



YEAR ONE WORK PLAN

*Submitted by Commissioner Sarah Swanson
on behalf of the State Workforce Innovation Board*

November 2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	2
Table of Acronyms.....	3
Executive Order 5-2025: Creating the 406 JOBS Initiative.....	4
PRIORITY INITIATIVES	
Increase Registered Apprenticeship Pathways.....	9
Prepare Workforce for Artificial Intelligence and Automation Opportunities.....	11
Establish Local Sector Partnerships in High Demand Sectors.....	13
Address Child Care Shortages to Enable Labor Force Growth.....	15
Reduce Barriers to Employment Through Disability Empowerment.....	17
Highlight Military Service and Support Veteran Transitions.....	19
Establish Office of Reentry Programs.....	21
Launch Statewide Credential Registry.....	23
Modernize Career Exploration Tools.....	25
Expand Jobs for Montana’s Graduates & Empowered Sites.....	27
Tell the Story of Workforce in Montana.....	29
Improve System Leadership, Coordination, & Communication.....	31
Key Dates & Timelines.....	33

On August 11, 2025, Governor Greg Gianforte announced the 406 JOBS initiative and signed Executive Order 5-2025 to implement the initiative. 406 JOBS is designed to modernize Montana's workforce, ensuring that every Montanan has a pathway to a career and a plan to achieve it.

Among the priorities established in the Executive Order is a focus on industry-led workforce development, improving state agency coordination and collaboration, planning for the future of artificial intelligence and automation, and removing barriers to work for nearly 100,000 working-age Montanans who have left the workforce entirely. The Executive Order directs the State Workforce Innovation Board (SWIB) to serve as the lead implementing entity for 406 JOBS and to deliver a work plan for the first year of 406 JOBS to the Governor by November 11, 2025.

406 JOBS will serve as the unifying framework for the state workforce system in Montana, bringing the private and public sectors at the state and local level together around a shared set of goals and priorities. The initiative is centered on three planks that form the strategic framework:

- 4 Pathways to Work - College, Career, Military, Entrepreneurship
- 0 Barriers to Employment - Prepared Employees, Engaged Employers, Responsive System
- 6 High Demand Sectors - Construction Trades, Health Careers, Education & Child Care, Advanced Manufacturing & Computing, Recreation & Hospitality, and Professional & Finance Services

This Year One Work Plan sets forth the priority tasks across the state workforce system for the first year of 406 JOBS implementation. The work plan is designed to be outcomes-driven, so each task includes metrics and outcomes. A significant portion of the Year One work will focus on establishing baseline data against which future outcomes will be measured. This work plan does not represent every project underway in the workforce system, as there is tremendous activity and innovation underway throughout Montana. However, the priority tasks identified in this work plan are those that will have a measurable impact in achieving the following broad goals of 406 JOBS:

- Every Montanan with a pathway to a career and a plan to achieve it.
- Reduce barriers to employment for individuals who have left the workforce
- Achieve consistent quarterly growth in the labor force participation rate
- Increase the number of Montanans achieving financial self-sufficiency

Finally, 406 JOBS is a **framework** for evolving Montana's state workforce system – it is not a rigid plan or a static set of tasks. 406 JOBS will guide the broad strategies for workforce development and form the foundation of ongoing, robust stakeholder engagement around a set of common principles. Stakeholder engagement has already begun with the successful Montanans at Work statewide tour, which concluded on October 30, 2025, after visiting 15 communities around the state. Hundreds of Montanans provided feedback on 406 JOBS and other workforce programs, which input is incorporated in this Work Plan. Future goals and action items will continue to be developed through ongoing partnerships and engagement.

TABLE OF ACRONYMS

CIE	Competitive Integrated Employment
COMM	Department of Commerce
CTE	Career Technical Education
DOA	Department of Administration
DLI	Department of Labor & Industry
DPHHS	Department of Public Health & Human Services
ETPL	Eligible Training Provider List
JMG	Jobs for Montana Graduates
MUS	Montana University System
OJT	On-the-Job Training
OCHE	Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education
OPI	Office of Public Instruction
RA	Registered Apprenticeship
RTI	Related Technical Instruction
SWIB	State Workforce Innovation Board
WIOA	Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act
VRBS	Vocational Rehabilitation & Blind Services

**STATE OF MONTANA
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
EXECUTIVE ORDER NO. 5-2025**

EXECUTIVE ORDER CREATING THE 406 JOBS INITIATIVE

WHEREAS, Montana faces a labor shortage, particularly in sectors with persistent recruitment challenges, with nearly two job openings for every one unemployed person in the state;

WHEREAS, technological advancements, including artificial intelligence (AI), are rapidly transforming the labor market, with recent studies showing that 30% of all jobs in the United States could be automated by 2030;

WHEREAS, between 2000 and 2025, automation resulted in 1.7 million manufacturing jobs lost in the United States, underscoring the importance of upskilling workers for jobs of the future;

WHEREAS, a significant number of Montanans in their prime working years have left the labor force, and targeted strategies are needed to re-engage this population through career pathways that promote self-sufficiency and upward mobility;

WHEREAS, the State of Montana saw 10,000 more Montanans enter the labor market in 2023, proving that our pro-jobs policies are encouraging people to enter the workforce, though more work is needed to provide workers with the skills needed to find a future-proof career;

WHEREAS, the State of Montana must prioritize a modern, industry-led workforce system that supports both job seekers and employers across all regions of the state as our continued economic growth depends on a dynamic, skilled workforce that meets the evolving needs of business and industry;

WHEREAS, President Donald J. Trump issued [Executive Order 14278](#) to “Make America Skilled Again,” by fully equipping workers to produce world-class products and implementing world-leading technologies while also streamlining workforce development programs that are too often disconnected from helping workers find secure, well-paying, and high-need American jobs;

WHEREAS, The U.S. Department of Labor on Wednesday, August 6, 2025, [announced](#) the availability of \$30 million for an initial round of the Industry-Driven Skills Training Fund (“Training Fund”) grants with awards available up to \$8 million for State Workforce Agencies to fulfill President Trump’s Executive Order and address critical workforce needs for in-demand skilled trade careers and in high-growth and emerging industries;

