

Incouragement Impact: Economic Growth

A Report to the Community

Last updated 10/14/16

*Established in 1994 to meet the changing needs of the community, Incouragement has evolved from a traditional grantmaker into a values-led, user-centered and place-based **community economic development organization** stewarding and connecting all forms of community capital – moral, social, human, intellectual, reputational, financial and natural – toward a powerful shared vision: **a community that works well for all people.***

There has been no greater change for our community than globalization, automation and downsizing of the paper industry. The backbone of the local economy – Consolidated Papers, Inc. – sold in 2000. By 2005, we had lost 40% of area manufacturing jobs.

Rebuilding and diversifying our economy has been a top resident priority since 2002. To address this significant need in our community, Incouragement understood it would require investment in approaches that motivate new thinking and capitalize on existing assets. This is generational change. It requires flexibility, persistence, innovation, collaboration and a sense of shared destiny among the people and institutions that call this place home.

*We believe there is no asset more important than **people**, and positive community change happens when individuals have the opportunity to realize their full potential. Further, residents who feel a sense of ownership, shared responsibility and shared destiny by virtue of a shared place are essential in shaping **an inclusive, sustainable local economy.** We are proud to work with local companies who value the role people play in their business success.*

Incouragement has invested and leveraged a total of \$15.4 million to support economic growth and opportunity in our region.

MOTIVATING NEW THINKING

Community Progress Initiative

The Community Progress Initiative (CPI), a joint partnership between Incourage and the Heart of Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce, was established to promote responsible, collaborative and visionary citizenship to transform community culture and invigorate economic development. Launched in 2004, CPI was a bold three-year program in south Wood County and the town of Rome intended to catalyze vibrant communities and prosperous local economies. The project aimed to motivate new thinking and behavior by seeking to: create a business friendly environment and empower entrepreneurs, shape a shared vision throughout the region, stimulate new enterprises resulting in additional job opportunities, build the area's endowed charitable assets to support sustainable community development, encourage emerging young leaders to drive positive change and inspire community spirit and pride.



CPI included programs such as Experiential Study Tours, Industry Cluster Networks, Business Innovation, Entrepreneurial Boot Camps and Angel Investor Network and Loan Funds. Additionally, community funds were established for Nekoosa, Pittsville, Port Edwards, Rome, Rudolph, Vesper and the Wisconsin Rapids area. Initially, the Barker Mead Fund through Incourage matched up to \$20,000 in donations to each fund and provided \$5,000 in seed money to each fund to be used for grants to support projects and programs in that community. Committees comprised of area residents continue leading these funds to identify and meet the changing needs of their respective communities.

INFORMING INCOURAGE'S PERSPECTIVE

In 2006, with support from the Ford Foundation, Incourage coordinated and participated in study tours to Maine and New Hampshire. Together with peers from the Black Belt Community Foundation located in Selma, Alabama, participating residents learned about community development strategies at Coastal Enterprises and the New Hampshire Community Loan Fund. Both organizations demonstrated innovative use of philanthropy to invest locally (i.e. seed community loan funds, make mission-related investments, think differently about workforce training programs and invest in long-term community development strategies). Additionally, Black Belt representatives shared their asset-based strategy – “taking what we have to make what we need” – providing attendees with a new outlook and opportunities to apply this same type of thinking in south Wood County.

Again, with support from the Ford Foundation, a group of 16 south Wood County residents had the opportunity to visit the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Avilla Kilmurray, CEO of the Community Foundation of Northern Ireland, shared the important work that her organization was doing in a country that has such rich heritage, but also conflict and deep difference embedded in its culture. She shared the programs that showed the first glimmer of hope toward a peace agreement after years of conflict and bloodshed. Avilla explained the community foundation's role as much more than a grant-maker; the foundation was actively engaged in programmatic and leadership work focused on brokering peace, restoring trust and deepening relationships. This learning provided context and perspective on the challenges south Wood County was facing, which seemed small in comparison to what was happening in Northern Ireland.

