Could lead to rental location (increase in cost)
    - vi. Recording background noise
2. Zoom Meeting --- Provide link following participant's response
  - a. Pros
    - i. Flexible/easier fit into workday
    - ii. Travel time and expenses are not an issue

- iii. Break out rooms
  - iv. Do not have to worry about weather
  - v. Cost friendly (location wise)
  - vi. Easily recorded
- b. Cons
- i. Missing personal face-to-face
  - ii. Could be distraction at workplace environment
  - iii. Internet considerations
  - iv. Cost of incentives

**Layout:**

- Group Size: 6-8
- Questions:
  - The number of questions will ultimately depend on the quality and length of discussion.
  - Aim for four to six questions, no more.
  - The opener question is the ice breaker and should help ease into main questions.
  - Be ready to change or skip questions based off discussion.
- Duration: 1.5 - 2 hours
  - Give time for participants to fill out consent form prior to beginning.
  - Gather themselves and their name tags or tents.
  - Ending time to wrap up discussion.
- Options:
  1. One focus group discussion
  2. One focus group split into two groups with different questions
  3. Break 20 minutes
  4. Focus group reconvenes to discuss questions, conclusions, and how they got there. Can open the floor for a healthy discussion and cover more questions.

**Note:** If in-person have name tags or tents. Leave it blank for the individual to fill out (we want them to feel comfortable and free to use their voice, allowing them to fill in their own name/nickname is a simple start).

1. Start the focus group
  - a. Introduce:
    - Who you are
    - Role here today
    - Pathfinders and its mission
  - b. Guidelines for Focus Group:
    - Objective of today is to discuss (for example) **common upstream thermalities affecting employers' top three challenges: number of applications, qualifications of applications, and turnover/attrition, while considering actions Pathfinders can take to help dissolve/mitigate.**
    - Voluntary participation
    - Open discussion
    - No right or wrong answers
    - Respectful to others and their voice and thoughts

- Can certainly disagree with concepts, but only the concepts, not the person.
  - Staying on topic
2. Question time

**Potential Focus Group Questions:**

*Provide a maximum of 6 questions. This includes the opening and closing questions. Leave additional questions in the bank to use if the direction of discussion changes.*

Which of these programs would be of interest to your organization's needs? (*List Top 3*) Then ask why. (This question can also be great to have participants privately write down their decisions on paper and tuck it away for later. Then at the end of discussion, use a new piece of paper, complete the question again, but this time have a group discussion. Did you change your choices? Rank? Why do you think that is? What do you think influenced this change or did not influence any change?)

- Task oriented internship program connected with local high school(s).
- Job position internship program for college students.
- An innovation or networking center to collaborate with other businesses.
- Career development assistance or training programs for potential employees.
- Interview/resume/cover letter workshops for potential employees.
- Grant writing assistance.
- A centralized job application site for the county.

What are your perceptions about the general applications you receive for open positions?

How are you using (social media) technology for your business? What are your perceptions about using this?

When you think of success, what do you think this looks like for your business/company?

When you think of this success, what do you think is most likely to stand in the way of reaching it?

What do you feel increases your productivity in the business/company?

What do you think are the main factors affecting your business/company's efficiency? How do you feel this can be resolved?

What, if any, are the main concerns/barriers you are anticipating for your business/company within the coming 5-10 years?

Imagine your business/company in the coming 5-10 years, what do you think it will look like? What do you think will be standing in your way to getting there? Why? What do you want it to look like?

What do you think are any experiences or changes your business/company have successfully tackled?

How do you feel this situation could be avoided or overcome for another?

Are there any changes or experiences you feel your company has recently seen growth from overcoming? Why do you feel that is? How do you think this bump could have been avoided?

What do you feel would positively change the trajectory of your company/business?

**Closer/Opener:**

Of all the topics brought up today, what do you think are most important? Why do you think this is?

If you had one session with a new business owner in this area, what advice would you give them?

Think back to when you were last job searching, [pause] what features/characteristics attracted you to where you are now?

**Consent Form Email**

Dear [Participant's Name],

We appreciate your willingness to participate in our focus group! Participation is completely voluntary, and at any given point or time you may decide to discontinue with the focus group.

As previously communicated in the email, we would like to gain your perspective, ideas, and opinions about what employers need to further succeed in [\_\_\_\_\_] County, and how Pathfinders can help meet these needs. The focus group will consist of [#] to [#] other individuals from [\_\_\_\_ County/Size Pool/Industry] businesses. The date, time, and location of the discussion are listed below. The duration of the focus group includes time set aside for paperwork, snacks, and any final conversations.

Your discussions will be confidential for the purposes of reporting any information, but discussions will be tracked for internal purposes necessary to Pathfinder RC&D and programming assistance.

Once you have read and signed the consent form, please feel free to either bring your consent agreement to the focus group session or include it as a PDF attachment to [Email Address].

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact [Name] either by email: [Email Address] or phone: (xxx)xxx-xxx between the hours of [Working Hours]. Thank you!