WHEREAS, interagency coordination and collaboration is essential to streamlining workforce development services and maximizing impact;

WHEREAS, Montana’s tribal governments and tribal colleges are critical partners in advancing workforce development, particularly in rural and underserved areas, and consultation is an essential component of a comprehensive statewide workforce strategy;

WHEREAS, the State Workforce Innovation Board (SWIB) is uniquely positioned to lead Montana’s efforts to modernize and integrate workforce development strategies statewide and apply for grants from the Training Fund;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, GREG GIANFORTE, Governor of the State of Montana, pursuant to the authority vested in me under the Montana Constitution, Mont. Code Ann. § 2-15-122, and other applicable laws of the State of Montana, do hereby authorize the creation of 406 JOBS Initiative, otherwise known as 406 JOBS, and order as follows:

PURPOSE

406 JOBS shall serve as the unifying statewide framework to coordinate workforce development efforts across state agencies, in partnership with industry, labor, education and training, and economic development partners.

In developing the framework, 406 JOBS shall seek input from Montana citizens, members of the Montana Legislature, Montana associations whose members are impacted by workforce development challenges, and other appropriate stakeholders as determined by SWIB.

STRUCTURE

SWIB, attached to The Department of Labor and Industry (DLI), shall serve as the lead coordinating body for the 406 JOBS Initiative.

SWIB shall:

- develop and oversee the implementation of 406 JOBS in alignment with state economic priorities;
- facilitate industry-led workforce strategies that reflect current and future labor market demands; and
- consult with tribal governments, tribal colleges, and Native-led organizations in the design and implementation of strategies that reflect the needs of tribal communities.

SWIB shall convene quarterly interagency workforce gatherings with the Governor’s Office of Budget and Program Planning to assess progress, identify barriers, reduce duplication of governmental services, and coordinate agency actions.

The Department of Administration shall support state agencies in advancing a skilled and resilient workforce by:

- identifying workforce development opportunities aligned with current and future agency needs;

- collaboratively developing and implementing workforce strategies to address critical talent and capacity challenges; and
- promoting and facilitating the adoption of skills-based hiring practices where feasible to expand access to qualified talent and support equitable hiring

All executive branch agencies with workforce-related programs shall designate an official to serve as a liaison to SWIB and participate in interagency efforts under the 406 JOBS framework.

SCOPE

The 406 JOBS Initiative shall prioritize:

- upskilling workers into in-demand occupations with higher wages, greater stability, and lower risk of automation;
- supporting employers in adopting responsible automation practices that complement workforce goals and enhance job quality;
- identifying occupations and sectors where automation may serve as a short- or long-term solution to workforce gaps, particularly when aligned with state economic development goals; and
- re-engaging individuals of prime working age who have exited the labor force through targeted outreach and flexible training pathways that remove barriers to employment.

DLI, in collaboration with the Office of Public Instruction (OPI), the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE), the Montana University System (MUS), and the Department of Commerce, shall:

- promote and expand opportunities that equip Montanans with AI skills;
- provide professional development opportunities that support educators in incorporating AI-skills development into career awareness and readiness instruction;
- identify opportunities to integrate AI tools that assist job seekers in navigating career pathways, accessing training, and securing employment;
- encourage public-private partnerships that accelerate AI workforce development and adoption across key sectors;
- support small businesses in upskilling workers and incorporating AI technologies into business operations; and
- prioritize digital modernization, including AI-readiness, in workforce service delivery and talent development programs.

INTERAGENCY COORDINATION

Agencies shall integrate workforce strategies into existing and new programs and share data and best practices with SWIB, consistent with privacy protections and legal requirements.

SWIB shall consult with Montana's tribal governments and tribal colleges to support workforce initiatives, leverage local expertise, and expand access to employment opportunities.

REPORT

Within 90 days, SWIB shall coordinate with relevant agencies to provide an initial written report to the Governor with recommendations and strategies for a statewide implementation plan for the first year of 406 JOBS, including measurable outcomes and timelines.

SWIB shall include information gathered from agencies as part of an annual report to the Governor, as well as use the outcomes and metrics in the development of both the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and Perkins State Plans.

TERMINATION

This Order is effective immediately and shall remain in effect until amended or rescinded by subsequent executive order.

This Order is effective immediately.



GIVEN under my hand and the GREAT SEAL of the State of Montana this 11th day of August, 2025.



GREG GIANFORTE, Governor

ATTEST:



CHRISTI JACOBSEN, Secretary of State

Priority Initiative

INCREASE REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIP PATHWAYS

Expand local earn-and-learn models, consistent with the Four Pathways to Work and Zero Barriers to Employment planks of 406 JOBS

The Montana Registered Apprenticeship program is an employer-designed training program, consisting of at least 2,000 hours (1 year) of On-the-Job Training (OJT) and 144 hours of related college-level coursework per 2,000 hours of OJT. This training is designed to teach specific technical skills unique to the profession. Formal Registered Apprenticeship completion can be the basis for professional licensing or confer journeyman status in the chosen field. A Montana Registered Apprenticeship (RA) program completion certificate is recognized in all 50 states. Montana had more than 3,200 active apprentices in 2024 and has apprenticed over 110 occupations since 2000.

In addition to RA programs, pre-apprenticeships are basic skills training programs that must lead to a Registered Apprenticeship, while youth apprenticeship programs are focused on workers ages 16-25 and often include additional supportive services to improve employment outcomes. Montana has a small number of approved pre-apprenticeship programs but no designated youth apprenticeships.

Montana is a State Apprenticeship Agency, meaning that the Department of Labor & Industry approves Registered Apprenticeship pathways, rather than the federal government. The State Apprenticeship Advisory Council guides the program and is chaired by a member of the State Workforce Innovation Board.