Both of these experiences (New England and Northern Ireland) informed Incourage's strategy and understanding related to our potential role in community economic development.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Workforce Central

Since 2008, Incourage has been leading efforts to transform the way we approach workforce development across systems. Known as [Workforce Central](#), Incourage has led, staffed, facilitated, funded and delivered programs focused on strengthening our region's economy for area job seekers, workers and employers.

Workforce Central's primary focus has been on manufacturing, given its prominence at both the local and state level.

Manufacturing is the largest economic driver in south Wood County. Wisconsin ranks second in the nation in the relative size of the manufacturing sector (one in six Wisconsin workers – more than 465,000 people – are employed by manufacturers).



Workforce Central has become a model for communities across the country and was a first rural site affiliated with the [National Fund for Workforce Solutions](#) (NFWS). In 2010, Workforce Central became the first rural [Social Innovation Fund](#) (SIF) sub-grantee (see below) through NFWS and the Corporation for National and Community Service. In 2011, the collaboration won the NFWS Chairman's Award, and in 2012, the Vice Chairman's Award.

As part of the NFWS, Incourage convened an active funders' network, bringing together 26 local and national investors from foundations, businesses, banks, individual donors and government to jointly invest over \$5.4 million in this work. In addition, with Incourage's leadership, more than 30 local agencies, schools and non-profits have worked to align with employer needs and collaborate in new ways to ensure every potential worker has career opportunities.

[Evaluation](#) and documentation have provided knowledge sharing, reflection and improvements along the way. Additionally, Incourage commissioned and produced a [Manufacturing Competitiveness Guide](#) featuring local businesses, to help their peers understand the value of investing in human capabilities and training.

In all, 647 job seekers have been served, earning 260 credentials in health care, manufacturing and customer service, eight youth apprentices have been placed in manufacturing firms and 35 businesses have been served. Seven industry curriculums have been developed, customized or made locally available. Three summer educator courses have exposed more than 50 teachers to over a dozen local businesses, and nearly 1,500 students from four public and private area high schools have experienced new hands-on renewable energy education.

Manufacturing Partnership CEO Peer Council

Launched in fall 2009, the Workforce Central Manufacturing Partnership CEO Peer Council is comprised of six local manufacturing leaders from Ocean Spray Cranberries, Mariani Packing Co., ERCO Worldwide, Pointe Precision, Domtar and Corenso North America. These leaders believe that companies thrive in communities that support business growth and that communities prosper and thrive when they invest in companies that demonstrate community commitment.



Workforce Central's industry-driven approach is focused on

achieving the highly skilled workforce required for businesses to grow and maintain a competitive edge in the south Wood County area. Since inception, Incourage has staffed the Partnership and facilitated collaborative relationships between businesses and K-12 schools, Mid-State Technical College and the North Central Wisconsin Workforce Development Board. This partnership develops up-to-date intelligence about the collective skills industry needs, delivers knowledge to workers, educators and policy makers, and promotes improvements in business practices and public systems that lead to healthier economies and better career opportunities for our workers and job seekers. To date, the Manufacturing Partnership has provided training and talent assessment services to 35 regional employers and over 170 local workers.

Service Provider Network

Convened and facilitated by Incourage, Workforce Central’s Service Provider Network was a peer-learning group of public, non-profit and faith-based organizations that learned about the role they played in the workforce development system to ensure workers were prepared to meet the needs of local employers. This network addressed and worked to removed barriers for workers and prospective workers, provided networking opportunities with peers across systems, built strategic collaborations, and provided learning, knowledge, and data sharing to improve client outcomes. In addition, collaborative program development issues were addressed, such as the development of the Fast-Track (formerly Pathways Partnership) program described below. This network consisted of 27 regional organizations and was active from 2009 to 2014.

Dislocated Worker Food Manufacturing Science Certificate (FMSC) Training

Following the loss of 40% of manufacturing jobs in five years in south Wood County, many dislocated workers were seeking new employment. However, food manufacturing businesses acknowledged that food processing specific skills did not match those of prospective workers.

