



EDUCATION & REHABILITATION IN ALICE COMMUNITIES FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Driving Workforce & Economic Development from
the Bottom Up

Carter County's Approach to Workforce & Economic Development through Education &
Rehabilitation

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Introduction

Currently, Carter County does not have an economic development organization or workforce development of any kind. The City of Elizabethton does have someone on staff that ‘minds the store’ so to speak but does not have the capacity to perform these functions on a regular basis. This report will give a broad overview of a grassroots workforce development initiative that is being developed, how it feeds into economic development for the county, and illustrate a unique opportunity for tapping a labor force that is generally inaccessible by repatriating recovering addicts through a regional rehabilitation center called the Northeast Tennessee Regional Recovery Center.

Middle College Project

The first of these initiatives is a ‘middle college’ facility; rightly named the Carter County Career Center. This will allow high school students to graduate with an associate degree or TCAT Certification. Making them workforce-ready the day after graduation. The focus is to galvanize the significant ALICE population (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) through education & opportunity. More than 50% of the population of Carter County is classified as ALICE. These workforce ready individuals will bolster existing businesses & industry in the region by fulfilling their specialized workforce needs. Long term the facility will make it easier for people to stay locally by not having to move to find adequate employment or start a business. This has a side effect of enticing established businesses to move into the area due to access to a workforce pipeline. It also offers an incredible education opportunity to families with children.

Through this partnership, students participating can earn an associate degree concurrently with graduating from high school, making them more attractive to both colleges and employers, as well as getting a two-year jumpstart on their future education. Students will take all their classes with Northeast State Community College, earning both high school and college credits for each class.

The 'Middle College' project is a collaboration between Northeast State Community College, Tennessee Center for Applied Technology at Elizabethton (TCAT), the Carter County Public School system, & the Tennessee Board of Regents. Junior's and Senior's will be able to attend and gain college credit and/or TCAT Certification hours at the same time as they are participating in county-wide CTE programs and finishing their high school credits for graduation. Essentially, they will be graduating high school with a 2-year degree or TCAT Certification. They will also be able to use their TN Promise money to cover the cost, which has cleared legislation finally; now known as the Dual Enrollment Grant.

Currently, the Carter County School System offers 16 programs of study in CTE. Some of those programs are duplicated at multiple high schools. There are four Office Management Programs, four Nursing Services programs, three Horticulture Science programs, two Welding programs, and two Environmental and Natural Resource Management programs. By creating a centralized campus for CTE programs, this will reduce duplication and free up funding and other resources to enable the creation of new programs of study in other high-demand workforce areas and emerging career pathways. The middle college facility will be a centralized CTE campus and will also improve equity-in-access, opening all programs to all students. This eliminates

location specific restrictions that currently exist due to certain CTE programs only being offered at certain schools. Students at one school may have schedule restrictions that prevent them from traveling to the school offering the CTE course they are interested in.

TCAT has certifications available in welding, HVAC maintenance, pipe fitting, criminal justice, aviation, diesel mechanics, & dozens more, these; many of these students will be in fields where they can start a business right out of high school with classmates. These fields are highly sought after in the region. Degrees like chemistry are going to be tailored to the needs of large regional employers like Eastman Chemical as well as local employers like Snap-On and AY McDonald with CNC & machine maintenance.

With the Carter County Career Center solidifying the ‘base’ of a workforce pipeline, the Northeast Tennessee Regional Recovery Center facility will be focused on redeeming those that might not have had the best start. The addition of a non-violent offender, abstinence-based rehab facility at the Roan Mountain Detention Center is the final piece. It will offer a path to those that choose to recover and remain sober from addiction to opioids, alcohol, and drugs and become productive members of society. These individuals will tentatively have a path to gaining their high school diploma or GED by attending the middle college after hours as well as potentially gaining TCAT Certification or 2-year degree.

The Carter County School System in cooperation with the Tennessee Board of Regents is working with the Tennessee College of Applied Technology at Elizabethton to manage the dual enrollment program. This program has been green lit and is in progress now. The property

where the facility will be located is 'leased' to the Board of Regents who will construct the facility and maintain it throughout its life. Local industry has agreed to help direct the courses to be specific for their needs & 'fast-track' these students in their hiring process.

Employment Impact

Equipping students with these in-demand workforce skills will increase their employability as well as their wage-earning potential. This acquiring of skills and potential will make these individuals less likely to drop out of the labor force. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS), part of the issue with low workforce participation rates can be attributed to what it labels as "discouraged workers." According to the BLS, a "discouraged worker" is someone who wants to work, and can do so, but has not actively looked for a job within the past four weeks because they believe they cannot get a job for some reason. BLS statistics show that recent graduates, older workers, and minorities are most likely to become "discouraged workers" and drop out of the participating labor force. By equipping these students with a skill set that is in high demand, they are more likely to quickly find work upon completing their program of study and graduation. This makes them less likely to become "discouraged workers" and will thus help improve the workforce participation rate for the community.