Growing apprenticeships is a priority initiative under 406 JOBS, as it ensures that direct-to-career pathways for employment are readily available across the state. Providing ways for workers to access training in their local communities, achieve a recognized credential, and earn a living while training helps to reduce barriers to employment. Expanding pre-apprenticeship programs in high schools helps to prepare students for success when entering the workforce and youth apprenticeships can reach young people facing barriers to employment in new ways. Throughout the implementation of 406 JOBS, local sector partnerships are encouraged to consider apprenticeship as a sector strategy for local talent development, including pre- and youth apprenticeships. Reducing barriers to apprenticeships, including lack of employer awareness, occupational licensing restriction, and incentives for apprentice mentors are a priority.

IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITY

DLI is the State Apprenticeship Agency, charged with approving new apprenticeship pathways. SWIB chairs the Apprenticeship Advisory Council, which advises DLI on apprenticeship programs. Work under this initiative will be led by DLI and supported by OCHE & MUS as a provider of Related Training Instruction, VRBS as the technical expert on ensuring accessibility and access for persons with disabilities, organized labor as RTI providers and apprentice sponsors, local school districts as RTI providers and sponsors of pre-apprenticeships and youth apprenticeships, and employers as sponsors of apprenticeships. Local sector partnerships will include both new and expanded apprenticeships as possible strategies for addressing local occupational gaps.

SPECIFIC YEAR ONE TASKS

- Identify structural barriers to apprenticeship programs, including barriers to accessing statewide housing incentives, and provide policy recommendations to the Governor
- Ensure that pre-apprenticeship programs clearly link to Registered Apprenticeship pathways
- Increase employer awareness of apprenticeship opportunities through webinars, trainings, and increased communications/outreach strategies
- Improve pathway identification on Registered Apprenticeship website, moving in the direction of formal, established pathways
- Implement teacher apprenticeship expansion grant in 40 school districts
- Increase sponsorship of apprenticeships and participation in apprenticeships
- Clearly define youth apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship in Montana, communicating the information system wide
- Train workforce intermediaries in apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeship, and youth apprenticeship, so that employers are aware of the tools
- Strengthen the Apprenticeship Advisory Council's role in guiding the Registered Apprenticeship Program and ensuring core competencies are included in Apprenticeships
- Build on the work of HB336 by continuing to examine licensed occupations in the state of Montana to ensure that apprenticeship is available as a pathway for licensing where appropriate

METRICS

- Increase apprenticeship participation by 20%
- Add 12 new apprenticeship pathways
- Define 6 new pre-apprenticeship pathways in Montana, one in each High Priority Sector
- Increase pre-apprenticeship participation by 50%

OUTCOMES

- Employers & employees are engaging with Registered Apprenticeship Program
- Local Sector Partnerships are exploring and identifying relevant apprenticeship opportunities in local communities
- Incentives to expand apprenticeships or reduce barriers to apprenticeship are identified by employers and workers
- Labor force stakeholders are clear about the distinctions between pre-apprenticeship, youth apprenticeship, and adult apprenticeships

Priority Initiative

PREPARE WORKFORCE FOR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND AUTOMATION OPPORTUNITIES

Tear down barriers to work by ensuring Montanan workers have digital literacy skills and small businesses are adopting new technology for sustainability

Compared to many states, Montana has a relatively low risk of widespread labor disruptions due to increased use of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation technologies in the workplace. Approximately 21% of the state's workforce is employed in occupations highly exposed to AI, ranking Montana 36th in the nation for workforce exposure to AI. Accordingly, the state is well-positioned to reap the benefits of robust digital literacy and business efficiency—including using technology to reduce labor shortages, improve worker retention and job satisfaction, and enhance small business competitiveness.

At the same time, Montana continues to face a digital divide in rural parts of the community, with broadband infrastructure still being extended to remote parts of the state. Federal funds are assisting with the buildout of a statewide network, improving access for Montanans to technology. As the state works to grow infrastructure, preparing the workforce for the jobs of the future is a priority for the 406 JOBS initiative.

Work under this priority task will focus on integrating digital literacy programs into K-12 classrooms, supporting educators at all levels, extending training opportunities to small businesses, and adopting best practices for technology integration across state agencies.

IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITY

Executive Order 5-2025 directs the Department of Commerce, Department of Labor & Industry, the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, the Office of Public Instruction, and the Montana University System to work in collaboration on AI workforce readiness in Montana. The State Information Technology Services Division leads AI initiatives for the state enterprise.

SPECIFIC YEAR ONE TASKS

- Develop the Montana Digital Academy's Frontier Learning Lab as a best-in-class online tool for exploring artificial intelligence, virtual & augmented reality and other emerging technologies, including an “always-on” help desk to support K-12 teachers with technology integration
- Provide professional learning communities for educators, regular webinars on topics of interest, and asynchronous training for teachers leading to stackable credentials in partnership with the University of Montana
- Revise and enhance OPI's Montana Artificial Intelligence in K-12 Education Guidelines
- Explore buying consortia for AI technology platforms to support school-based adoption, as well as opportunities for statewide technology partnerships
- Develop on-line and in-person training programs to support small businesses in adopting AI and automation technologies to improve efficiency and support sustainability
- Offer non-credit credentials and OJT programs to upskill existing workforce
- Implement statewide AI Communities of Practice for state agencies, led by new Chief AI Officer at the Department of Administration

METRICS

- Number of educator professional development opportunities offered
- Number of small business AI training programs offered
- Continual increase in participation rate in professional development and training opportunities
- Number of school districts incorporating AI-related skill development in instructional programs

OUTCOMES

- Educators will develop competency with AI technologies, demonstrating the ability to establish proper ethical use standards in the classroom, incorporate AI for planning and efficiency, and provide developmentally appropriate skill-building instruction for students
- Small businesses will adopt AI and automation technologies to improve operational efficiency, address labor shortages, and improve long-term business sustainability
- Incumbent workers, employers, and trade associations will increase AI skills and AI adoption in appropriate industrial sectors
- State agencies will develop appropriate use standards for AI, protect consumer and client data, and improve operational efficiency through technology use

Priority Initiative

ESTABLISH LOCAL SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS IN HIGH DEMAND SECTORS

Engage employers in leading and expanding local efforts to tackle specific job needs in communities across the state

The 406 JOBS Initiative defines Six High Demand Sectors, where current projections indicate significant gaps in the labor market every year for the next 10 years: Construction Trades, Health Careers, Education & Child Care, Advanced Manufacturing & Computing, Hospitality & Recreation, and Professional & Financial Services. Closing these sector-based workforce gaps requires local, employer-led strategies to address specific occupational needs in Montana communities.

