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# MUS Connector

*A Newsletter made by Workforce Development Stakeholders  
for Workforce Development Stakeholders*



**December 2025 Edition**

*Welcome* to the **December 2025 Edition of the MUS Connector!**

As 2025 comes to a close, we pause to reflect on a year of growth, collaboration, and impact across the Midwest Urban Strategies network. This month marks one full year of the *MUS Connector* — our shared platform for stories, ideas, and progress from across the workforce system.

Throughout 2025, our members and partners have advanced the *Workforce Works* Message showing that workforce development works when systems are connected, communities are supported, and opportunities are accessible for everyone. From expanding reentry and youth employment initiatives to strengthening employer partnerships and early childhood career pathways, MUS continues to demonstrate the power of coordinated resources driving national impact through local action.

This edition celebrates the milestones, partnerships, and people who made 2025 a year to remember. Together, we've proven that when we learn from one another, lift

up success stories, and stay committed to innovation, *Workforce Works for everyone, everywhere.*

## In This Month's Edition:

1. [MUS Policy Perspectives December 2025](#)
2. [Reflections from the Executive Director: The Year in Workforce](#)
3. [Midwest Urban Strategies: A Year of Bold Growth & Collective Impact](#)
4. [The Workforce Behind the Workforce: Celebrating Progress and Partnering for the Future](#)
5. [Member Spotlight: Employ Milwaukee](#)
6. [WorkforceWorks!! – A Year of Building with Purpose](#)
7. [A Year In Review: Reflections and Milestones](#)
8. [Strengthening Pathways, Expanding Possibilities: A Year of Impact and Innovation](#)
9. [2025's Big Lesson: Soft Skills Make the Difference](#)
10. [ECE Sponsor Appreciation and the SEED Fund](#)
11. [MUS Learning Lab: Understanding and Implementing a Competency-Based Apprenticeship Program](#)
12. [2025 In Workforce: A System Innovation Perspective](#)
13. [The Government Has Reopened, Funds Are In Place—What's Next?](#)
14. [Preparing for Workforce Pell: A New Tool for Workforce Leaders](#)
15. [OkaySo Year in Review: Building Everyday Skills for Youth Workers](#)
16. [Looking forward with Purpose: Building Momentum for 2026](#)
17. [Author Appreciation: A Year of Voices, Vision, and Impact](#)



## MUS Policy Perspective

Congressional leaders finally ended the federal government shutdown after a record 43 days. The majority of the federal government is now temporarily funded until January 30, 2026. However, Congress also passed, and the President signed, full fiscal year 2026 appropriations

bills for the Department of Agriculture (which fully funds SNAP), Legislative Branch

(congressional operations), and Veterans Affairs. These agencies are funded through September 30, 2026.

The federal workforce was directly impacted during the shutdown with additional layoff and reductions-in-force (RIFs). The Continuing Resolution (CR) reverses those layoffs that occurred during the shutdown and prohibits any additional RIFs through January 30, 2026. With that end date a short ten weeks away (fewer legislative days when you account for the holidays and recesses), Congress needs to show progress towards a longer-term funding deal for the remainder of the federal government, including the Departments of Labor and Education.

A key driver to the shutdown divide was the expiring Affordable Care Act (ACA) enhanced subsidies for those individuals buying insurance through the ACA Marketplace. Senate Republicans have promised a vote on an extension, a policy of Democrat choosing, sometime in early-to-mid December. The outcome of that negotiation, which has a direct impact on the emerging affordability issue confronting Americans and our political leaders, may set the tone for the next stage of funding discussions and the ability of [Read More](#)

Submit your Workforce Development Success Stories [HERE](#)

“When Workforce Development Boards align services and braid resources, communities see measurable outcomes.”  
  
Tracey Carey

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Chris Andresen serves as a Partner with the Dutko GR team. He works extensively with MUS and other workforce development clients to identify policy opportunities and threats and advises on legislative and executive strategies.



Chris Andresen  
Partner, Dutko Government Relations

**Reflections from the Executive Director:  
The Year in Workforce**

The Connector was launched at the start of 2025 as a way to bring our industry closer together and to share the stories that define workforce development. Each month, it has become a place where members, partners, stakeholders, and practitioners across the country come together to exchange ideas, highlight innovation, and show what happens when collaboration drives progress. Through our newsletter, we have lifted up the people



and programs shaping the future of our field and shown the world what an effective public workforce system looks like when it works the way it is meant to.

