

**MIDWEST**  
Urban Strategies  
A Workforce Innovation Laboratory

**Workforce**  
**>> Works!!**

*The Urban Rural  
Connection*



**ANNUAL**  
**CONVENING**  
**2026** *Northwest Indiana*

# Agenda

DAY 1 – TUESDAY, JUNE 2, 2026

## **Site Visits & Immersive Learning Experiences in Michigan City, Indiana**

**9:30 AM - 11:30 AM | Convening Registration at hotel & Annual Meeting of Members**

Blue Chip Hotel Casino and Spa, 777 Blue Chip Drive, Michigan City, IN 46260

**11:30 AM | Gather in the hotel lobby, bus departs at 11:45 PM**

**12: 00 PM – 12:15 PM | Opening Remarks at Elston Opportunity Hub**

**Presenter:** Tracey Carey, Executive Director, Midwest Urban Strategies

**12:15 PM – 12:45 PM | Welcome from our Host and Presentation at Elston Opportunity Hub**

An introduction to the Center of Workforce Innovations' (CWI) Growth Plan and key priorities currently underway. As the plan moves into early implementation, attendees will gain insight into how CWI is positioning itself and its partners for long-term sustainability, including strategies to diversify revenue and strengthen the regional hub network.

**Presenter:** Lisa Daugherty, President & CEO, Center of Workforce Innovations

**12:45 PM – 1:45PM | Lunch on Location at Elston Opportunity Hub provided by Strack & Van Til**

Lunch will be served on site. During this time, attendees will be introduced to the NWI Works Opportunity Hub Network because the future of workforce development isn't more programs, it's integrated systems. Learn how NWI Works is leading a bold, region-wide transformation to prepare adults for careers and position Indiana as a national innovator.

**Presenter:** Shelley Moore, Founder & President, Insight Strategic Concepts, Inc.

**1:45 PM - 2:45 PM | Tour of The Elston Opportunity Hub with Shelley Moore**

Participants will tour the Elston Opportunity Hub, with an overview of the facility's transformation, including before and after design plans and its development into a multi-purpose workforce and community space. The NWI Works Opportunity Hub at Elston is a transformational redevelopment of the historic Elston campus into a 300,000+ square foot, multi-service center focused on workforce development, education, and economic opportunity. Designed as a single "front door" to opportunity, the Hub connects residents to career pathways, employers to talent, and partners to a shared mission of community revitalization.

**2:45 PM - 3:00 PM | Break**

**3:00 PM - 4:15 PM | The Economic Impact Case for Opportunity Hubs**

Panel discussion will explore the Economic Impact Model developed by Tony Sindone, highlighting three-year projections across high-demand career pathways in Northwest Indiana. The conversation will focus on how the Opportunity Hub model drives measurable economic outcomes through coordinated workforce strategies, industry alignment, and community-based delivery, ensuring clear insight into pathways and system integration. A Work B.I.G. program participant will provide real-world perspective, connecting data and strategy to lived experience and outcomes.

**Panel Moderator:** Denise Wright, Director of Strategic Initiatives, Center of Workforce Innovations

**Panel Members:** Anthony (Tony) Sindone, Director of the Center for Economic Education & Research & Visiting Clinical Associate Professor, Indiana University Northwest, Heather Ennis, President & CEO, Northwest Indiana Forum, Shelley Moore, Founder & President, Insight Strategic Concepts, a Work B.I.G. program participant

**4:15 PM - 4:30 PM | Workforce Hero Award Presentation**

A Workforce Hero Award will be presented to Mayor Angie Nelson Deutch of Michigan City, Indiana. This recognition honors her leadership and commitment to advancing workforce development, strengthening community partnerships, and supporting economic opportunities for residents and employers across the region.

