



**2024 WORKFORCE EXCELLENCE AWARD NOMINATION FORM**

**NOMINATION FORM**

APPLICANT:

City of Smithville

Name of Community or Workforce Board

Joanna Morgan, Treasurer, Board of Directors, SWTC

Contact Name and Title

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Email Address

Telephone Number

3922

Community Population (as of the most recent census or as officially marketed)

Jill Strube

TEDC Member Name (must be individual TEDC member, not organization)

**City of Smithville  
Smithville Workforce Training Center  
Engage \* Empower \* Employ**

**HISTORY AND OVERVIEW**

As a small rural community in the shadow of Austin, a group of stakeholders concerned with creating a viable plan for economic growth began to explore the idea of a workforce training initiative with the dual goals of creating a skilled labor pool to support commercial growth and to provide a pathway out of poverty for our economically disadvantaged- population.

With a partnership comprised of the City of Smithville, the Smithville Area Chamber of Commerce, the Smithville Independent School District, Seton Ascension hospital and the Smithville Community Clinic, we defined a mission: *Create opportunities for local area residents and employers by providing high quality training, education, and placement services.*

Grants from the City of Smithville, St. David’s Foundation, Hospital Authority Board, Union Pacific Railroad obtained during 2021 supported the initial organizational efforts. These were: hiring a staff, assessing the skill requirements of local employers, developing a training curriculum, building relationships with educational service providers, and conducting pilot training programs in three high-demand local areas – HVAC, welding and a Certified Nursing program.

Grants received in 2022 set the stage for the successes in 2023. During that year, substantial grants from the City of Smithville and Bastrop County from their American Rescue Planning Act (ARPA) funding, and a \$4.8M grant in partnership with the Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area (WSRCA) from REINVEST, Good Jobs Challenge, funded expansion of services from Bastrop County into the surrounding counties of Fayette, Caldwell and Lee.

This REINVEST grant provided the funding and a framework for growing our initial vision and scope into a scalable, sustainable and transferable model which can be tailored to other rural communities or regions. Sections following highlight key elements of the initiatives made possible by these grants and the growing support coming from all four counties as we continue to address both growth and sustainability through new grant opportunities and partnerships with private companies and educational institutions.

## **I. INNOVATIVENESS**

A chronic shortage of skilled medical staff, including emergency responders in this rural area made medical training a high priority. A partnership with Regency Towers nursing facility in Smithville offers a Certified Nurse's Aide (CNA) class which graduated 127 aides in 2023, all of whom gained their certification and were placed in positions with local care facilities. Soliciting feedback on course materials and employee preparedness from employers helped to fine tune the program to ensure placement success. From this entry-level start, the program has been expanded to provide career advancement opportunities through paramedic, EMT, and LVN or RN certification.

Many of the center's clients do not have English language skills sufficient to manage the course work, or they lack the High School diploma required for certification in their chosen field. Providing GED and ESL classes and Spanish language mentors has enabled these students to succeed.

Removing barriers to class attendance with wrap around services such as childcare, transportation and remote learning have allowed more clients to participate, and mentoring in the soft skills that support workplace success are part of the placement process.

Encouraging employers to invest in apprenticeships and on-the-job skills training programs, to grow an inclusive, diverse workforce and help bridge the skills gap for underrepresented groups and partnering with educational institutions, such as community colleges, to provide training and credentialing programs leverage our federal funding in expanding economic opportunities for SWTC clients.

With a motto of *Engage, Empower, Employ*, the last step in the process – *Employ* makes close relationships with business partners essential. Understanding their needs and building trust in the ability of SWTC to provide potential employees with the necessary skills is imperative. Inviting their participation in customizing courses to their specific needs is one approach that has been successful. Another has been to invite potential employers to speak at graduations and have a chance to meet the graduates.

## **II. TRANSFERABILITY**

The goal of the REINVEST grant is to support development of a program that is effective, transferable and sustainable. Much of the first year, 2023, was devoted to developing, designing and beginning implementation of a transferable model for rural workforce development to achieve three goals:

1. Invest in the region's current and potential workforce to grow capacity and align capabilities with current and future needs.
2. Promote and enhance the region's image as a desirable place to live, work and thrive.
3. Reduce barriers to workforce participation and engagement.

The completed tasks to accomplish these goals are detailed in the **Measured Objectives** section. Having completed this model by mid-year, the first proof of concept was rolling out the model piloted in Bastrop County to Fayette and Lee Counties. Based on the success of implementation of the approach in those two counties, SWTC was asked by the Workforce Solutions Rural Capital Area (WSRCA), for whom SWTC is a sub-grantee under the REINVEST grant, to also assume responsibility for Caldwell County.