Thank you to our readers and advertisers whose support has helped the MUS Connector grow throughout its first year.

This year also marked meaningful growth for our network. We welcomed fifteen new members and extended membership to include affiliate organizations who share our values and vision for the public workforce system. They are: **The Workforce Partnership, The Workforce Alliance, KentuckianaWorks, Employ Milwaukee, Visionz Group, Tecumseh Area Partnership/Region 4 Workforce Board, Southwest Indiana Workforce Board, South Central Region 8 Workforce Board, Inc., Career Solutions, Cael (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning), YWCA Metro St. Louis, Skilltrade, and EDSI (Educational Data Systems, Inc.).**

Each member brings unique expertise, regional insight, and a deep commitment to collaboration. Together, our members form a consortium that continues to expand opportunity, drive innovation, and build stronger, more connected communities across the country. [Read More](#)

“Collaboration is the engine of innovation.”  
  
Walter Isaacson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tracey leads MUS and its consortium of urban workforce boards and affiliate members, leveraging millions in investments to drive strategic partnerships, economic and business growth elevating transformational workforce innovation across the country.

Tracey Carey – MUS Executive Director



**Midwest Urban Strategies:**

## A Year of Bold Growth & Collective Impact

This year marked a powerful chapter for Midwest Urban Strategies, a network that continues to redefine what’s possible when cities and regions work together. What began as a small coalition of Department of Labor–funded urban workforce boards has evolved into a multi-state, cross-regional force shaping the future of workforce development. Today, MUS stands as a powerhouse connector bringing together leaders, practitioners, employers, and community partners to strengthen economic mobility and build a more inclusive workforce ecosystem.

At the core of our work is a shared commitment to the values that have guided us from the beginning. We believe deeply in job seeker equity and access, ensuring that every community has clear pathways to opportunity. We lead with innovation, bringing bold, data-driven solutions into the workforce system. We champion collaboration, proving time and again that when regions align, they unlock greater impact. And through a focus on mobility and resilience, we support programs and partnerships that help people thrive, not just navigate the challenges of today, but prepare for the possibilities of tomorrow.

This guiding vision has fueled extraordinary momentum. This year was MUS’s biggest yet. Our network now spans. [Read More](#)



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kellie Landaker is our Director of Membership and unofficial Wellbeing Warrior! She envisions a world where everyone deserves equitable treatment, freedom from trauma and violence, fair wages, and a fair shot at wellbeing. Kellie brings that lens to our membership and to our work.

Kellie Landaker– MUS Membership Director

“The future is completely open, and we are writing it moment to moment.”

Pema Chödrön



### The Workforce Behind the Workforce: Celebrating Progress and Partnering For the Future

The impact that a skilled and well-compensated early childhood education (ECE) workforce – *the workforce behind the workforce* –

has on all industries is significant. Registered Apprenticeship (RA) offers a powerful

model to support, uplift, and increase the ECE workforce. The ECE workforce is both eager and well-suited to participate in RA programs, and they need the support within the child care industry and from other sectors to be successful.

Midwest Urban Strategies, along with our partners WRMA, Inc. (a TriMetrix Company), and LPE Associates, are proud to reflect on the meaningful progress we have achieved together through the **Early Childhood Workforce Connector (ECWC)**. ECWC was established in 2023 as a U.S. Department of Labor (U.S. DOL) funded ECE RA Industry Intermediary. When the U.S. DOL contract ended in June of this year, ECWC began a new chapter as an **independent ECE apprenticeship intermediary**.

ECWC's mission remains clear: to strengthen and sustain a well-qualified, well-compensated ECE workforce by helping partners develop, launch, and expand RA, Youth Apprenticeship, and pre-apprenticeship programs nationwide. It has been an honor to collaborate with partners across the country to advance ECE apprenticeship programs as a trusted and effective workforce development strategy, supporting *the workforce behind the workforce*.

### Celebrating ECWC's Progress

*As a U.S. DOL-funded intermediary for two years, together we...*

- Formed **80 signed formal partnerships** across **28 states** and the District of Columbia
- Supported the launch of **17 new RA programs** for **16 new RA sponsors**
- Helped expand **31 existing programs**
- Contributed to the enrollment of over **1,000 new ECE apprentices** (and counting!)