Food Manufacturing Science Certificate (FMSC) Training ensures workers are prepared and understand the global importance of processing food safely and efficiently. This project provided preparatory courses and support to prepare dislocated and other Workforce Investment Act (WIA) eligible participants for successful completion of Manufacturing Skills Standard Certification (MSSC - safety, quality, processes, and maintenance) and FMSC. With leadership and support from Incourage, the North Central Wisconsin Workforce Development Board, philanthropic partners, local businesses, Mid-State Technical College, and Labor Education and Training Center (LETC) developed a career path meant to sustain an employment pipeline for local advanced manufacturing companies and those specifically in the food processing sub-sector.

Training of Incumbent Workers



One of the first collaborative needs identified within the Manufacturing Partnership was the development of the first-line supervisor. As such, the Supervisory Training program was initiated, together with Mid-State Technical College, for incumbent supervisors. CEO Peer Council members vetted the course instructors to ensure industry experience and perspective. The courses were grouped into manageable certificates that all ladder into an associate’s degree in Supervisory Management. This training was also extended to other needed skills, like a Hazard Analysis for Critical Control Points (HACCP) certification course for food processing companies and Lean Six-Sigma training for continuous

improvement. Incourage has also pursued general skill improvements using the MSSC Production Technician curriculum.

Fast-Track (formerly Pathways Partnership)

Healthy communities create enabling conditions for all people to meet their full potential, including those with barriers to employment. With investments to realize Fast-Track, Incourage focused on a frequently disenfranchised and growing segment of the population – those eligible for FoodShare.



Wood County Human Services and Mid-State Technical College led and expanded Fast-Track. Incourage provided facilitation, access to technical expertise and direct financial support to provide disadvantaged job seekers and recipients of FoodShare occupational training with wrap-around support services. Mid-State tailored its existing adult basic education program for these students. Wood County Human Services staff provides support and other services with an office on campus.

Fast-Track’s main goal is to increase the educational levels of participants through attainment of a GED/HSED and/or short-term job skills training in health care, customer service or manufacturing. Once completed, participants then are able to connect with higher-wage employment or pursue continuing education through a certification or degreed program.

Results to date include more than 400 job seekers served, over 390 enrolled in training or education, 218 earned credentials, and over 220 placed directly in employment.

To learn more about Fast-Track participants Nick and Debi Schmid, view this video: [Schmids Beat the Odds](#).

Business Education Alliance

Three years after the initiation of Incourage’s Workforce Central Manufacturing Partnership, it was evident that having come out of the Great Recession and addressing the training needs of displaced workers, businesses were soon going to be directly impacted by the impending “Silver Tsunami” – the aging baby boomers that will be exiting the labor force in droves in the coming years. Data shows that as of 2015, 64% of Wood County manufacturing employees are 45 years of age or older.



In addition, data compiled by partner companies indicated an average of over nine months to fill an open STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) position with an average salary over \$67,000.

Simultaneously, there was low interest in applicable STEM courses in our area secondary and post-secondary institutions, with some courses either discontinued or under threat. The Manufacturing Partnership saw an opportunity for collaborative action, and in 2012, they initiated the Business Education Alliance.

In 2012, Incourage coordinated a collaborative school board meeting with three of the area school districts – Nekoosa, Port Edwards and Wisconsin Rapids – to present the data and solicit their support to address the issues. Key business leaders were in attendance at the joint school board meeting and voiced their support for action. All three districts decided to jointly work on narrowing the skills gap, specifically in STEM, and creating greater awareness of the family-sustaining career opportunities in our region. To date, three summer continuing education courses have introduced more than 50 teachers to over a dozen regional businesses. These businesses project hiring needs of more than 1,500 new employees in the next five years. Today, the Business Education

Alliance is a collaboration of four public (Nekoosa, Pittsville, Port Edwards and Wisconsin Rapids) and two private (Assumption Catholic Schools and Immanuel Lutheran School) school systems, Mid-State Technical College, University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point, community organizations and area businesses.



Based on this highly successful collaboration, the Alliance was selected to receive three Constellation *Energy to Educate* grants, written by In courage, totaling \$135,000. These grants provided solar photovoltaic installations at area schools and educated over 1,400 students in renewable energy concepts. To learn more about the *Energy to Educate* grants, view this video: [Power to the Pupils!](#)

Youth Apprenticeship Program

At south Wood County high schools, the Youth Apprenticeship program combines school curriculum with job experience for area high school students. In courage provided the key aspect of successful youth apprenticeship programs – building relationships and connections between the school system and businesses. In addition to technical skills, youth apprentices also learn crucial soft skills for today’s workplace. But most importantly, youth apprentices feel like a true part of the organization they are working at, creating a lasting connection to their community.