**4:30 PM - 4:45 PM | Load Bus to return to hotel | 777 Blue Chip Drive, Michigan City**

**6:00 - 8:00PM | Stacey Fowler Leadership and Heart Award Ceremony and Mixer**

# Agenda

Day 2 – Wednesday, June 3, 2026

## **Site Visits & Immersive Learning Experiences in Rensselaer, Indiana.**

**8:30 AM - 9:00 AM** | Gather in the hotel lobby, bus departs at 9:00 AM to St. Joseph College, 1214 Tonner Road, Rensselaer, IN

### **9:00 AM - 10:30 AM** | Employer-Led Consortia & Work-Based Learning Presentation

During travel, attendees will learn about CWI's employer-led initiatives, including READY NWI, IN FAME, and a healthcare consortia. The session will highlight work-based learning strategies such as farmworker, arborist, and water testing apprenticeships, demonstrating how employer engagement drives talent development across key industries.

**Presenters:** Nicky Rodriguez, Director of READY NWI, Center of Workforce Innovations, DeeDee White, Director of Business and Talent Strategy, Center of Workforce Innovations

### **10:45 AM – 11:15 AM** | Guided Bus Tour of St. Joseph's College Campus

Attendees will arrive at the Regional Trades Training Center for a guided tour of the reimagined St. Joseph's College campus in Rensselaer. Highlights include a residential construction training site, CDL Academy, on-site childcare, and student housing, all designed to support immersive, hands-on workforce training experiences.

**Presenters:** Jerome Wyrobek Jr, Business Development Coordinator, St. Joseph's College, David Wall, Certificate Programs Coordinator, St. Joseph's College

### **11:15 AM - 12:30 PM** | St. Joseph's College Evolution into Workforce Programming Presentation

This session explores the transformation of St. Joseph's College into a workforce-focused training hub. Attendees will learn about key programs, including building and trades pathways, registered apprenticeship on-ramps, health and veterinary certifications, and CDL training. The presentation highlights how the campus aligns education with industry needs, creating accessible pathways into high-demand careers.

**Presenters:** Jerome Wyrobek Jr, Business Development Coordinator, St. Joseph's College, David Wall, Certificate Programs Coordinator, St. Joseph's College

### **12:30 PM - 12:45 PM** | Workforce Hero Award Presentation

Workforce Hero receiving award is Dennis Black, Physical Plant Manager, Saint Joseph's College of Indiana. This recognition honors his leadership in advancing workforce development, supporting industry partnerships, and strengthening pathways to employment that contribute to the economic vitality of the community.

**Presenter:** Mayor Jeff Phillips of Rensselaer, Indiana

### **12:45 PM – 1:45 PM** | Lunch on location at St. Joseph's College provided by Strack & Van Til

During lunch, attendees will learn about the Farmer Apprentice Program

### **1:45 PM - 2:45 PM** | Creating Side Doors Not Back Doors: Developing Skills Based Accelerated Hiring Programs

The Machinists Institute partners with The Boeing Company to connect individuals from underinvested communities to quality union careers. This session highlights the Pre-Employment Training Program and explores replicable strategies, including employer engagement, competency mapping, braided funding, and community partnerships that accelerate access to high-quality jobs.

**Presenter:** Ryan Davis, Executive Director, The Machinist Institute

### **3:00 PM - 4:00 PM** | Workforce Pathways into the Great Lakes Blue Economy

The Great Lakes region faces rising demand for water workers, driven by AI growth, aging infrastructure, and increasing industrial needs. Great Lakes RENEW, an NSF-funded Regional Innovation Engine led by Current, is building a talent pipeline across six states through K-12 STEM education, adult career pathways, and startup support. This session explores how this model is transforming workforce challenges into economic opportunity for regions and workforce systems.

**Presenter:** Marisa Lewis, Workforce Development Director, Current & Workforce Innovation Lead, Great Lakes RENEW

### **6:00 PM** | Return to Blue Chip Hotel

Dinner on your own

# Agenda

Day 3 – Thursday, June 4, 2026

## **Site Visits & Immersive Learning Experiences in Gary, Indiana**

**8:00 – 8:30 AM** | Gather in Hotel Lobby, bus departs at 8:30 AM, arrives at Gary Public Library & Cultural Center, 220 West Ave., Gary, Indiana

**9:00 – 10:30 AM** | **Work B.I.G. Blight Remediation Tour**

An engaging overview of the Work B.I.G. program, including a brief history of Gary and its ongoing revitalization journey. Attendees will be guided on a neighborhood tour highlighting active blight remediation efforts across the city. Gain a first-hand look at how paid, work-based learning equips residents with career pathways while contributing to community renewal and transformation.