These achievements reflect our shared commitment to addressing the critical need for a well-qualified and well-compensated ECE workforce. [Read More](#)

"A good education is a foundation for a better future."

Elizabeth Warren

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marjorie D. Cohen, Senior Subject Matter Expert for Early Childhood and Registered Apprenticeship, is driving toward the day that all childcare is high-quality and accessible, and ECE providers are compensated commensurate with their immense worth to society.

Marjorie D. Cohen, MPP  
Senior Subject Matter Expert



## Member Spotlight

### Organization Name:

Employ Milwaukee

### Executive Leaders Name/Title:

Julie Cayo  
President and CEO

**Website:**  
[www.employmilwaukee.org](http://www.employmilwaukee.org)

**Tell us about your organization's mission and the communities you serve:**

Employ Milwaukee is the local workforce development board serving Milwaukee County. By convening leaders from business and industry, economic and workforce development, education and training as well as community partners and policy makers, our vision is to develop workforce solutions that promote regional economic growth and employment opportunities for all job seekers.

Our mission is to build a strong workforce development system by planning, coordinating, collaborating and monitoring workforce initiatives with businesses, partners and community stakeholders at the local, regional and state level to ensure a skilled and productive workforce for the 21st Century.

Our goals are to connect job seekers to employment opportunities, to provide education and training options in high-growth, high-demand sectors, and to provide a skilled and sustainable workforce to attract, retain and grow diverse businesses in our Milwaukee 7 region.

**Connecting Systems, Strengthening Communities in Milwaukee**

Employ Milwaukee stands at the center of one of the most dynamic workforce ecosystems in the Midwest. As Milwaukee County's local workforce development board, the organization brings together leaders from business, education, and community organizations to design and deliver solutions that drive regional economic growth and open doors to opportunity.

Led by President and CEO Julie Cayo, Employ Milwaukee builds bridges between employers seeking skilled talent and residents ready to work. Through collaboration with industry partners and community stakeholders, their mission is clear: to ensure a skilled and productive workforce for the 21st century. With over 20 programs serving more than 11,000 job seekers each year, Employ Milwaukee connects youth and adults to education, training, and career pathways in high-demand industries like healthcare, manufacturing, construction, and information technology.

That commitment to connection is at the heart of their work. Employ Milwaukee's Business Solutions team helps employers build talent pipelines through customized services such as job readiness training, pre-screening, [Read More](#)

Check out our New Member Spotlight on Our Website: [HERE](#)





## ABOUT EMPLOY MILWAUKEE

Employ Milwaukee is the local workforce development board serving Milwaukee County, Wisconsin. By convening leaders from business and industry, economic and workforce development, education and training as well as community partners and policy makers, our vision is to develop workforce solutions that promote regional economic growth and employment opportunities for all job seekers.



### **Looking Forward with Purpose: Building Momentum for 2026**

As we prepare for the enrollment period of our Pathway to Progress Reentry Program and continue full-speed ahead with recruitment for our Growth Opportunity 5 project, I have been reflecting deeply on how we can strengthen connections, engagement, and momentum, not only for our

participants but also for their families.

I have said this before, and I will repeat it: When an individual is system-impacted, their family is affected as well. They carry the burden of uncertainty, delays, complex bureaucracy, and the emotional toll of watching someone they love go through the justice system. Many are exhausted. Many are frustrated. And many have grown tired not of believing in their loved one's redemption, but of the systems that keep challenging it.

This is why family engagement cannot be an afterthought in our outreach and recruitment strategies. It must be part of our core approach.

One strategy that has proven especially effective, particularly with pre-release participants, is conducting intentional outreach to families before an individual returns home. Something as simple as a postcard, an email, or a personalized letter helps build trust, sets expectations, and begins a relationship long before reentry starts.

Imagine a message like: "Greetings, Shonique has enrolled in our Pathway to Progress Program, and we are excited she has chosen to take this step. Through this program, participants receive the support, tools, and opportunities needed for a successful reentry and entry into the world of work. We are thrilled to take this journey with her, and we hope that you will join us."

A message like this does more than notify a family member. It signals hope. It signals partnership. It signals that no one is walking this journey alone. [Read More](#)

“Hope is the companion of power, and mother of success.”