### **III. COMMUNITY COMMITMENT AND LEVERAGE**

Community engagement through presentations to regional organizations such as Lions and Rotary clubs tell the story of SWTC's mission and offerings. Membership and participation in sector networks, Chambers of Commerce and Economic Development organizations are an important part of SWTC staff activities, since these create the contacts that identify both emerging needs and potential alliances.

Participation in job fairs and other local events are recruitment and messaging opportunities. Plans are underway to collaborate with the Smithville Community Clinic to take their bus which is a mobile dental clinic on weekend trips to surrounding communities to provide pop-up medical and dental screening services and promote the training available through SWTC.

Close relationships with regional city and county agencies, business leaders and other non-profits keep strategic plans synchronized and identify intergovernmental and public/private partnership opportunities. This role is filled by the Executive Director, key staff and Board Members.

Community involvement has resulted in financial support from several regional organizations: Methodist Healthcare Ministries, Rural Whole Health Coalition, City of Smithville, Born Again Emporium, Smithville Hospital Authority, Texas Mutual Insurance. Additionally, business donations of money, space for conducting training, training services and underwriting of the graduation ceremonies held for each class leverage our grant funding.

### **IV. MEASURED OBJECTIVES**

**Major federal grant (REINVEST and ARPA) objectives defined and met during 2023 were:**

#### ***Completion of the Systems Development Phase***

- Researched area businesses to identify potential employer partners and secure employment commitments in all four counties.
- Developed a business model based on County Coordinators and Case Managers. County Coordinators have responsibility for soliciting support and confirming agreements with local government, community stakeholders, employers, education service providers and facilities in their area. Case Managers engage with clients, organize and monitor classes and wrap-around services. Both are involved in the placement process and follow up success monitoring with clients and employers.

### ***Completion of the Program Design Phase***

- Developed plans and accountability mechanisms for meeting diversity and equity goals.
- Developed outreach and recruitment strategies and plans.
- Confirmed agreements with regional training partners and training sites:

City of Smithville	Ascension Seton
Equus Workforce Solutions	Austin Community College
Blinn Jr. College	Career Academy and Training
Career Education Inc.	Career Step LLC
First United Methodist Church	Regency Towers
Smithville Independent School District	Texas Public Safety Training (EMT)
Fayette County Fairgrounds	Round Top Family Library
- Completed the Case Management, Marketing and Implementation Plan
- Begin to Organize Sector Partnerships in Healthcare, Skilled Trades, Finance/Banking and Information Technology

### ***Began Program Implementation Phase (2023 was year 1 of REINVEST grant funding)***

- Completed a Continuous Improvement plan including data strategies and industry specific methods of data collection for AGS Prime Software. This product is a turnkey EDA-compliant application specified by the REINVEST grant to track the data required for the EDA and Census reporting requirements. This product is also used for internal tracking of participant demographic, services and outcome data.
- Executed outreach and recruitment strategies in collaboration with strategic partners.
- Started enrollment in training programs and supportive services, including post-training placement and support.

Success in achieving these goals was confirmed by federal audit of the REINVEST grant conducted from September to December 2023.

### **Clients trained and placed in jobs, new hires and upskilled:**

- Medical (CNA, Phlebotomy, EMT and Paramedic, multiple classes) – 127
- Welding (first class) – 5
- HVAC – (2 classes) - 12
- Electrical (1 class) - 8
- Commercial Driver’s License (CDL, 4 classes) – 35
- Additional classes were offered to prepare students for skill classes or for community enrichment (ESL, GED, Microsoft Office, QuickBooks) - 80

## **V. SECONDARY BENEFITS**

Through community engagement, opportunities for collaborative efforts that leverage the effectiveness of all parties are emerging. One exciting example is in the Healthcare field. The Smithville Whole Health Partnership formed in 2014 to address needs in Smithville recently expanded its service area to the four counties served by SWTC under the new name, Rural Whole Health Coalition. This was in part facilitated by the relationships put in place in these counties by SWTC.

Including the Seton Ascension hospital and the Smithville Community Clinic (SCC) into this collaboration may enable the SCC to attract more funding to support providing medical services to the uninsured and underinsured members of the community. Taking this service load from the hospital emergency room will contribute to that organization's profitability, allowing them to pursue service expansion plans desperately needed in the area, which can be supported by SWTC training of medical support personnel.

Collaboration with the schools and major employers in the region continue to identify opportunities to reach students with the awareness of career possibilities that will help them make better post high school choices for continuing education and skills development.

These are just two examples of the opportunities SWTC is pursuing now and moving forward through the years 2024 and 2025 of this grant.

### **CONCLUSION**

The REINVEST initiative has provided a backbone for the development of a workforce development program that is sustainable, transferable and capable of evolving to meet the dynamic economic development needs of a community or region.