Using the US Department of Labor's Sector Strategy Framework, the State Workforce Innovation Board will support the development of regionally organized, employer-led sector partnerships across the state of Montana in each High Demand Sector. The partnerships will include employers in the sector, organized labor or employee representatives, education & training providers, and subject matter experts for supportive services. Each sector partnership will be supported by a trained workforce intermediary to facilitate the partnership, support identification of sector strategies to address labor shortages, and serve as a liaison to the SWIB. The sector partnerships will define specific occupations in the sector that are essential in the region, using their own experiences as well as DLI-provided data. Private sector funding is the priority for implementation of the sector strategies.

SWIB will provide ongoing support to the regional sector partnerships-including training, best practices, and support for problem-solving and reducing barriers. SWIB will focus on rapid response to addressing identified barriers, so that sector strategies are implemented at an accelerated pace. Feedback provided to SWIB and DLI during the Montanans at Work statewide tour showed some high priority needs that are common across the state: strategies for access to transportation, increased attention to employability skills, strategies to improve attitudes toward work and strengthening work ethic, and a strong interest in expanded access to apprenticeship programs, industry recognized credentials, and private trade schools.

IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITY

SWIB will have primary responsibility for guiding the formation of local sector partnerships and training workforce intermediaries. Local sector partnerships, led by employers, will have primary responsibility for identifying specific occupational priorities, developing strategies to address local shortages in those occupations, and leading local implementation. Workforce intermediaries will have primary responsibility for convening sector partnerships and facilitating communication with statewide partners.

SPECIFIC YEAR ONE TASKS

- Support the formation of regional, employer-led local sector partnerships in each of the 12 Montana Association of Counties Regions for the High Demand Sectors
- Train and deploy workforce intermediaries regionally across the state to facilitate local sector partnerships and to communicate sector strategies and workforce barriers to SWIB
- Develop models for public-private partnerships to fund and implement sector strategies
- Issue sector reports in each High Demand Sector to provide actionable data and information on workforce gaps and needs

METRICS

- Creation of 40 local, employer-led sector partnerships across the state, representing the six High Demand Sectors
- Identification of 3-5 priority occupations for each sector partnership and development of sector strategies for each
- Investment of private funding into local sector strategies

OUTCOMES

- Employers are regularly engaged with workforce system to address high priority occupational labor shortages.
- Education & training providers are aligned with demonstrated industry needs
- Sector-based strategies are implemented to create sustainable local occupational talent pipelines
- Wraparound services are aligned with specific community needs to increase access to employment and improve retention outcomes
- Strategies are implemented efficiently to be responsive to real-time sector needs

Priority Initiative

ADDRESS CHILD CARE SHORTAGES TO ENABLE LABOR FORCE GROWTH

Address the multi-faceted workforce challenges of access and affordability

Approximately 63,000 Montana parents – more than 10% of the labor force – are unable to fully engage in the workforce due to limited access to childcare. In 2024, a monthly average of 23,200 Montana parents were completely unable to participate in the labor force, while an additional 39,700 Montana parents were underemployed or reported working reduced hours.

In 2024, licensed childcare capacity met only 46% of estimated demand in Montana. Childcare shortages exist across the state, with nearly 52% of counties identified as childcare deserts – meaning supply meets less than a third of estimated demand. The most significant unmet demand occurs in the more rural areas of the state.

In addition to the impact on the overall workforce, many childcare providers report challenges in recruiting and retaining their own workforce. Instability in childcare workers can lead to programs operating below licensed capacity, reduced hours, or program closure. Pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs can help prepare workers to care for young children at a high level of quality, as can certificate and credential programs that are available throughout the state. But more action is needed to support parents in accessing childcare and to help childcare programs train and retain needed staff.

During the 2025 Legislative Session, lawmakers enacted HB 924 which created, in part, an early childhood special revenue account to address childcare barriers, including access, affordability, and childcare workforce. Priorities for the funds are developed by an oversight board, which includes representatives from DPHHS, DLI, OPI, Commerce, childcare providers, parents, and childcare organizations.

IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITY

DPHHS's Early Childhood & Family Support Division has primary responsibility for strategies to address childcare issues in the state of Montana and is the agency to which the Early Childhood Account Oversight Board is attached. DLI leads the childcare apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs, in collaboration with DPHHS, as well as the statewide credential database, which may include childcare credential options. SWIB will lead the development of regional, employer-led partnerships for the Education & Child Care sector, as well as collaboration with DPHHS to support sector strategies in all 6 High Demand Sectors for improving access to childcare, as needed.

SPECIFIC YEAR ONE TASKS

- Support the Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis of the prenatal-to-five system in Montana with respect to workforce needs
- Grow and strengthen childcare apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs
- Include Child Development Associate in statewide credential database
- Support implementation of HB 924's Early Childhood Special Revenue Account and Oversight Board
- Identify opportunities through sector partnerships to align childcare access and affordability strategies with employment strategies

METRICS

- Increased participation in childcare apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship program
- Increased number of high school students participating in CDA credential
- Sector strategies identified to improve access and affordability of childcare in local communities

OUTCOMES

- Workforce needs in the childcare sector will be addressed
- Childcare access and affordability will improve, reducing barriers to work
- Employers will engage in strategies to expand childcare access and affordability as a workplace benefit
- Training and career preparation will improve for childcare careers, leading to reduced turnover in the sector

Priority Initiative

REDUCE BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT THROUGH DISABILITY EMPOWERMENT

Establish Montana as an Employment First state to provide economic opportunity and dignity for all workers

DLI's recent *Montanans for Hire* report showed that approximately 19,000 working-aged Montanans have left the labor force due to disability or chronic illness. Many more Montanans with illness or disability are unemployed or underemployed. Reducing barriers to employment for these individuals – including accessing apprenticeships – helps to expand the labor force, provide independence and dignity to all Montanans, and strengthens economic opportunity.