Samuel Smiles

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Shonique Banks is a seasoned workforce strategist and leadership coach with 25+ years of experience supporting talent, guiding transformation, and empowering leaders across public, nonprofit, and philanthropic sectors to lead with impact.



Shonique Banks, MASCL  
Partner, Strategic Impact Group



## MUS WorkforceWorks!! Building with Purpose

When Midwest Urban Strategies launched WorkforceWorks!! during Workforce Development Month 2025, the goal was clear: to realign the national conversation around the vital role of Workforce

Development Boards (WDBs). This initiative was created to help policymakers, partners, and the public see what the data already proves: WDBs are the foundation of a strong workforce system. They connect employers, educators, and community partners to drive solutions that expand opportunity, strengthen local economies, and ensure policy is informed by practice.

At a time when national conversations often overlook the real impact of workforce systems, WorkforceWorks!! helped amplify the truth our members live every day. Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) make workforce development work. Local workforce systems are driven by these boards, built through partnerships, and designed to serve both employers and job seekers. WorkforceWorks!! demonstrates how policy takes shape through local practice, reminding policymakers that real impact begins at the community level.

Through this campaign, members across the MUS network aligned their messaging and shared examples that reflect what the America's Talent Strategy outlines in theory through its five pillars of a strong workforce system. Our members are already putting those principles into practice, developing industry-driven partnerships, advancing worker mobility, integrating services, and innovating at the local level to deliver results that last. [Read More](#)



## Year in Review: Reflections and Milestones

As we close out another unforgettable year, Visionz Group is taking a moment to reflect on a journey marked by growth, meaningful connections, and powerful momentum. This year's theme, Reflections and Milestones, captures not just what we have accomplished as an organization, but also my own evolution as a leader. Our partnership with Midwest Urban Strategies has been central to this progress, shaping the trajectory of both Visionz Group and my personal leadership journey in profound ways.

This year, I, Chris Rivers, stepped further into my role as a leader with a renewed sense of purpose and confidence. Through our collaboration with Midwest Urban Strategies, I was able to forge valuable relationships that expanded my ecosystem of trusted partners. These relationships didn't just open doors—they offered fresh insights, new perspectives, and strategic opportunities that strengthened my ability to lead with intention. I gained a deeper understanding of workforce dynamics, regional needs, and collaborative programming, and those learnings have enhanced both my confidence and our organizational vision. The trust built throughout these interactions has been instrumental in shaping the way I approach partnerships, community engagement, and long-term planning.

For Visionz Group, this year brought extraordinary growth and access. Through the support and alignment with Midwest Urban Strategies, we were able to connect with organizations that share our mission and values. We received visibility and opportunities that not only elevated our work but also positioned us for sustained success. [Read More](#)



“Every moment  
is a  
fresh  
beginning.”

T. S. Eliot

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Chris is a visionary leader and founder of Visionz Group, empowering youth and adults through soft skills development to succeed, lead, and thrive across business, education, and community spaces.

Chris Rivers  
CEO, Visionz Group



Attendees of the MUS Motor City Convening stand together outside Michigan Central Station

## **Strengthening Pathways, Expanding Possibilities: A Year of Impact and Innovation**

Our relationship with MUS has grown in thoughtful and meaningful ways over the past two years. It began in the fall of 2024 when we sponsored the Motor City Momentum Convening in Detroit. Attending that event gave us a clear sense of MUS in action, especially the collaboration, the energy, the conversations, and the way people openly shared and connected. That experience encouraged us to stay connected and ultimately led us to sponsor the Milwaukee Forward: Cream City Rising Summer Convening in 2025.

It was at this convening where we learned MUS was opening membership to affiliate organizations. The alignment was immediate and clear; we needed to become a member and did so in 2025! For us, it was an easy decision because we saw the value of being part of the MUS community; they spark innovation, and they really

understand the power of sector partnerships and what it means to create workforce development ecosystems that are accessible.

We've also found a home in the MUS Connector newsletter as an advertiser and contributing author. The newsletter has become a space for Skilltrade to share our voice, highlight our programs, and stay connected to the broader workforce community. [Read More](#)



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Sandy is the Vice President of Workforce Development at Skilltrade, driving innovative training solutions and partnerships to empower underserved communities with access to high-demand healthcare careers

Sandy Mead – VP of Workforce Development, Skilltrade

“Community is built when people show up for each other.”