Among the major contributors to unemployment are geographical immobility and lack of necessary or in-demand education and training. This project will focus on in-demand education and training because the CTE programs at all three institutions are based on real-world job market data regarding skills gaps currently experienced by employers. This project will also address geographical immobility that occurs when a person is unable to move to a new region to

find work and thus remains unemployed. Because the CTE programs offered at all three institutions are based on local labor needs, in essence students are trained for jobs available in their home community, so they do not have to move away to find a job with a living wage. This project will potentially decrease unemployment as these are in-demand job skills in the community being fulfilled by curriculum and training developed in partnership with local employers.

Economic Impact

The 'Middle College' project will have a multi-faceted economic impact. Producing more skilled workers entering the labor force will allow industries to fill those skills gaps they are encountering. This will allow Carter County to help maintain existing businesses and industries located here. By increasing the available skilled workforce, businesses whose operations are currently constrained by the available workforce and skills gaps could potentially expand operations which would create additional jobs in the community and increased stability for the business. This also creates the potential for the development of ancillary business creation to support the existing industry base. These graduates will be entering the workforce at a higher wage-earning potential, which will increase their per capita personal incomes along with the contribution they make to the local economy. As industries expand, and workers have more disposable income to contribute back into the local economy, this will increase the tax base of the county contributing to the economic growth of the region. The direct impact on unemployment, poverty rate, and economic growth will be long-term as the program continues with results not immediately evident. However, as the workforce skill level is improved the County can expect to experience improvements in those three areas.

Economic Indicators

By expanding access to CTE programs of study as well as expanding the types of programs offered, the ‘Middle College’ project works to train a more skilled workforce. Because the CTE programs offered at the high school level by Carter County and the post-secondary level by Northeast State Community College and Tennessee College of Applied Technology at Elizabethton are created and maintained by real-world job market data from the immediate region, we know that the skills taught by the programs are in demand in our community. The projects goals and outcomes also align with Tennessee’s “Drive to 55” initiative. Drive to 55 is the goal of having 55% of Tennesseans with a college degree or certificate. The dual enrollment program shortcuts the needed time to achieve a degree or certificate and makes it far more appealing to high school students.

This project also addresses another economic development challenge faced by Carter County – an aging and declining population. Estimates show a decrease of 1.7 percent in county population since 2010. Census data also shows that 22.4 percent of Carter County’s population is aged 65 years or older while only 18.1 percent is aged 18 years or younger. The median age for Carter County is 44.9 years. Two years ago, the population decline since the 2010 census was estimated at 1.3 percent and the median age at that time was 44.4. The data continues to show that Carter County is experiencing a declining and aging population. According to data from the Tennessee Department of Workforce Development, 15,146 members of the workforce in Carter County are age 60 or older. In total, this leaves Carter County with an insufficient number of younger employees in the workforce, and unable to replace losses due to relocation or

retirements. Indicators show that loss to relocation is primarily to pursue higher-wage jobs in other regions. If the declining population and relocation of workforce participants continues, the impact on Carter County's available workforce could be long lasting and detrimental.

Because the CTE programs at the high school and post-secondary level among the partner agencies are offered and maintained based on local labor market needs, these programs are not only preparing workers for higher-wage jobs, but they are also training them in fields in demand here. This will help to maintain that pipeline of skilled employees entering the job market to replace the older workers who are retiring. As our workforce becomes more skilled, it also leads to the potential for industry expansion and recruitment.

This in turn could serve as a catalyst to helping recruit new residents to the region as they seek jobs in these in-demand fields. Bringing additional skilled labor into our community as part of our workforce will also help to replace members of our aging population who are reaching retirement.

Poverty Rate and Per Capita Income

In looking at the poverty rate, it is important to see more than the partial picture painted by the Federal Poverty Level numbers. One should also examine the impact that regional cost of living has on whether a person experiences poverty. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the federal poverty level for a single person living in the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia is \$12,880. However, recognizing that costs of living vary, the federal government has provided different Federal Poverty Level guidelines for those living

in Hawaii (\$14,820 per year for a single person) and Alaska (\$16,090). In the 48 remaining states and the District of Columbia, the cost of living greatly varies by region and even within the same city, but that is not accounted for by the Federal Poverty Level. Working from the federal data, about 20% of county residents exist at or below that level of income. A family of 4 is considered impoverished if earning at or below \$38,000 annually.