In December 2024, Montana was selected as one of 13 states to participate in the National Expansion of Employment Opportunities Network, focused on developing Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) opportunities for people with disabilities. CIE is defined under the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) as full or part-time employment where people work alongside employees without disabilities, are paid at or above minimum wage and at wages comparable to employees without disabilities, are provided with comparable benefits, and are given opportunities for advancement similar to those without disabilities.

Montana, in partnership with the Harkin Institute, is now launching a statewide Employment First workgroup focused on expanding CIE opportunities across the state. According to the U.S. Department of Labor:

“Employment First is a national systems-change framework centered on the premise that all individuals, including those individuals with the most significant disabilities, are capable of full participation in Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) and community life. Under this approach, publicly financed systems are urged to align policies, regulatory guidance, and reimbursement structures to commit to CIE as the priority goal of day and employment services for youth and adults with significant disabilities.” <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/initiatives/employment-first>

The workgroup will develop a strategic plan to reduce or eliminate barriers in employment settings, positioning Montana as an Employment First state. The workgroup includes representatives from DPHHS, DLI, OPI, service providers, disability advocates, and families. The plan will outline practical and policy-driven steps to ensure individuals with the most significant disabilities are supported and thriving in Competitive Integrated Employment.

IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITY

DPHHS's Disability and Employment Transitions Division has primary responsibility for disability empowerment initiatives in Montana, including development of CIE opportunities. DLI's Registered Apprenticeship Program has primary responsibility for supporting the development of apprenticeship pathways and ensuring equal access to participation.

SPECIFIC YEAR ONE TASKS

- Develop strategic plan to establish Montana as an Employment First State
- Reduce barriers to Registered Apprenticeship Pathways for individuals with disabilities
- Continue to improve referral services between WIOA programs for individuals with disabilities

METRICS

- Increase the number of Vocational Rehabilitation participants employed one year after program exit by 10%
- Increase Registered Apprenticeship participation among Vocational Rehabilitation participants

OUTCOMES

- Individuals with significant disabilities will attain quality employment outcomes in diverse, high-wage fields.
- Clients will move beyond entry level positions into employment with family-sustaining wages
- Montana's labor force will expand, and employers will increase capacity to support employment for individuals with disabilities
- State policy and funding will prioritize quality CIE opportunities across the workforce system

Priority Initiative

HIGHLIGHT MILITARY SERVICE AND SUPPORT VETERAN TRANSITIONS

Reduce barriers to employment for those who have served our nation

Montana has one of the highest concentrations of veterans in the nation, ranking 3rd among states. About half of Montana veterans are under the age of 65. Nearly 8% of veterans in Montana live in poverty and slightly less than a third have a service-related disability. Montana also has strong rates of active service members, and both the Air National Guard and Army National Guard actively recruit in the state. Four high schools have Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) in Montana: East Helena, Great Falls, Lockwood, and Lodge Grass. Billings is working to establish the fifth JROTC in Montana. ROTC programs are also available at Montana State University, University of Montana, Montana Tech, and MSU-Billings.

DLI operates both the Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG) program, which provides funds to help reduce barriers to civilian employment for military veterans, and the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP), which provides career supports for disabled veterans. In addition, a number of nonprofit associations operate throughout the state to support veteran employment. The Armed Services branches provide some transition and employment services, including the Department of Defense SkillBridge program, which helps active-duty service members gain civilian workplace experience during the last six months of service.

Currently, most programs supporting veteran transition into civilian employment are operating independently, without sufficient coordination or collaboration. Awareness of military service as an option for career development varies widely throughout the state. Better communication among partners is needed to highlight military careers as a workforce strategy and reduce barriers to civilian employment for veterans.

IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITY

DLI has oversight of federal funds used to support transitioning military service members, veterans, and eligible spouses, assisting them to access training and maximize employment opportunities. SWIB will convene a stakeholder group to strengthen services across the state. Local sector partnerships will identify strategies to support veteran success in specific occupations, as well as opportunities to support JROTC and other youth programs that highlight military as a career opportunity.

SPECIFIC YEAR ONE TASKS

- Complete an inventory of all veteran-serving programs in the state of Montana
- Develop plan to restructure statewide programs to improve quality of service and client access, including Jobs for Veterans State grants and Disabled Veterans Outreach Programs
- Establish a stakeholder group with Armed Services liaisons, employment transition specialists, and veteran-serving programs

METRICS

- Number of veterans successfully transitioning to civilian careers
- Reduction of barriers to employment for veterans, leading to higher labor force participation
- Improvement in military-to-civilian skill mapping tool quality
- Increase in employers hiring veterans and engaging in transition support

OUTCOMES

- Montana veterans will feel supported in transitioning to civilian employment opportunities, identifying a career of choice and accessing needed training and services
- Montana employers will offer programs to recruit, hire, train, and support veteran employment
- Montana youth will have improved understanding of military service as a career opportunity

Priority Initiative

ESTABLISH OFFICE OF REENTRY PROGRAMS

Support employers in hiring former offenders and improve targeted career programs to reduce recidivism, as part of the Zero Barriers to Work plank

DLI's recent Montanans for Hire report identified criminal history as one of the more common barriers to employment among the state's long-term unemployed. During the 2025 Legislative Session, lawmakers established a new Office of Reentry Programs at DLI, intended to improve coordination of services for people leaving incarceration. The goal is to improve employment outcomes for people with criminal justice history and in doing so, reduce both recidivism and criminal activity.

Employers are often concerned about hiring from the reentry population, yet many businesses have established processes and strategies that have led to successful outcomes. Improving access to meaningful training programs, while incarcerated and upon exit, including apprenticeship, can help people find a new path forward in life and improve public safety across Montana.

DLI operates the federal bonding program in Montana, which helps employers to navigate risk and expand opportunities for people who are exiting incarceration. DLI also administers the WIOA Adult Education program, which can provide basic literacy and education to persons exiting the justice system. The Department of Corrections has undertaken a variety of initiatives to both improve training programs and reduce recidivism; under HB 718, these programs and efforts will enhance collaboration and coordination of services. During the recent Montanans at Work statewide tour, stakeholders also provided input into the new Office of Reentry Programs and shared local reentry projects that are having positive impact.

IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITY

DLI has primary responsibility for the new Office of Reentry Programs as well as the WIOA Adult Education, while the Department of Corrections maintains oversight of correctional services and recidivism reduction programs generally. DPHHS provides services to address behavioral health needs for the justice-involved reentry population. Regional sector partnerships will identify local strategies, in coordination with the Office of Reentry Programs, to support employers in hiring individuals with nonviolent criminal backgrounds and address training needs to prepare individuals with a criminal justice history for success in the workplace.

SPECIFIC YEAR ONE TASKS

- Implement HB 718 to establish an Office of Reentry Programs at DLI
- Develop coordination strategy for reentry services across state agencies and with private sector partners, including supportive services to improve job retention
- Improve referral process to ensure seamless transition from incarceration to workforce service provider
- Issue required report to legislature by July 1, 2026, regarding reentry programs and services in Montana
- Expand capacity to address behavioral health needs of inmates to improve employment outcomes once released

METRICS

- Percentage of individuals releasing from state incarceration who find and persist in employment
- Increased engagement of persons with criminal justice history in workforce training programs, both while incarcerated and once released
- Improved coordination among public and private workforce partners in delivering workforce preparedness programs for persons with criminal justice history
- Reduced rates of recidivism and improved desistance

OUTCOMES

- Montana employers will develop strategies to hire individuals with criminal justice history
- Workforce training programs will be more widely available as a part of reentry planning and supportive services will align with the goal of improving workforce outcomes for persons with criminal justice history
- Recidivism rates will decline over time and unemployment for persons with criminal justice history will be reduced

Priority Initiative

LAUNCH STATEWIDE CREDENTIAL REGISTRY

Unite industry partners and school districts together in modernizing delivery of career technical education programs, even in the most rural Montana communities

HB 252, also known as the STARS Act, was enacted during the 2025 Legislative Session. The bill, which deals broadly with K-12 funding in Montana, also included a provision establishing Future Ready Payments – incentive payments to support individualized high school and middle school career technical education programs.

Specifically, the Act provides per-pupil payments to school districts based on the number of high school students attaining industry recognized credentials (IRC), participating in work-based learning (WBL) opportunities, or completing an associate's degree while still in high school. The Act directs DLI to establish a statewide credential registry, listing all the IRCs and WBL experiences available to students across the state, and assigning a relative weight or value to each of them. Industry-recognized credentials are offered by third parties and should be stackable towards higher levels of credentialing when possible. The Act also directs the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE) to provide criteria of courses of study that yield transcripts postsecondary credit in the Montana University System under Board of Regents policy.

Annual rulemakings will allow trade associations, organized labor, and other industry partners to submit credentials that are relevant to their sectors and appropriate for high school students to achieve. Credentials can be online or supported with classroom-based instruction, but they must be driven by employers and industry representatives. This database will provide private sector partners with an accessible option for engaging with school districts, highlighting priority skills and abilities, and focusing career technical education programs on training that results in meaningful employment outcomes.

IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITY

DLI has primary responsibility for establishing a statewide credential registry and promulgating annual rulemakings to add new credentials, combinations of credentials, and work-based learning (WBL) experiences, as well as for assigning Career and Technical Education (CTE)-equivalent credit values to those credentials and WBL. The registry is developed with input from industry stakeholders, school districts, OPI, and OCHE. OCHE has primary responsibility for providing an annual list of dual enrollment programs or courses of study that high school students may complete for credit. Industry groups, trade associations, and organized labor partners have responsibility for identifying industry-recognized credentials (IRC) that are relevant to occupations in their field and submitting them to the annual rulemaking. Local school districts have responsibility for determining any graduation credit for IRC or WBL experiences.

SPECIFIC YEAR ONE TASKS

- Complete required DLI rulemaking, under HB 252, by December 1, establishing the credential registry, creating a petition process, and issuing the first round of industry-recognized credentials for the registry
- Complete mid-cycle DLI rulemaking to identify work-based learning experiences for CTE-equivalent credit under HB 252
- Launch education and awareness outreach to school districts, educators, industry groups, organized labor, and other stakeholders to explain the credential registry, ongoing rulemaking, and petition process
- Identify longitudinal data tracking options for evaluating credential impact on workforce outcomes (e.g. wages, retention)
- Embed credential database into career exploration platform

METRICS

- Number of students participating in IRC, WBL, or dual enrollment programs
- Employer satisfaction with workforce preparedness from IRC, WBL, and dual enrollment programs
- Increased wages for students graduating with IRC, WBL, or associates degrees
- Improved employer retention and in-state employment retention for students graduating high school with IRC, WBL, or associates degrees
- Expansion of CTE programs, including elementary and middle school career awareness opportunities, based on future-ready incentives

OUTCOMES

- Student career awareness and preparedness will improve, leading to better employment outcomes upon graduation and improved retention of students in the Montana labor force
- Employers will identify credentials of value and report higher workforce readiness for students participating in IRC, WBL, or dual enrollment options
- Employers, industry groups, and organized labor will engage with school districts more often to support career awareness and preparedness programs, ensuring that CTE programs are better aligned with actual industry needs

Priority Initiative

MODERNIZE CAREER EXPLORATION TOOLS

Reduce Barriers to Employment with sophisticated online career portal, available to students, adults, and employers across the state

Montana offers several online career exploration platforms, including tools through the Office of Public Instruction, Department of Labor & Industry, and the Montana University System. Many local school districts have adopted career preparation tools and curricula, while workforce partners and human service organizations providing employment services vary widely in their access to and knowledge of career programs. In addition, job seekers navigate a wide range of job boards looking for employment opportunities and training programs looking to skill up and prepare for a career. Rarely does this web of resources interact or provide uniform information.