Brené Brown



## 2025's Big Lesson: Soft Skills Make the Difference

As 2025 comes to a close, the Foundation for Talent Transformation reflects on a remarkable year of progress, teamwork, and meaningful results. This year has been shaped by strong relationships with workforce leaders, educators, and local changemakers who share our belief that personal growth drives career success.

Throughout the year, we launched impactful partnerships that emphasized cooperation and understanding; helping individuals better connect with themselves and others. One standout effort has been our work with Midwest Urban Strategies (MUS). Together, we are strengthening career preparation programs that open doors to long-term success across cities in the Midwest. MUS's dedication to helping individuals focus on self-development and well-being aligns perfectly with our goal of supporting growth, adaptability, and confidence in the workplace.

A major highlight of the year was engaging with professionals at the NAWDP conferences, where inspiring conversations emphasized the value of creativity and compassion in preparing people for the future of work. We were equally energized by

the Midwest Urban Strategies Convening, where dedicated professionals reaffirmed their drive to improve career readiness across the region. [Read More](#)

“Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success.”

Albert Schweitzer

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Eric Shepherd, leader of the Foundation for Talent Transformation, helps individuals develop self-awareness, resilience, and life skills through expert guidance, free assessments, and AI-enabled assistants.

Eric Shepherd  
Executive Director, Foundation for Talent Transformation



## Sponsor Spotlight: Advancing Early Childhood Education Through Sponsorship

Midwest Urban Strategies is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit committed to building stronger, more connected workforce ecosystems. Delivering high-impact early childhood education programming takes collaboration, intention, and shared purpose. Our ECE Registered Apprenticeship Accelerator in St. Louis was made possible through the generosity of sponsors who believe in expanding opportunity for quality early education development and strengthening the systems that support them.



Looking ahead, Midwest Urban Strategies is launching a **new Early Childhood Education Sponsorship opportunity: the SEED Fund (Supporting Early Educators Development)**. This initiative will help grow ECE Registered Apprenticeship programs, strengthen professional development, and support the events and activities that elevate early educators. We thank our 2025 ECE sponsors for helping pave the way and look forward to welcoming new partners ready to invest in the future of early childhood education.

We invite you to learn more about our 2025 ECE Sponsors: [ReadMore](#)

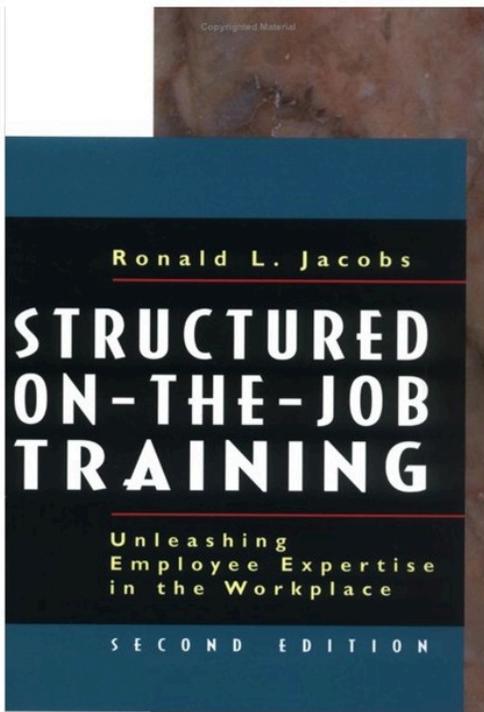
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## MUS Learning Lab: Understanding and Implementing a Competency-Based Apprenticeship Program

This Learning Lab will discuss what is meant by time-based and competency-based apprenticeship approaches, discuss the implications when using a competency-based approach, and describe an on-going project to develop competency-based apprenticeship programs for two operator positions with the Minneapolis Metropolitan Council, Environmental Services Division. Pilot implementation of the apprenticeship program is planned for early 2026.



Ron Jacobs, author of **Structured On-the-Job Training**, offers a practical framework for building skill-based training and apprenticeship programs.

