

# BOOTS ON THE GROUND

## Regional Workforce Offices Keep Businesses Humming, People Employed

By Anthony Schoettle

While the Indiana Department of Workforce Development (DWD) is headquartered in Indianapolis, there is an entire army of workforce specialists stationed throughout the state aiming to make sure employers have the skilled manpower they require to continue to thrive and help Hoosier workers attain the education and training needed to fill jobs in their regions.

The 12 workforce regional offices cover every corner of the state – and then some. They offer many of the same services as DWD’s centralized headquarters but are tailored to meet demands unique to each region.

“Indiana’s workforce development regions are great collaborative partners with the state to provide valuable resources and support on a regional level,” states Katie Rounds, DWD chief workforce officer. “Regional leaders and staff are available to help employers solve their workforce needs through training and skills

development and can also connect employers to state and federal funding streams that can cover some or all of the expense to skill up workers.”

Federal dollars from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act provide the backbone funding for the 12 regional offices in Indiana, which each having a staff ranging from 30 to 55 individuals. The regional offices also tap into state, federal and private grants to help sustain their work and infrastructure. Many are co-located with other training and social services organizations to reduce overhead and facilitate collaboration. The state reimburses the regional offices for co-located staff.

### Local approach

The 12 regions’ mission is straightforward, yet comprehensive, according to Kurt Kegerreis, executive director of the Southeast Indiana Workforce Board, which oversees Region 9 that includes Bartholomew, Jackson, Jennings, Decatur and six other counties.

“In short, (our mission) is helping workers find jobs and helping employers find workers,” Kegerreis explains. “In the past, this was largely a function of simple job-matching and shepherding people through the unemployment process. But over the past 10 years this has

much more to do with case management and removing barriers to success. We’ve also become much more active working directly with employers to educate them on how to work with vulnerable populations.”

The regional offices have a cadre of services and offerings, among them: operating career centers, working on internship and apprenticeship programs, running career awareness initiatives funded through the private sector, providing access to training and working with employers on employee recruitment. They also provide labor market information that helps people choose right career and employers to devise recruitment and retention strategies, as well as conducting hiring events and strategic planning to help employers build talent pipelines.

Another collaboration for the regional offices involves Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG), a state-based national non-profit organization, which runs programs dedicated to supporting young people and helping them build career paths from junior high and high school.

“What we do is a little different than just helping someone get a job or a company making sure it has a workforce,” offers Rick Farrant, director of communications for



Northeast Indiana Works (known as Region 3) facilitates a Manufacturing Experience day camp in Noble County. A job fair hosted by the Southeast Indiana Workforce Board – which oversees Region 9 encompassing Bartholomew, Jackson, Jennings, Decatur and six other counties – was held in October.

Northeast Indiana Works (known as Region 3), which covers 11 counties – including Allen County. “Our mission is to train and educate workers, build talent pipelines, work with schools and other learning organizations to build career awareness and develop pathways to careers.”

Due to the extensive efforts it does within its region – including conducting 250 to 300 hiring events annually – Farrant says his regional office is well known among area employers.

“The businesses know a great deal about us,” he expresses. “We work with 1,700 businesses a year in varying degrees.”

One thing that enhanced those relationships is the training grants his office helps administer, Farrant notes.

“Region 3 has made good use of employer training grants, which are part of the Next Level Jobs program and administered through Northeast Indiana Works. Since the grants began (in 2017), about \$17 million has been allocated to northeast Indiana employers,” Farrant shares.

Many of the 12 regional offices also work closely with the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC), the state agency tasked with growing the state economy, driving economic development and helping businesses launch, grow and locate in the state.

Northeast Indiana Works and the IEDC, for instance, have been partnering to jointly make business and retention visits to employers in Region 3. In 2022, the two entities working in tandem made 91 visits. Through September this year, they have made 78 visits.

### Outreach needed

In contrast, the familiarity with the region’s services isn’t as great with jobseekers.

“We are well established in our communities, but unfortunately most folks still think of us as the unemployment office,” Kegerreis admits. “We don’t actually get funded to provide unemployment assistance at all, but most of our foot traffic still comes from individuals navigating the (unemployment insurance) system.”

Outreach, adds Kegerreis, “is a constant challenge.”

“There are a lot of players in this space, but we are one of the few that is acting purely for the benefit of the jobseekers and employers rather than selling a particular product or brand,” he declares. “Most of our outreach comes from word of mouth, serving clients one on one and letting them know we’re here for them regardless of the current market conditions.”

The regional offices are a critical component in keeping the state’s economy humming, state officials stress.