Prior to the work of the Business Education Alliance, there had been no youth apprentices in the manufacturing sector. Now there are more than 10.



Devyn Koch (youth pictured at right) was one of the first south Wood County manufacturing youth apprentices at Pointe Precision. In 8th grade, Devyn participated in a Heavy Metal Bus tour (supported by In courage’s CEO Peer Council) which introduced youth to local manufacturing. A few years later, his youth apprenticeship high school advisor saw him as a good fit for a local manufacturer, Pointe Precision. While there, Devyn gained great experience in machining and manufacturing that expanded his horizons. He now attends UW-Stout, pursuing a degree in mechanical engineering. In 2015, Pointe Precision received the 2015 *Youth Employer Champion* award from the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals.

To learn more about the Youth Apprenticeship Program, view this video: [Are You In? Youth Apprentices.](#)

STEM Scouts



In 2015, Boy Scouts of America chose our area’s Samoset Council for a STEM Scout program to engage more youth in the STEM areas. Now, south Wood County’s STEM Scout program serves as a model for other programs across the nation.

The success of our area’s STEM Scouts is no coincidence. Years of dedicated work by In courage, businesses and educational institutions created the positive conditions of readiness. Building trust and strengthening relationships between organizations and individuals accelerates the impact of programs like STEM Scouts, while creating a path for the future success of students and businesses.

To learn more about STEM Scouts, view this video: [Are You In? STEM Scouts.](#)

Information Technology (IT) Occupational Sector Board

Information technology is a crucial infrastructure component for most companies and almost all industrial sectors employ or contract for IT services. As such there is a tremendous demand for those with these skills. In 2010 as part of the Workforce Central Initiative and expanded work from the SIF funding, the IT occupational sector was added to the initiative. Mid-State Technical College was contracted to lead this effort, forming an “IT Sector Board” comprised of decision-level representatives from a number of regional organizations that employ significant numbers of IT workers. This effort revealed the extreme discrepancy in job postings which in aggregate made the sector employment demand very opaque. Although this initiative only lasted two years, it was key to the eventual formation of the current Central Wisconsin IT Alliance (CWITA), which is now facilitated by North Central Wisconsin Workforce Development Board (NCWWDB) and consists of 25 companies including manufacturing, healthcare, insurance, finance, software, and agriculture.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Investing to Build Community

In 2014, the Incourage Board of Directors approved and subsequently led an organizational commitment to align 100% of all Incourage resources to mission.

In February 2016, the Incourage Board approved a 100% mission and values-aligned [Investment Policy Statement](#). This establishes and further articulates a mission and values framework for all aspects of our financial asset management. It assumes that economic value resides not just in financial currency, but in human integrity, skills, curiosity and relationships.

As part of this work, Incourage holds and seeks investments in private funds, organizations, companies and projects focused on creating a more equitable and environmentally sustainable economy in central Wisconsin. This includes, but is not limited to, providing below market rate loans to area Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs), such as Community Assets for People (CAFP) and Forward Community Investments (FCI). These investments are used for loans to small businesses and entrepreneurial startups that create and retain jobs in our region, affordable housing, non-profit facilities, sustainable agriculture and more.

One of these business loans helped with the startup of a new Subway in Pittsville in 2014. Arlynn and Patricia Stainbrook (pictured above) established the business and received assistance with putting their business plan into action. Incourage’s investment in CAP made it possible for their staff to provide direction to the Stainbrooks in the areas of business planning, developing and assessment of financial projections, technology and business promotion.