At this Learning Lab we will discuss the need for administrators to choose which approach to follow when planning an apprenticeship program. As the name implies, a time-based approach, which is often viewed as being more prevalent, is when the program is structured around predetermined learning times for the RTI and OJT components, with less emphasis on the outcomes of those components. A competency-based approach focuses foremost on documenting the specific tasks to be learned and requiring proficiency on them before moving forward, irrespective of the time it takes to acquire the tasks. Given today's emphasis on skills development and program accountability, it seems critical for administrators to become more aware of what is required to implement a competency-based approach.

A recent [brief](#) on apprenticeship completion trends underscores how program design choices, including the shift toward competency-based models, directly influence apprentice success and retention. [Read More](#)

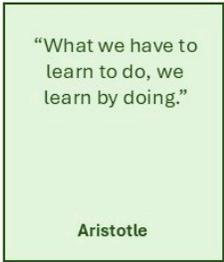
Register for this Learning Lab: [HERE](#)



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

After a distinguished academic career at Ohio State University and the University of Illinois, Ron Jacobs, Ph.D., is now principal of SiTUATE, LLC., a consulting firm that focuses on innovative work-based learning and performance solutions.

Ron Jacobs, PhD., Principal, SiTUATE, LLC.



**2025 In Workforce:  
A System Innovation  
Perspective**

I have always had an unusual perspective on America's workforce system. I ran groundbreaking British government programs that extended public employment services (job centers, job banks, etc.) to nonjob employment; breadwinners who need "gig work" to fit around day-to-day complexities in their life. I have now spent nearly a decade sharing learning with workforce agencies around the U.S. In Britain, we developed platforms for hour-by-hour labor under regional control and built



around protections, control, stability and progression for anyone needing personalized hours of work on any day. Realizing no other government had done the same, we obtained permission to put a copy of the technology in a nonprofit for open sourcing and looked at where else we could achieve social impact. British consulates enthused about America's public workforce system, highlighting the structure of state and regional boards accountable to governors and mayors.

The Annie Casey Foundation funded an **initial assessment project** involving 25 workforce agencies around the U.S. That identified a need. Walmart Foundation then enabled Americanization of the platform while the Kauffman Foundation enabled **research into a path to launch** in which our group expanded to 40 workforce agencies scrutinizing plans. That led to a first-year **proof of concept** for the City of Long Beach, CA, and a market that is now expanding across Los Angeles County.

So, we entered 2025 focused on whether new forces might increase a willingness to extend services to people outside the traditional employment model. For us, the devolution of responsibilities to the States is good news. [Read More](#)



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Wingham Rowan is a former television reporter who ran UK government programs that supported individuals needing alternatives to gig work. He now runs the Beyond Jobs nonprofit project.

Wingham Rowan  
Director, Beyond Jobs Project

"The future belongs to those who see possibilities before they become obvious."

John Sculley



## The Government Has Reopened, Funds Are In Place—What's Next?

For the workforce development industry, the sigh of relief is palpable. The uncertainty of a government shutdown has passed, and long-awaited funds are flowing again. While it's tempting to dive back into program delivery and reporting immediately, this moment of stability is a critical inflection point. It's not just about restarting; it's about building a

more resilient, effective, and sustainable organization for the future.

The organizations that will thrive are those that use this moment not just to refill their coffers, but to reinvest in their most valuable assets: their people and their partnerships. Here's a strategic roadmap for what comes next.

### 1. Stabilize Your Team By Building a Cohesive Team Culture

Your team has just endured a period of significant stress and uncertainty. Morale may be frayed, and burnout is a real risk. Before charging full-speed ahead, the first priority must be to stabilize and re-engage your internal team. A strong culture is the foundation upon which everything else is built.

#### Strategies to Build Culture:

- **Reconvene with Purpose:** Don't just hold another staff meeting. Host a "Reconnection and Relaunch" session. Acknowledge the challenges of the past few months openly and thank your team for their perseverance. Then, pivot to a forward-looking vision. Reaffirm your organization's mission and how their specific roles are crucial to achieving it. This rebuilds a shared sense of purpose.
- **Establish Psychological Safety:** Create an environment where team members feel safe to voice concerns, ideas, and even mistakes. Encourage this by leaders modeling vulnerability, actively listening without judgment, and acting on feedback received. When employees feel safe, innovation and collaboration flourish.
- **Create Small, Consistent Rituals:** Culture is built in the daily grind. Implement a weekly "Win of the Week" shout-out in team emails, host a monthly virtual coffee chat for informal connection, or start meetings with a personal check-in. These small, consistent actions build camaraderie and reinforce that team members are valued as whole people. [Read More](#)

"Leadership is not about being in charge. It is about taking care of those in your charge."