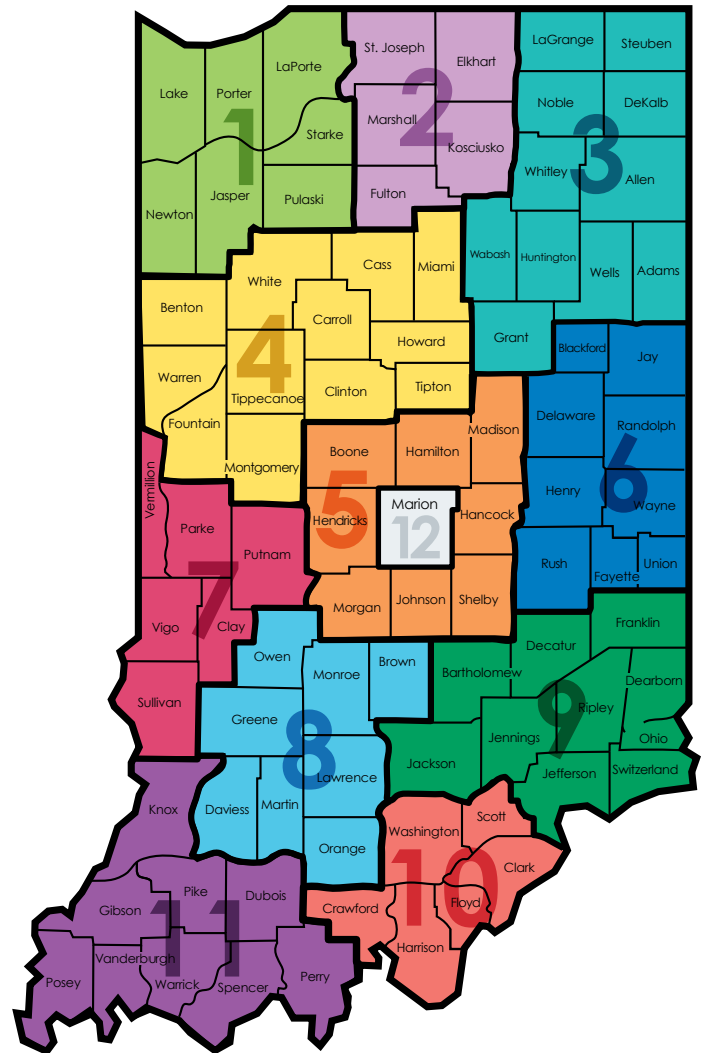
“Regional staff are knowledgeable about the everyday labor force issues that impact the employers they serve,” Rounds begins. “This gives them the best opportunity to promote strategies to develop the workforce that best aligns with the employers in their communities. I’d encourage all employers to connect with their regional development board, especially if they want to up-skill staff now or have plans to grow or add new technology in the future. It is never too early to be a part of the conversation at the regional level.”

While the DWD might be perceived as too far removed to help out with workforce issues on the ground in a particular region, the regional offices are set up to be approachable, Farrant remarks. “We’re local, we’re nearby, easy to reach and we understand the unique problems businesses and people in our communities are facing.”

### Tailor-made services

Customizing its offerings based on employers’ and workers’ needs as well as their region’s economic situation is a big part of the regional offices’ missions.

## Indiana’s Workforce Regions



For instance, Region 3 last year formed the Northeast Indiana Health Care Consortium to deal with issues specific to the health care industry, which is the area’s second biggest employer.

“One of our major roles is to convene people around workforce development challenges,” Farrant acknowledges. “So, we formed a health care consortium made up of health care providers, educators, economic development entities and others. The goal is to bring all the people and organizations – many of them competitors – together to tackle the challenges facing the health care industry, which are significant.”

The lowest unemployment rate in the state can be found in Region 9, the southeast Indiana region, and is posing a different challenge.

“We are on the frontlines of the talent crisis. This has forced us to figure out how to engage those folks who aren’t working but could or should. This is a large group of people, but if done poorly you can waste a lot of money trying to recruit them,” Kegerreis emphasizes. “Thus, our mission is to strategically build ladders for those overlooked individuals who are capable of climbing them, and we do this by carefully collaborating with subject matter experts and the employers themselves to build new pipelines that are sensitive to the social challenges that exist across our region.”

**RESOURCES:** Rick Farrant, Northeast Indiana Works, at [neinworks.org](http://neinworks.org) | Kurt Kegerreis, Southeast Indiana Workforce Board, at [www.in.gov/dwd/workonesoutheast/wdb](http://www.in.gov/dwd/workonesoutheast/wdb) | Katie Rounds, Indiana Department of Workforce Development, at [www.in.gov/dwd](http://www.in.gov/dwd).