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Regional Economic Growth Initiative (REGI)

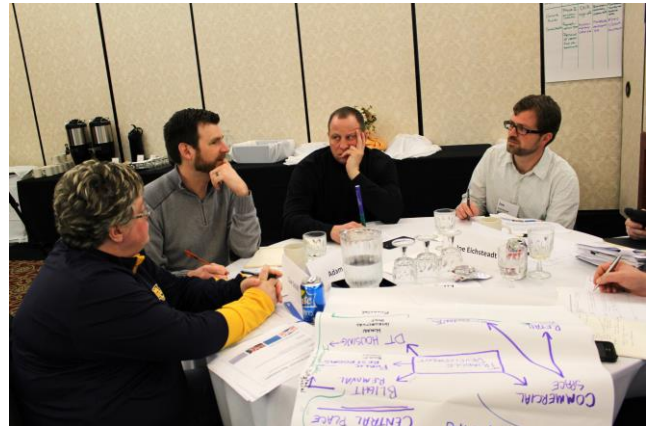
After two years of progress with Workforce Central and the Manufacturing Partnership, the Workforce Central Funder’s Collaborative commissioned a study to analyze our economic development and growth capacities regionally. The contracted firm, FutureWorks, presented [the results](#) in August 2011. The report and subsequent recommendations formed the impetus for a working group to address the needs identified. That group began meeting in September of that year and after several years of work has transformed into the Regional Economic Growth Initiative (REGI) with its own 501(c)(3) incorporation, by-laws, articles of incorporation, and board of directors. Significant resources were brought to bear on the two-plus years of incubation of this initiative. Incourage coordinated the meetings, logistics, facilitation and expenses. In 2014, with the organization on the cusp of launch from incubation, Incourage transitioned to a stakeholder role, while continuing to provide leadership on the REGI Board of Directors and collaborate on key economic development opportunities like Workforce Development and entrepreneurial support. Incourage’s commitment of \$200,000 has leveraged and realized over \$140,000 in match from eight municipalities in the region. REGI has since commissioned a regional

infrastructure study, reported the results to the community and hired its first president. For more on REGI, read [The REGI Origin Story](#).

Blueprints for Tomorrow: Designing for a Strong and Inclusive Local Economy

With support from USDA, Incourage created, implemented and funded [Blueprints for Tomorrow](#), an economic development program for professionals that combines training, coaching and community knowledge with evolving design and finance tools.

Launched in September 2015, Incourage developed the *Blueprints* curriculum with a long-term focus on the types of changes needed across all levels of the community – individuals, institutions and systems – to grow an economy that will fully realize the community’s potential. The curriculum includes learning in these areas: adaptive leadership, impact investing and financing, collaborative development practices, and local, inclusive, sustainable economies.



Through *Blueprints*, participating organizations (both government and nonprofit) are building state-of-the-art economic development knowledge, while applying new insights and techniques to collaborative projects that support community priorities. The six organizations participating in the initial group include: City of Wisconsin Rapids, Wood County, John E. Alexander South Wood County YMCA, Wisconsin Rapids Housing Authority, Central Rivers Farmshed and Incourage.

In 2016, *Blueprints* received a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) [Secretary’s Award for Public-Philanthropic Partnerships](#).

Port Edwards Mill Closure

Worker Study

When Domtar closed its Port Edwards Paper Mill in 2008, it dislocated over 500 workers living in and around Nekoosa and Wisconsin Rapids. Before layoffs took effect, the NCWWDB set up a Dislocated Worker Program at the mill, offering career counseling, education and training to assist workers in positioning themselves to re-enter the workforce. Nearly six years later, with support from Incourage, NCWWDB commissioned a study to understand what had happened to these mill workers.

The study revealed several key findings: former Domtar workers were now earning 91.1% of their previous mill salary; most stayed in the community, with nearly 77% still residing in Wisconsin Rapids, Nekoosa, or Port Edwards; and about 40% of the dislocated workers elected to re-train for new skills or occupations. The findings of the study further informed local, state and national public policy.

Economic Replacement and Reuse Strategy

The mill shutdown was a massive change for the community. Without the economic engine, the community looked at what could replace the mill and how the community could move forward. Incourage supported the creation of an Economic Replacement and Reuse Strategy with a \$45,000 grant, providing Port Edwards with a plan to maintain its economy and productive reuse of the closed Domtar Mill.