Driven by the need to implement effectively a statewide credential registry and to address long-standing customer frustrations with the current Montana Career Information System (MCIS), DLI is undertaking a comprehensive modernization of career exploration tools, creating a single online portal that integrates and links:

- career information (e.g. career pathways, job projections, wage data, day-in-the-life insights, upskilling and entrepreneurship opportunities);
- education and training providers, including the credential database and data regarding employment outcomes by provider;
- a job posting aggregator; and
- additional labor market data and reports.

The resulting platform will connect job seekers, educators, guidance and career counselors, case workers, parents, and students with the latest information about available careers in Montana. The platform will provide information on the education and training opportunities available to support those careers, how a job can evolve into a career with growth potential, what the work environment is truly like for jobs in Montana, demand and wages over time, and companies that are hiring for various positions now.

Most career exploration information will be available without sign-in, but users will also be able to create an account to save career and skill surveys/quizzes, upload resumes, access live career specialists in the state, and save job searches. Employers will also have access to an account for a variety of tasks and action items. Users will be able to access multi-media tools to learn about career pathways in Montana and make a plan for their future.

IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITY

DLI has primary responsibility for establishing and maintaining a modern career exploration platform that links various tools together in a sophisticated user interface relevant to multiple audiences. Industry, labor, and workforce partners have responsibility for supporting aligned content that helps Montanans learn about careers, training opportunities, and available jobs. DLI and DPHHS have responsibility for ensuring that WIOA-related case managers are providing live support to job seekers engaging with the platform.

SPECIFIC YEAR ONE TASKS

- Develop online career exploration platform with improved career awareness & exploration tools, including multi-media content that shows Montanans at work and the diversity of career opportunities in the state
- Identify occupational career pathways that show advancement potential, entrepreneurship options, and training opportunities linked to career growth; focus on occupations in Six High Demand Sectors
- Embed credential database into career platform
- Link training outcomes data to credentials and training programs in the database
- Integrate labor market information to show career pathways with wages and demand projections over time
- Develop a crawler/aggregator tool to collect available job opportunities in Montana and link them to career pathways in the platform
- Create ability for user log-ins and user-specific career tools (e.g. saved skills assessments, resumes) behind the log-in

METRICS

- Modernized career exploration platform launched during Year One
- 30 comprehensive career pathways are developed for in-demand occupations in the Six High Demand Sectors, supported by multi-media content
- User engagement with the platform increases
- Employer and industry engagement with content development increases
- Connection to employment services at DLI and DPHHS increase

OUTCOMES

- Montana students will have access to relevant and timely career awareness and exploration tools, including training programs, across the state, regardless of the availability of school-based CTE programs
- Adults looking to make career transitions or adults facing barriers to employment will have access to a single point of entry for career exploration and connection to live employment service support
- Employers will reach a wider range of potential employees, highlight in-demand occupations, and find more workers with the necessary skills and training for success in the workplace
- Workforce partners -- including state agencies, training providers, and wrap-around service providers -- will have greater access to career tools to support their clients and programs
- Consumers and policymakers will have better access to outcomes data for training programs, enabling improved decision-making

Priority Initiative

EXPAND JOBS FOR MONTANA'S GRADUATES & EMPOWERED SITES

Highlight entrepreneurship and employability skills for all Montana students

During the recent statewide Montanans at Work tour, stakeholders repeatedly expressed concerns about attitudes toward work and lack of employability skills in today's workforce. During stakeholder feedback sessions, attendees in every community volunteered that attitudes toward work present a significant barrier to employment in Montana. When asked to rank the most critical area for skills development, basic employability skills – showing up to work on time, communication, managing conflict – was consistently at the top of the list across the state.

Jobs for Montana's Graduates (JMG), a part of the national Jobs for America's Graduates, works to address these deficiencies. JMG is available in schools throughout Montana and develops critical employability skills, leadership skills, and workforce readiness. JMG is supported by DLI, which provides support to educators to implement the program in the classroom as well as works to bring new schools into the program.

Empowered is a nationally recognized workforce readiness and entrepreneurship skill-building program, supported in Montana by the Montana Chamber of Commerce. Students develop creativity and a growth mindset, while having the opportunity to build their own businesses in the community. Both JMG and Empowered link students to real world employers and necessary skills for success in life, whether graduates pursue college, career, or entrepreneurial pathways to employment.

While each program functions independently, when offered together, JMG and Empowered develop a broad range of workplace skills that are a core part of the Zero Barriers to Employment plank of 406 JOBS. They provide practical experiences that connect directly to improved workforce outcomes. Growing both programs in Montana and helping educators offer both curricular tools as a comprehensive skill building strategy, is a priority for Year One of this work plan.

IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITY

DLI leads the implementation of Jobs for Montana Graduates in the state, while the Montana Chamber of Commerce Foundation supports implementation of the Empowered program in the state.

SPECIFIC YEAR ONE TASKS

- Develop a crosswalk of the two programs to support schools in delivering both programs
- Increase the number of sites offering JMG and Empowered
- Increase stakeholder awareness of the program, so that JMG and Empowered certificates have value to employers

METRICS

- Add 50 new JMG sites across the state
- Increasing number of schools offering JMG and Empowered programs together or in alignment
- Increased educator attendance at JMG Summer Training
- Increased employer recognition of JMG and Empowered skill attainment

OUTCOMES

- More students will participate in JMG programs to gain fundamental employability skills and build entrepreneurship skills through the Empowered curriculum
- Educators will expand ability to offer JMG and Empowered as a comprehensive career readiness program, aligning skill attainment and outcomes
- Employers will recognize value of JMG and Empowered in hiring decisions

Priority Initiative

TELL THE STORY OF WORKFORCE IN MONTANA

Help programs scale and replicate, and disseminate best practices through better communication and system collaboration

Among the many barriers to employment identified by SWIB is the lack of communication about effective training pathways – high school career programs that connect students to employers, training programs with quality outcomes, innovations in the university system that move people to careers faster, and local workforce efforts that help employers find and retain employees. In a state as large as Montana, sharing best practices and successes doesn't happen naturally. It requires a dedicated communication strategy that highlights the best of our local communities and employers doing what it takes to address labor shortages in key industries.