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Pathfinders at (xxx)xxx-xxx.

**Consent Agreement**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name), in representing \_\_\_\_\_ (organization) consent to participate in this focus group on \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_ (date) and consent to have my answers transcribed for the purpose of programming created by Pathfinders RC&D.

By signing this agreement, I understand my discussions to be used for any of the following:

- Internal research
- Identity-protected data publication
- Basis for employer-assistance programs

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name), have read the above text and agree to my voluntary participation in the focus group.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_.

Date: \_\_/\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX III

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### Rural South Central Iowa Young Residents Survey

This survey is to understand why young people tend to leave, stay, or return to their rural hometowns. Please fill out the form as thoroughly as you can.

1. What is your age? \*

- Under 18
- 18-20
- 21-24

2. What is your highest level of education? \*

- Still in high school
- High school diploma/GED
- Associates Degree
- B.A./B.S.
- M.A./M.S.
- PhD
- N/A

3. Do you plan on moving out of your rural area? \*

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

4. If you answered yes to the question above, please provide an answer for why. \*

- Pursue education
- Employment opportunities
- Bigger social scene
- Economic opportunities
- Other social factors
- Family
- Other

5. If you answered no to the question above, please provide an answer for why. \*

- Pursue education
- Employment opportunities
- Bigger social scene
- Economic opportunities
- Other social factors
- Family
- Other

6. Could you see yourself returning to your rural area in the next 10 years? \*

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

7. If you answered yes to the above question, please provide an answer for why. \*

- Family ties
- Quality housing
- Job opportunity
- Quality schooling
- Local culture
- Other

8. What I like about this area/town is...

Enter your answer

9. I would live in this town/area forever if...

Enter your answer

10. I would consider leaving this area/town because...

Enter your answer

11. I would come back to the area/town after leaving if...

Enter your answer

12. What are your perceptions of the area? (Select all that apply) \*

- This is a good place for families and young children
- There are many available parks, playgrounds, and trails
- This is a good place for older people
- Commuting to this area is easy
- People care about each other here
- There are arts and cultural opportunities here
- This is a beautiful place to live
- There are social community events here
- This is good place for LGBTQ+ people
- This is a good place for immigrants
- This is a good place for racial and ethnic minorities
- This is a good place for young, talented college graduates looking for work
- This is a good place to meet people
- This area has a vibrant nightlife

13. What do you think this area should be prioritizing? (Select top 3) \*

Please select at most 3 options.

- Town growth and development
- Shopping
- Bars and restaurants
- Diversity
- Career development
- Recreational opportunities
- Parks and trails
- Nightlife
- Safety
- Arts and cultural opportunities
- Affordable housing
- Educational opportunities
- Social events
- Public transportation

12. What are your perceptions of the area? (Select all that apply) \*

- This is a good place for families and young children
- There are many available parks, playgrounds, and trails
- This is a good place for older people
- Commuting to this area is easy
- People care about each other here
- There are arts and cultural opportunities here
- This is a beautiful place to live
- There are social community events here
- This is good place for LGBTQ+ people
- This is a good place for immigrants
- This is a good place for racial and ethnic minorities
- This is a good place for young, talented college graduates looking for work
- This is a good place to meet people
- This area has a vibrant nightlife

13. What do you think this area should be prioritizing? (Select top 3) \*

Please select at most 3 options.

- Town growth and development
- Shopping
- Bars and restaurants
- Diversity
- Career development
- Recreational opportunities
- Parks and trails
- Nightlife
- Safety
- Arts and cultural opportunities
- Affordable housing
- Educational opportunities
- Social events
- Public transportation

## APPENDIX IV

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### **Rural South Central Iowa Young Residents Survey**

This survey is to understand why young people tend to leave, stay, or return to their rural hometowns. Please fill out the survey as thoroughly as you can. Please circle each option that meets your preferences.

**1. What is your age?**

Under 18  
18-20  
21-24

**2. What is your highest level of education?**

Still in high school  
High school diploma/GED  
Associates degree  
B.A./B.S.  
M.A./M.S.  
PhD  
N/A

**3. Do you plan on moving out of your rural area?**

Yes  
No  
Unsure

**4. If you answered yes, please provide an answer for why**

Education  
Employment  
Bigger social scene  
Economic opportunities  
Other Social Factors  
Family  
Other

**5. If you answered no, please provide an answer for why**

Education  
Employment  
Bigger social scene  
Economic opportunities  
Other Social Factors  
Family  
Other

**6. Could you see yourself returning to your rural area in the next 10 years?**

Yes  
No  
Unsure

**7. If you answered yes, please provide an answer for why**

Family ties	Local culture
Quality housing	Other
Job opportunity	
Quality schooling	