Simon Sinek

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Darrell "Coach D" Andrews is a nationally acclaimed innovator in workforce development, a motivational leader, and author. With his team, he empowers staff, leaders, and clients through transformative coaching, training, that drive results and ignite purpose.

Darrel "Coach D" Andrews  
President & CEO, Darrell Andrews, LLC & Associates



## Preparing for Workforce Pell: A New Tool for Workforce Leaders

The Workforce Pell program is a major federal expansion of Pell Grant eligibility, allowing students to use federal aid for short-term, for-credit programs lasting 150–599 hours (about 8–15 weeks). These programs aim to help adults and career changers gain fast, affordable pathways into high-demand careers.

To help institutions and workforce leaders prepare, the Pennsylvania Workforce Development Association (PWDA) has created a [Workforce Pell Toolkit](#). This practical guide explains how the new program works, what's required for eligibility, and how to plan for implementation once federal regulations are finalized.



### *What's in the Toolkit:*

The Toolkit breaks down key program requirements, including:

- Programs must be for-credit, stackable, and tied to in-demand jobs
- They must achieve at least 70% completion and 70% job placement within 180 days

- Graduate earnings must exceed program costs
- Programs must be operational for one year before applying

It also includes a readiness assessment to help colleges and partners evaluate their current capacity, with areas of impact including employer engagement, data tracking, and outcomes reporting, and identify next steps to meet Workforce Pell standards. [Read More](#)

Request Toolkit: [HERE](#)

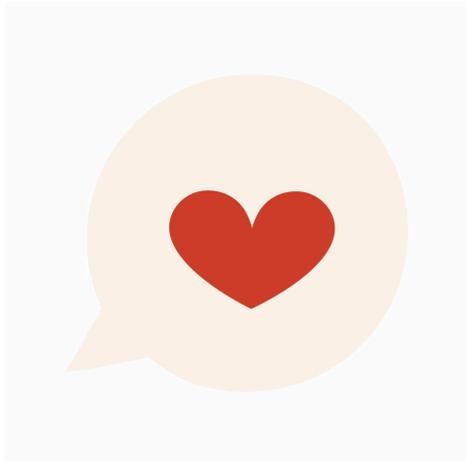


ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Lauren Holubec serves as Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Workforce Development Association, advancing workforce policy, partnerships, and professional development that align education and industry to strengthen Pennsylvania’s talent pipeline.



Lauren Holubec  
Executive Director, Pennsylvania Workforce Development Association



### OkaySo Year in Review: Building Everyday Skills for Youth Workers

This year, OkaySo took important steps toward our mission: to improve the well-being of young adults across the US. We did that in the places where so many young people are already turning for support—college access programs, community centers, and workforce development initiatives.

In 2025, over 100 youth workers completed our on-demand trainings across eight sites nationwide. These are front-line staff and mentors who, together, are supporting thousands of young people as they navigate school, work, relationships, and everything in between. Our focus has been simple but powerful: make it easier for caring adults to show up as safe, steady, and skillful supports in everyday moments.

We’ve continued to grow our suite of short, interactive trainings designed specifically for youth workers. This year, we launched new modules on having difficult conversations and navigating cyberbullying—two areas our partners told us were especially pressing. We now offer more than 20 trainings, including core topics like active listening, setting healthy boundaries, and trauma-informed best practices, all designed to be practical and immediately usable in real interactions with young people. [Read More](#)

"No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted."

Aesop

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elise Schuster is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of OkaySo where they work to improve the health and well-being of young people across the United States by increasing their access to safe, trusted spaces.



Elise Schuster  
Co-Founder and Executive Director of OkaySo

## Author Appreciation: A Year of Voices, Vision, and Impact

As we celebrate one full year of the *MUS Connector*, we pause to honor the remarkable authors who made each edition possible.



We also invite new voices to join us in the year ahead, contributing stories, insights, and perspectives that continue to shape our shared impact.