**Presenters:** Mayor Eddie Melton of Gary, Indiana, Michael Suggs, Chief Operating Officer, City of Gary, Rachele Morgan Ceaser, Executive Director, Public Works & City of Gary

**10:30 AM** | Bus arrives at Gary Public Library & Cultural Center, 220 West 5th Ave., Gary, Indiana

**10:45 – 11:45 AM** | **Work B.I.G. as a Template for any Community or Employer**

The City of Gary will share its vision and goals for the Work B.I.G. initiative, followed by CWI highlighting how partners, employers, and community stakeholders were mobilized to deliver results. Attendees will hear directly from program participants about their experiences and impact, alongside brief documentary vignettes that bring the work to life.

**Presenters:** Mayor Eddie Melton of Gary, Indiana, Denise Wright, Director of Strategic Initiatives, Center of Workforce Innovations, And Work B.I.G. Team

**12:00 - 12:30 PM** | **Lunch on Location at Gary Public Library & Cultural Center Provided by Strack & Van Til & Workforce Hero Presentation**

Lunch will be served on site, followed by the presentation of the Workforce Hero Award presented to Mayor Eddie Melton of Gary, Indiana. This recognition honors his leadership in advancing workforce development through initiatives like WorkBIG, connecting blight remediation with paid, work-based learning and creating pathways to employment for residents.

**1:00 – 2:00 PM** | **Using the Kolbe System to Restore Hidden Natural Talent**

In Northwest Indiana, the challenge isn't a lack of talent; it's how talent is identified and developed. Many individuals who are wired to build, fix, and create have not been fully reached through traditional approaches. In this presentation, discover how NWI Works is using the Kolbe System to unlock "Implementor" talent, accelerating job readiness, reshaping workforce training, and connecting more residents to high-demand careers across the region.

**Presenter:** Shelley Moore, Founder & President, Insight Strategic Concepts

**2:00 PM - 3:00 PM** | **Do you want to be an Integrator?**

Attendees will hear how the Maestro Concept has informed a more client-centric (employers & job seekers) experience, reduced silos, increased WIOA performance and led to new product development. Learn about "client-centric products" CWI has developed, branded and promoted to drive traffic into the region's AJCs and ultimately performance.

**Presenter:** Lisa Daugherty, CEO & President, Center of Workforce Innovations

**3:00 PM - 3:15 PM** | **Break**

**3:15 AM – 4:15 PM** | **Workforce System Standards Council**

The Council has begun its work to establish standards that define quality and high performance in the workforce development industry. This session will share the progress, timeline, and how you can get involved in the work.

**Presenter:** Casandra Blassingame, President & CEO, The Continuing Education Unit Accreditation Council (CEUAC)

**4:15 – 4:30 PM** | **Call to Action**

As we close this convening, we carry forward more than ideas; we carry responsibility. Kellie Landaker, Director of Membership and Learning, will gather insights and experiences from this event to shape and deliver our collective call to action.

**Presenter:** Kellie Landaker, Membership Director, Midwest Urban Strategies

**4:30 PM** | **Load the bus to return to Blue Chip Hotel**

# Presenters and Panelists

## DENNIS BLACK

Physical Plant Manager at Saint Joseph's College of Indiana, brings more than 40 years of service and leadership. He launched the Building and Trades Program, creating workforce pathways and fostering mentorship to support students, employers, and the community.



## CASANDRA BLASSINGAME, MED

President & CEO of CEUAC, an accomplished education and nonprofit executive with 25+ years advancing adult learning, workforce development, accreditation, and credentialing, recognized for building innovative, high-impact programs that expand access and strengthen opportunity.



## TRACEY CAREY

Executive Director of MUS, leads our consortium of workforce boards and affiliate partners, leveraging millions in investments to drive strategic partnerships, showcasing and supporting the robust local work that yields transformational workforce innovation across the country.



## RYAN DAVIS

Executive Director of the Machinist Institute's efforts to advance pre-apprenticeship, apprenticeship, and incumbent worker pathways, drawing on 20 years of workforce development experience across the healthcare, manufacturing, construction, maritime, and technology sectors.