**8. What are your perceptions of the area?** Please choose all that apply

- This is a good place for families and young children
- There are many available parks, playgrounds, and trails
- This is a good place for older people
- Commuting to this area is easy
- People care about each other here
- There are arts and cultural opportunities in the area
- This is a beautiful place to live
- There are social community events here
- This is a good place for LGBTQ people
- This is a good place for immigrants
- This is a good place for racial and ethnic minorities
- This is a good place for young, talented college graduates looking for work
- This is a good place to meet people
- This area has a vibrant nightlife

**9. What do you think this area should be prioritizing?** Please choose the top 3

- |                             |                                 |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Town growth and development | Public transportation           |
| Shopping                    | Social events                   |
| Bars and restaurants        | Educational opportunities       |
| Diversity                   | Affordable housing              |
| Career development          | Arts and cultural opportunities |
| Recreational opportunities  | Safety                          |
| Parks and trails            | Nightlife                       |

**10. What would you like to see from your employer?**

- More pay
- More flexible schedule
- More options in employers
- Other

**11. How much would you expect to be paid in the field you will enter, or how much are you being paid?**

- <\$10,000/year
- \$10,000-\$20,000/year
- \$21,000-\$30,000/year
- \$31,000-\$40,000/year
- \$41,000-\$50,000/year
- \$51,000-\$60,000/year
- \$61,000-\$70,000/year
- >\$71,000/year

**12. If you are currently working, are you happy with your pay?**

- I am happy with my pay
- I am not happy with my pay
- I am neither happy or unhappy with my pay

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- <sup>i</sup> <sup>ii</sup> South Central Iowa Workforce Development Board. (2021). South Central Iowa Workforce Area Local Plan. Iowa State Workforce Development Board.  
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- <sup>ii</sup> State of Iowa. Data Visualization: Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS). Iowa Workforce Development, 9 Aug. 2024, <https://workforce.iowa.gov/labor-market-information/indicators/local/data> "Labor Force Data for Kane County." Utah Department of Workforce Services, <https://jobs.utah.gov/jsp/utalmis/#/laborforce/areaname/Kane/periodyear/2024/adjusted/1/monthly/false/annualaverage/false>.
- <sup>iv</sup> "DS Results - LAUS2." Nevada Workforce, Nevada Department of Employment, Training & Rehabilitation, <https://www.nevadaworkforce.com/Home/DS-Results-LAUS2>.
- <sup>v</sup> Cromartie, John, et al. "Why Some Return Home to Rural America and Why It Matters." USDA ERS - Why Some Return Home to Rural America and Why It Matters, May 2015, [www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2015/july/why-some-return-home-to-rural-america-and-why-it-matters/#:~:text=Roughly%20half%20of%20nonreturnees%20made,opportunities%20as%20the%20primary%20barrier](http://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2015/july/why-some-return-home-to-rural-america-and-why-it-matters/#:~:text=Roughly%20half%20of%20nonreturnees%20made,opportunities%20as%20the%20primary%20barrier).
- <sup>vi</sup> Davis, James C., et al. "Rural America at a Glance 2022 Edition." Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Nov. 2022, file:///C:/Users/delan/Downloads/eib-246%201.pdf.
- <sup>vii</sup> Iowa Workforce Development. Workforce Needs Assessment. 18 Sept. 2024, [workforce.iowa.gov/](http://workforce.iowa.gov/)
- <sup>viii</sup> Iowa Workforce Development. Industry Projections. Iowa Workforce Development, [workforce.iowa.gov/](http://workforce.iowa.gov/).
- <sup>ix</sup> "Traction Thursdays." *Fairfield365.Com*, 25 Mar. 2024, [www.fairfield365.com/event/tractions-thursday/](http://www.fairfield365.com/event/tractions-thursday/).
- <sup>x</sup> "Small Business Loans." *Pathfinders RC&D*, 21 Mar. 2024, [pathfindersrcd.org/what-we-do/community-development/small-business-loans/](http://pathfindersrcd.org/what-we-do/community-development/small-business-loans/).
- <sup>xi</sup> "America's Small Business Development Center Iowa." *Pathfinders RC&D*, 2 May 2019, [pathfindersrcd.org/community-guide/americas-small-business-development-center-iowa/](http://pathfindersrcd.org/community-guide/americas-small-business-development-center-iowa/).
- <sup>xii</sup> "Workforce Needs Assessment." South Central Iowa LWDA, Iowa Workforce Development, 2023, [workforce.iowa.gov/media/1204/download?inline=](http://workforce.iowa.gov/media/1204/download?inline=)
- <sup>xiii</sup> "Innovate 120." *Innovate 120*, [www.innovate120.org](http://www.innovate120.org). Accessed 6 Nov. 2024.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Endsley, Jeremy, et al. "Attracting and Retaining a Quality Workforce in Cedar Rapids." *Iowa Initiative For Sustainable Communities - School of Planning and Public Affairs | The University of Iowa*, Iowa Initiative For Sustainable Communities (IISC), 2013, [iisc.uiowa.edu/projects/attracting-and-retaining-quality-workforce-cedar-rapids](http://iisc.uiowa.edu/projects/attracting-and-retaining-quality-workforce-cedar-rapids).