

Regional Economic Growth Initiative (REGI)

Incourage and partners conceive and launch REGI

Historically, Fortune 500 paper mills located in our region comprised the majority of the area's economic growth strategy. With globalization and the advent of digital media, the industry experienced significant contraction and downsizing of the regional workforce. In response to the changing economy, Incourage supported innovative and targeted workforce and economic development solutions. This support included investments of time, money and leadership in creating Workforce Central, a first rural site to be affiliated with the National Fund for Workforce Solutions (NFWS, nfwsolutions.org). This work and related impact continues today in a number of significant ways, including the creation of Regional Economic Growth Initiative (REGI).

As the timeline and narrative show, Incourage's initial investment and ongoing collaborative investments nurtured creation of REGI. Located in Wisconsin Rapids, REGI is a non-profit collaborative of businesses, municipalities, community organizations, and philanthropy.

REGIONAL ECONOMIC GROWTH INITIATIVE LEADERSHIP



Origins

Incourage along with planning partners North Central Wisconsin Workforce Development Board, Heart of Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce, and Mid-State Technical College applied for and received funding from the NFWS for the Workforce Central program which includes a manufacturing sector partnership. This program is staffed and facilitated by Incourage. It is funded through public, private, and philanthropic resources locally and nationally, including investments



from regional stakeholders (\$270,000) and employers (\$300,000). To date, Incourage and partner cash investments exceed \$1.4 million. To learn more about Workforce Central, its impact and partners, visit incouragecf.org or contact Incourage.

After two years of progress, the Workforce Central Funder's Collaborative commissioned research to identify emerging opportunities for long-term economic growth in order to align and leverage corresponding workforce investments. The results were presented in August 2011. One of the study's recommendations was to "Organize a coalition of key stakeholders." As such, an engaged working group was formed to address the study's additional recommendations. The working group, originally named JEDI (Joint Economic Development Initiative), consisted of nineteen members, and began meeting the very next month.

2011 STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS: To support economic growth

- Organize a coalition of key stakeholders
 - Start with manufacturing
 - Form an intermediary organization to develop and implement a tightly focused plan
 - Hire a highly skilled and experienced economic development professional
 - Focus on making something happen
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During the incubating phase, Incourage invested broadly in the work. This investment included the coordination, logistics, documentation, and facilitation of the initiative among other contributions. The working group adapted over time to include interested and engaged municipal, business, and community organization stakeholders. Further recognizing the importance of a more regional approach, the group was renamed REGI in 2012.

This working group of key stakeholders developed a vision of the future through a "theory of change" visioning process, funded by Incourage and facilitated by the Aspen Institute. That process articulated a collective vision, along with the necessary and sufficient pre-conditions needed to achieve the ultimate outcome: *"Our region has a healthy, growing and resilient economy in which all people and businesses thrive."*

REGI Timeline: Investments to Realize REGI

REGI Incourage Working Group Workforce Partners

NFWS = National Fund for Workforce Solutions

WC = Workforce Central

REGI = Regional Economic Growth Initiative

WEDC = Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation

USDA/EDA = United States Department of Agriculture / Economic Development Administration

2008	Incourage coordinates NFWS application with key partners
2008	WC selected as NFWS site; first rural site
2009	Incourage board approves staffing support, facilitation and cash match for first three years of WC
2009	WC CEO Manufacturing Peer Council established
2011	WC Funders commission a regional Economic Assessment
2011	Incourage coordinates and facilitates first collaborative meeting
2011	Economic Assessment report out
2011	Group originally named Joint Economic Development Initiative (JEDI); later REGI
2012	Group applies for USDA/EDA Rural Accelerator Grant
2012	"Theory of Change" work begins to determine collective vision
2012	Incourage board approves \$215,000 grant to provide seed capital to grow REGI and leverage investments
2013	Incourage publishes "Growing the Economy in Central Wisconsin" including REGI information
2013	Eleven municipal presentations begin, resulting in eight resolutions of support
2014	REGI receives WEDC grant for infrastructure study
2014	REGI obtains 501c3 status, develops bylaws and board structure; Incourage moves to stakeholder role
2015	President/CEO Hired

Modeling the courage to take calculated risk, Incourage with REGI sought additional financial support, applying for a \$750,000 United States Department of Agriculture/ Economic Development Administration (USDA/EDA) Rural Accelerator Grant in 2012. A cash match was required for the application and Incourage's Board of Directors approved the \$215,000 cash match. The grant was denied by USDA/ EDA on a technicality. However, Incourage's Board believed so strongly in the need and opportunity presented by REGI, they approved the use of the \$215,000 match commitment as a grant from Incourage to REGI in order to accelerate its work and to incentivize additional investments.

With enough progress and background information, REGI began engaging additional regional municipalities. Eight municipalities passed resolutions of support for REGI and thus far have contributed a total of \$130,000.

In 2014, recognizing the progress being made by REGI, Incourage stepped back from incubating this new concept into a mutual stakeholder role. In the process, REGI increased efforts to secure additional investments to advance their emerging work.

REGI has achieved its own 501c3 status, developed bylaws, articles of incorporation, and formed a board of directors. The collaborative applied for and received a Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) grant to complete a capacity building infrastructure assessment. That study, conducted by Lupke & Associates, Inc., has been completed and is scheduled to be shared publicly. In July 2015, the REGI Board hired a highly skilled and experienced economic development professional as the organization's president.

As part of its vision of a "community that works well for all people", Incourage continues to support the work of REGI and has a member seat on the Board of Directors.

Established in rural Wisconsin in 1994 to serve the changing needs of the south Wood County area, Incourage has become a nationally-recognized leader in place-based philanthropy and community development. Guided by values of equity, opportunity and shared stewardship, Incourage envisions a community that works well for all people. One physical manifestation of this vision is the Tribune, which demonstrates Incourage's resident-centered approach to growing a strong and inclusive local economy. To learn more, visit incouragecf.org.

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