Economic and Recreational Development (ERD)

ERD will be a 2-part effort. To lift and support the potential entrepreneurs created by the middle college project it has been proposed to create and fund an Economic and Recreation Development body within County government. The department will have several functions pertaining to the middle college project as well as developing recreational assets to improve the health and welfare of citizens. This has a side effect of creating a destination for outdoor activity and tourism and aids in business retention by liaising with those industries to convey their needs to the middle college.

A function of the Economic & Recreational Development organization to the students and educators will be ensuring they are aligned with industry expectations. Students will be able to exit high school with most of the technical skill required to provide a service that can earn a living wage or walk into an employer equipped with the expected skills. Depending on their career path they may have the basic knowledge of how to start or run a business. However, they have none of the foreknowledge for accessing many of the resources available to new business owners.

The next function will include the establishment of a small business incubator geared toward students that want to dive into working for themselves, developing their ideas, accessing mentors, and networking. This will give these students a jumpstart on making their way with their education. This has a secondary benefit of making it attractive for parents when choosing where to live to give their kids the best opportunities. Not only would the students have a first-class education, but also mentors and guidance once they graduate.

Another function is the recreation development activities. According to the Tennessee Data Dashboard from the Tennessee Department of Health, about 21% of the days in a month being counted as ‘poor or fair’ health days in Carter County alone, providing additional recreational activities is a must. Coupled with 20% of the population below the federal poverty level and a median total household income under \$37,000 a year (that equates to the entire household earning less than \$17 an hour), access to these activities need to be as low-cost and low maintenance as possible. This will reduce the tax burden on the citizens while at the same time adding to the wealth of existing natural recreational opportunities that the hills, mountains, lakes, and rivers provide. Bolstering the natural resources & beauty with softball fields, more ‘family friendly’ bike trails, ATV parks, cleared hiking trails with adequate parking, disc golf courses, soccer fields, and pocket parks will not only improve access for citizens but also be marketable for tourism.

Northeast Tennessee Regional Recovery Center

Statistically, the poverty level present in the region leads to drug use & non-violent offenses related to usage. The criminal court judges in Northeast Tennessee along with a non-

profit organization known as Families First have been conducting a ‘Recovery Court’ for the past several years. The focus of this court is to remove the “non-evil” individuals from the criminal system. These are generally individuals that are addicted, non-violent offenders and cannot recover on their own. This will provide the assistance they need to break the cycle of addiction. These judges with Families First approached the city councils and county commissions in Northeast Tennessee to appropriate their ‘Baby Doe’ settlement money from the opioid lawsuit to the development of a rehabilitation facility for these non-violent offenders. The facility will be focused on helping recovering addicts through abstinence-based methods. These nine counties have pledged these funds to the development of a rehabilitation center. Along with the Tennessee Department of Health and Tennessee Department of Corrections the Northeast Correctional Workcamp in Roan Mountain will be repurposed into the Northeast Tennessee Regional Rehabilitation Center.

It goes without saying that the opioid addiction plagues most of the counties in Tennessee. Also, from the Tennessee Data Dashboard’s section on Overdose statistics; in Northeast Tennessee, there were around 200 deaths across 9 counties with over 100 coming from 2 counties alone in 2020 alone and around 1000 non-fatal overdoses. With just over 5 million prescriptions written statewide, the problem will most likely continue for many years. This will be a voluntary program for those individuals seeking to truly overcome their addiction and get their life back on track. In many cases, this leads to reuniting families. This allows them to recover children from foster care and become gainfully employed. To help these individuals along they will gain ‘after hours’ access to the course offerings to the middle college.

In concert with the new Carter County Career Center, the individuals that stick with the rehabilitation program will potentially access after-hours classes to help integrate them back into being productive citizens. They will be able to pursue a 2-year degree from Northeast State Community College or TCAT Elizabethton certification. Many of these individuals do not have basic life skills, such as how to open a bank account, how to acquire a driver's license, or even have a basic high school education. They are products of various societal ailments; systemic governmental dependence, systemic substance dependence, a feeling of being 'left behind', or not being able to excel in academics, or just making a one-time mistake that has led to an addiction that they cannot shake and is leaving them with ruined lives & families.

This generates a secondary side effect beyond the socio-economic impacts in that it allows for tapping a historically unreachable labor force for the region. Across the labor shed this could lead to thousands of new members to the general work force since most places of employment require employees to remain clean & sober. Many of these citizens will have attained a marketable and region-specific skillset that is in demand by employers and allow the area to be more attractive to new businesses. This provides a unique opportunity to 'track' the participants reintroduction to the labor force that will give hard, actionable data in the years to come as well.

In conclusion, this illustrates a broad overview of the dynamic approach that has been undertaken. The hope is that this approach could be mirrored in part, or in whole by other at-risk and distressed counties around the state. This is a monumental undertaking, requiring

cooperation of dozens of partners in the public and private sector. However, data suggests that this is a good starting point for brightening the future of the heart of the Appalachian Highlands.