## LISA DAUGHERTY

President and CEO, Center of Workforce Innovations, brings a diverse background in nonprofit leadership and media. She has led transformative community initiatives focused on economic mobility, workforce access, and strengthening support systems for working families.



## MAYOR ANGIE NELSON DEUTCH

Mayor Angie Nelson Deutch leads Michigan City with a focus on progress, collaboration, and community. Elected in 2023, she brings 25+ years of leadership experience and a strong commitment to workforce and community impact.



## HEATHER ENNIS

President and CEO of the Northwest Indiana Forum, leading regional economic development efforts. She has built strong partnerships to drive population growth, capital investment, and income growth, while actively advocating for policies that strengthen the region's economy.



## KELLIE LANDAKER

Director of Membership and Learning at MUS. She envisions a world where everyone deserves equitable treatment, access to opportunities, freedom from trauma and violence, fair wages, and a fair shot at wellbeing. Kellie brings that lens to our membership and to our work.



## MARISA LEWIS

Workforce Development Director, Current, leads initiatives advancing workforce pathways in the blue economy. She builds partnerships, aligns training with industry needs, and leverages data to support equitable access to high-demand careers across the Great Lakes region.

# Presenters and Panelists



## MAYOR EDDIE MELTON

22nd Mayor of Gary, Indiana, and a former State Senator, and community leader with experience in education, philanthropy, and workforce equity initiatives expanding opportunities for his communities.



## SHELLEY MOORE

Founder, President, and Lead Strategist, Insight Strategic Concepts, is a growth strategist who has helped more than 200 organizations achieve significant impact. She aligns leaders, teams, and communities to drive strategic growth and deliver measurable results.



## MAYOR JEFF PHILLIPS

Mayor Jeff Phillips of Rensselaer, Indiana, was elected in 2023 and currently serves his first term. He oversees city operations, regional partnerships, and public policy initiatives, while serving on several state and regional leadership and government relations



## ANTHONY (TONY) SINDONE

Director of the Center for Economic Education and Research and Visiting Clinical Associate Professor at Indiana University Northwest, brings 38+ years of experience in forensic economics, labor markets, workforce development, and public policy.



## MICHAEL SUGGS

Chief Operating Officer, City of Gary, Indiana, brings decades of leadership in operations and public affairs. He advances workforce, education, and community initiatives through extensive board service and civic engagement.



## DAVID WALL

Certificate Programs Coordinator, is a higher education leader specializing in workforce-aligned training programs at Saint Joseph's College of Indiana. He develops innovative pathways connecting education, community engagement, and real-world career opportunities.



## DEE DEE WHITE

Director of Business and Talent Strategy, Center of Workforce Innovations, leads WIOA initiatives, apprenticeships, and employer-driven solutions. With 30+ years of experience, she advances workforce strategy, training, and talent development



## DENISE WRIGHT

Director of Strategic Initiatives and a lifelong Northwest Indiana resident who uses data to help teams make informed decisions that drive economic and workforce impact. Her work focuses on translating data into coordinated strategies by aligning partners, priorities, and action.



## JEROME WYROBEK, JR.

Business Development Coordinator with nearly four decades of experience in personnel management. His background spans military service, insurance investigation, and workforce development, where he supports individuals and organizations through strategic engagement.

# Special thanks to our 2026 Annual Convening Sponsors

## WorkforceWorks - The Urban Rural Connection

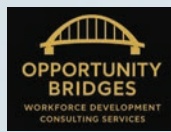
Your generous support has made this event possible, helping us bring together workforce development leaders and create opportunities for meaningful collaboration. We are grateful for your partnership in driving progress and shaping the future of workforce development.



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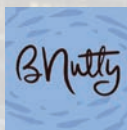
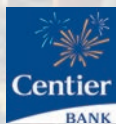
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## A special thank you to our local collaborators and partner organizations

Your contributions made the Convening truly memorable.





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890 ELM GROVE RD., SUITE 5-1, ELM GROVE, WISCONSIN 53122  
734-331-8604 • [WWW.MIDWESTURBANSTRATEGIES.COM](http://WWW.MIDWESTURBANSTRATEGIES.COM)

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