Wisconsin Institute for Sustainable Cellulosic Operations Research and Commercialization Center (WISCORC) is envisioned for the site. WISCORC will serve as an anchor to the new Central Wisconsin Applied Research and Business Park. The Center will be located in a former Plant Research and Development and Administrative Building overlooking the Wisconsin River. It will provide office, lab and flexible space available to tenants at the Center, as well as to the other businesses located in the Park. With support from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), a business plan was developed by the Village of Port Edwards and DMI

Acquisitions, LLC, who bought the site in 2013. Incourage provided workforce expertise and industry knowledge throughout the 18-month business plan process.

Community Survey

In 2012, Incourage commissioned the largest-to-date regional survey of residents. Through online, paper and community forum/conversations, more than 4,000 residents shared their hopes and concerns. Resident responses highlighted four primary priorities: a strong economy, attracting and retaining young adults and families, nature and recreation and openness to new ideas and change. Residents also indicated a lack of trust and confidence in elected officials and businesses, in particular, as it relates to addressing the community’s challenges.

Tribune Building Project

The Tribune Building Project (tribunebuilding.org) began in December 2012 when Incourage purchased the historic riverfront property along the Wisconsin River with the intent that residents would decide its future use. From the beginning, this was about more than the building. It is a demonstration of a user-centered process toward realizing Incourage’s vision of a community that works well for all people. This work builds upon more than a decade of Incourage’s investment in culture change, beginning with re-establishing trust and confidence among residents.



Through a user-centered process that has engaged more than 2,000 residents to date, the Tribune’s design reflects resident priorities and capitalizes on community assets. It will serve as a “community accelerator” – accelerating economic growth and opportunity, environmental sustainability, learning, creativity and connections for community benefit. Designed as the City’s first Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified building, the Tribune will host:



Enterprises	Community Spaces
Microbrewery	Welcome center
Cafe with rooftop lounge	Conference / meeting rooms
Culinary kitchen	Game room & play area
Recreational rental shop	Art studio with classroom
Creative workshop / makerspace	Social space & gallery
Gift shop for local goods	Outdoor plaza



At its core, the Tribune is a social enterprise focused on cultivating a **participatory and entrepreneurial culture**, while also providing the requisite technical training and financial investment needed to **grow the community’s human capital**. After seven years of learning and leading workforce systems change with a dual focus on human potential and employer needs, Incourage is uniquely positioned to **accelerate the growth of entrepreneurs** in the Tribune that embrace human capital and community benefit as not only central to their operations, but also beneficial business practice. Through an environment that supports learning and builds community networks, the Tribune will build on this momentum to foster creativity, new thinking, and the ability to take risks and “fail forward” – essential attributes of a community that is open to change and shaping a local, inclusive, sustainable economy.

Vital Signs

Incourage began measuring and communicating key data related to the community in 2011, providing a baseline from which to accurately assess progress and impact. With four iterations to date, Incourage's investments have established *Vital Signs* as a key source of community metrics. It is frequently used throughout the community and encourages dialogue about key elements, needs and opportunities in our area.



EDUCATING THE COMMUNITY

Since 2012, Incourage has commissioned, supported and published a series of Educational Briefs, with each topic related directly to advancing economic growth in our community:

- [Making Workforce Work in Central Wisconsin](#) (2009)
- [Bridging the Digital Divide to Improve Life in Central Wisconsin](#) (2010)
- [Growing the Economy in Central Wisconsin](#) (2013)
- [Growing the Economy in Central Wisconsin through Environmental Sustainability](#) (2015)

For more information, please contact Team Incourage:

- Jenny Harms (Tribune, Entrepreneurship, Mission Investments) – jharms@incouragecf.org
- Chelsey Mazurek (Tribune) – cmazurek@incouragecf.org
- Heather McKellips (Blueprints for Tomorrow) – hmckellips@incouragecf.org
- Rick Merdan (Workforce, Economic Development) – rmerdan@incouragecf.org
- Dawn Neuman (Business Development, Mission Investments) – dneuman@incouragecf.org
- Jenny Riggerbach (Workforce, Economic Development) – jriggerbach@incouragecf.org
- Kelly Ryan (Organizational Strategy) – kryan@incouragecf.org