

# Jobs With a Future Partnerships

*Matching qualified workers with quality jobs in South Central Wisconsin*

**J**obs With a Future (JWF) is a partnership of business, labor, and public-sector representatives committed to improving the workforce development system in South Central Wisconsin. Its goal is to enhance workers' opportunities in the labor market while serving the needs of employers in the region.

Back in 1995, the Dane County Executive — concerned that many workers were locked into low-wage employment — convened the Dane County Economic Summit Council (ESC) to consider how to reverse that trend. The ESC was comprised of representatives from area companies, labor unions, public-sector institutions, and non-profit groups. At the ESC's request, COWS staff analyzed the local labor market and proposed strategies to ensure "jobs with a future" for County residents.

That process gave rise to the establishment, in 1997, of employer-led partnerships in three sectors: manufacturing; health care; and finance, insurance, and business services (FIB). Currently, about 50 employers — including some of the area's leading companies — participate in the partnerships, which meet on a monthly basis. They work closely with other key players in the workforce development system: the Workforce Development Board of South Central Wisconsin (WDB), City and County representatives, staff from technical colleges and County-run Job Centers, and union leaders. (The WDB, established by the federal Workforce Investment Act of 1998, is a major source of financial and technical support.)

Through the partnerships, firms are able to exchange information, identify common problems — such as high turnover in certain entry-level occupations — and hammer out practical solutions that individual companies would have difficulty implementing on their own. This process, in turn, allows employers to provide better information to technical colleges and Job Centers about how to meet their needs. Finally, by building more effective relationships between employers and public-sector institutions, the partnerships are making it easier for workers to navigate the labor market and gain access to family-sustaining jobs.

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## The Center on Wisconsin Strategy

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**The Center on Wisconsin Strategy**

JWF's activities are overseen by a board of representatives from the WDB, Dane County, the City of Madison, Madison Area Technical College (MATC), the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the South Central Federation of Labor.

Initially centered in Dane County, JWF now includes Columbia, Dodge, Jefferson, Marquette, and Sauk Counties as well.

In just a few years, JWF has made important strides. For example, the JWF partnerships have sponsored more than 65 courses through MATC, serving more than 900 trainees. In one early case, a number of employers in the FIB Partnership were faced with a shortage of information systems personnel. Together with MATC staff, they planned a curriculum and tapped current, or incumbent, employees — many of them in clerical or other positions — to enroll as programmer/analyst trainees. By joining forces, participating firms found a way to alleviate a labor shortage. At the same time, they enabled their own employees to enter a more challenging and lucrative field.

In tackling the problem of high turnover among Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs), members of JWF's Health Care Partnership adopted a similar approach. By setting up phlebotomy training classes through MATC, employers improved CNA retention by showing a commitment to entry-level workers — and by offering them a stepping-stone to higher-paying jobs. Other popular areas of training have included basic skills for manufacturing workers, customer service, medical transcription, and English as a Second Language.

JWF also collaborated with the Dane County Job Center to establish Upward Mobility, a project designed to help low-wage workers find better jobs. As part of the project, JWF produced the *Jobs With a Future Resource Book*, a guide to partnership employers that includes sample job descriptions, profiles of incumbent workers, and other resources to guide the job search. Since its inception, Upward Mobility has placed nearly 300 participants in new positions, at earnings averaging 18 percent more than in their previous jobs.

In addition, each of the three JWF partnership has established a Joint Committee on School-to-Work, to facilitate placement of high-school students in member firms.

JWF is poised to expand dramatically in the next few years. Between 1996 and 2000, it received generous support from the Joyce Foundation. More recently, the WDB received a \$1.14 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) to carry JWF's work forward through 2004. Backed by DOL funding, JWF will strengthen and extend its employer-led partnerships (especially in manufacturing and health care); provide job preparation and training for dislocated workers as well as incumbents at participating firms; and support the creation of an integrated workforce development system that will benefit workers and employers alike.