Additionally, stakeholders participating in the recent statewide Montanans at Work tour repeatedly expressed concerns about attitudes towards work in their communities – a lack of interest in employment, declining beliefs that work is a pathway to prosperity, and general disengagement from planning for a sustainable future. Many young people feel trapped, unable to see a clear path to a good-paying job in a sector with growth potential.

These twin challenges – the need to see purpose and potential in work and the need to amplify the successes and opportunities that exist in Montana – must be addressed for the overall success of the 406 JOBS initiative. At a minimum, the state workforce system must center on best practices and scaling promising strategies to meaningfully change labor market trends. Workers in Montana must know what good-paying jobs exist and how they can attain those jobs through training and skill-development programs. Telling the story of work in Montana – showing real Montanans finding their futures, creating identity in employment and entrepreneurship, and highlighting employers that open doors to prosperity is a necessary step to modernizing our workforce system.

IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITY

SWIB has been tasked with developing robust communication strategies to share success stories, best practices, and lessons learned for workforce programs across the state. The Department of Commerce has primary responsibility for business attraction and general state promotional content. SWIB will lead efforts to develop multimedia content that highlights careers in Montana, programs that prepare workers for success, innovative employers and partners, and human-interest stories that inspire career development.

SPECIFIC YEAR ONE TASKS

- Support the development of DLI's Workforce Warriors Poster series
- Launch a 406 JOBS electronic newsletter
- Direct the development of videos, graphics, publications, and web content that tells the story of Montana's workforce, in alignment with Montana's business attraction content
- Create an online website repository of workforce programs
- Begin development of best practice documents based on implementation feedback from Year One of 406 JOBS
- Guide development of talent attraction campaigns for targeted industries, ensuring that the messages focus on not just attracting workers but retaining them in-state

METRICS

- Number of workforce videos, posters, and related content developed
- Social media platform engagement numbers increasing overtime
- Newsletter subscriptions increasing overtime
- Number of best practice documents developed

OUTCOMES

- More Montana students and adults will be aware of the diversity of occupations in Montana and what those jobs entail on a regular basis
- Workforce partners will share information on successes in career development programs, allowing program replication and scaling across the state
- Duplication and fragmentation of the statewide workforce system will decrease, and collaboration will increase
- Workforce development successes will increase through improved traditional and social media content
- Statewide talent and business attraction efforts will be more successful as the strengths of Montana's workforce become more widely understood

Priority Initiative

IMPROVE SYSTEM LEADERSHIP, COORDINATION, & COMMUNICATION

Create single point of entry for employers and employees, eliminate red tape, and enhance efficiency of government operations

At the core of the 406 JOBS initiative is a full-scale modernization of the statewide workforce system. Executive Order 5-2025 directs state agencies follow the lead of industry and employers in identifying workforce priorities, to reduce duplication and service gaps, and to begin solving problems at the pace of industry, rather than the pace of government.

Across Montana's state agencies, workforce is a priority project. To maximize impact and deliver real results for taxpayers and workers, the entire workforce system must improve communication and collaboration. The system must adopt innovation, efficiency, and modernization as core values and strive to reduce the complexity of navigating the workforce system. Planning documents must be coordinated with policy priorities, the voices of employers and employees must be central to system development, and the system must be oriented to outcomes and results.

Improving interagency collaboration and overall system coordination are sizable efforts, but work is already underway. Year One of the 406 JOBS work plan will focus on fulfilling the directives contained in Executive Order 5-2025 and laying the foundation for a more streamlined workforce system. State agencies will provide regular liaisons to SWIB, so that the Board can quickly engage subject matter experts in planning and problem-solving activities. Agencies will also meet more frequently to focus exclusively on shared workforce goals across the state. As a part of the ongoing work to standardize systems across state agencies and modernize operations, best practices in workforce development, such as skills-based hiring, will be considered for implementation.

IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITY

Executive Order 5-2025 directs SWIB and the Governor's Office of Budget and Program Planning to lead interagency coordination efforts. SWIB is also tasked with engaging tribal governments and tribal colleges to support workforce development efforts in Montana's tribal communities. The Department of Administration has primary responsibility for leading workforce modernization for state agencies and employees.

SPECIFIC YEAR ONE TASKS

- Implement skills-based hiring strategies across the state enterprise, including training for human resources personnel
- Align State Plans for both the Carl D. Perkins Career & Technical Education and WIOA programs, with the goal of submitting a single state plan for both programs in 2028
- Ensure that implementation of new short-term Pell grants, including eligibility, is consistent with statewide workforce goals
- Establish regular cadence for interagency collaboration on workforce development initiatives
- Create an inventory of state workforce programs, grants, and initiatives
- Assign a workforce liaison from each agency to SWIB, serving as a point of contact for improved communication and collaboration
- Ensure that state-level business attraction efforts and talent development/attraction efforts are linked

METRICS

- Number of positions advertised using a skills-based approach
- Increasing alignment of Perkins and WIOA strategies, goals, and metrics
- Increasing alignment of workforce programs across agencies
- Improved success at attracting private and federal funding to coordinated workforce efforts

OUTCOMES

- State agency coordination on workforce development efforts will improve by uniting workforce experts and subject matter experts together in launching new initiatives and strengthening existing programs
- State and federal funds will be better aligned and more effectively deployed
- Workforce system confusion will decrease and more Montanans will successfully access employment services
- State agency hiring will recruit strong candidate pools by expanding access to employment opportunities
- Private sector companies will benefit from lessons learned in skills-based hiring implementation from state enterprise

Priority Initiative

KEY DATES & TIMELINES

NOVEMBER 17, 2025	Perkins Plan Meeting (OPI)
DECEMBER 1, 2025	Credential Registry Final Rule
JANUARY 2026	Perkins Plan Meeting (OCHE) SWIB Quarterly Meeting
MARCH 2026	WIOA State Plan Mid-Cycle Amendments
APRIL 2026	SWIB Quarterly Meeting Perkins Plan Meeting
APRIL/MAY 2026	National Apprenticeship Week
MAY 2026	Employment First Strategic Plan
JULY 2026	Office of Reentry Programs Report