Throughout 2025, our Authors have shaped the story of workforce development across the Midwest and beyond. We are deeply grateful to each author who took the time to craft thoughtful articles that shared insight, highlighted best practices, and celebrated the people and partnerships that make WorkforceWorks!! a true movement.

Together, they've helped make the *MUS Connector* a trusted source of inspiration and connection across our network. As we look to the year ahead, we invite new Authors to lend their voices and perspectives and encourage our current authors to continue sharing their expertise. Each contribution strengthens our collective story and helps advance the mission of building stronger, more connected workforce systems. [Read More](#)

**Learn more about our 2025 contributing Authors by clicking on their name:**

[Chris Andresen](#)  
[Darrel "Coach D" Andrews](#)  
[Shonique Banks](#)  
[Dorinda Byars](#)  
[Tracey Carey](#)

[Marjorie Cohen](#)  
[Ryan Davis](#)  
[Kimberly Farris](#)  
[Ron Jacobs](#)  
[Kellie Landaker](#)

[Sandy Mead](#)  
[Priya Ramanathan](#)  
[Wingham Rowan](#)  
[Chris Rivers](#)  
[Elise Schuster](#)  
[Eric Shepherd](#)



## Community Spotlight Advertisements

In this final edition of 2025, we celebrate the organizations and partners whose investment in the *MUS Connector* has helped sustain a year of storytelling and impact.

Our advertisers, contributors, and sponsors have not only supported this publication but have also amplified the message that strong workforce systems build strong communities.

As we look ahead to 2026, we invite new and returning partners to join us in continuing to elevate workforce excellence through collaboration, innovation, and shared vision.

Please Note: For your convenience, all advertisements are clickable links.

Learn more about our Authors by clicking on their headshots.

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Next month's newsletter theme will focus on:

**New Beginnings and Career Exploration**

Questions about article submission? We are happy to help!

**734-331-8604**  
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**MUS Learning Lab**  
**JANUARY 20 @ 10AM (CST)**



**Understanding & Implementing Competency-Based Apprenticeship**  
 With Author, Ron Jacobs, Ph.D  
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## EVENTS ■ WEBINARS ■ ANNOUNCEMENTS

### CLASSIFIED SECTION:

**EVENT: MUS Learning Lab: January 20, 10-11am CST., A Discussion about Competency-Based Apprenticeship with Ron Jacobs, Ph.D.** With today's focus on skills and accountability, it's essential for administrators to understand what's needed to successfully implement a competency-based approach. Register [Here](#)

**EVENT: Save the date! MUS Summer Convening 2026 – June 2–4**, MUS will bring workforce leaders together for three days of collaboration, innovation, and partnership. Details to come. Questions? Contact Melanie: [Here](#)

**ANNOUNCEMENT:** MUS Sponsorships Available Now through Summer 2026. Partnering with MUS comes with plenty of benefits and opportunities to build strong connections and partnerships. Inquire within to learn more: [Here](#)

**ANNOUNCEMENT:** Skilltrade seeks partners to launch new Clinical Medical Assistant Career Training Pilot Programs across the country. Contact Sandy Mead to collaborate and learn more: [Here](#)

**ANNOUNCEMENT:** The Foundation for Talent Transformation introduces its Well-being Framework in a comparative study of global models. More About Well-being Framework: [Here](#)

**ANNOUNCEMENT:** Learning Labs are open to all, especially our readers. These online, expert-led sessions bring together professionals from various fields to explore key topics such as labor market statistics, early childhood education, workforce development programs, apprenticeships, and more. The best part? Learning Lab topics are selected by you—our readers and members—ensuring they remain timely and relevant. Sign up to receive an invitation to all MUS Learning Lab: [Here](#)

**ANNOUNCEMENT:** The MUS Connector would like to feature your success stories! Share your impact and inspire others. Submit your story: [Here](#)

**ANNOUNCEMENT:** MUS Wants to Hear About Your Workplace Wellbeing Initiatives! We are gathering insights on how our partners support well-being in the workplace. Do you offer initiatives that help employees thrive? Share your strategies and inspire others. Submit your workplace well-being initiatives: [Here](#)

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As the year winds down, may this season bring you time with the people who steady you, moments that spark joy, and the pause you need to enter the new year with confidence and hope.

From all of us at Midwest Urban Strategies, we send our warmest wishes for a meaningful holiday season.



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