



memworks

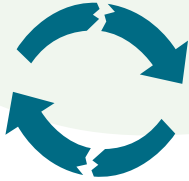
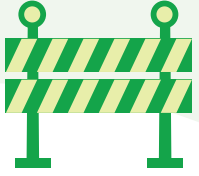
**BUSINESS CASE:
UNCOORDINATED SYSTEMS**

OCTOBER 2024

Funding for MemWorks was generously provided by:
AutoZone, Fleetwood Foundation, Hyde Family Foundation,
Power & Tel, and Sylvamo Corporation.



UNCOORDINATED SYSTEMS



EMPLOYMENT ROADBLOCK

Limited coordination within and between systems makes accessing workforce services unmanageable.



MEMWORKS OVERVIEW

Employment pathways for Memphians living in poverty are not working. Memphians experience poverty at some of the highest rates in the nation. Finding a way out of generational poverty is difficult, and employment pathways fall short even when employers across the community face demand for workers. Until the community understands why these pathways are not working, leaders in the workforce ecosystem can never hope to implement solutions that will improve them.

MemWorks is a collaboration between MDRC, a national research and social policy institution, and

Slingshot Memphis, a local poverty-fighting center of influence that is helping enhance employment outcomes for people experiencing poverty in Memphis. By utilizing the combined strengths of Slingshot and MDRC, MemWorks is working to amplify, not duplicate, existing workforce initiatives and help unify the numerous disparate efforts across the city. MemWorks hopes to do this by establishing a common understanding of the workforce domain that will increase alignment and facilitate collaboration across multiple entities and endeavors.



ROADBLOCK INTRODUCTION

Limited coordination within and between workforce systems makes accessing workforce services unmanageable. To access support from more than 130 workforce service providers in Memphis, people must navigate inefficient systems that frequently require working with multiple organizations across multiple sites. More than [70,000 Memphians](#) between the working ages of 18 and 65 years old live in or near poverty. The locations of workforce development organizations are misaligned with the locations of the people who need the services most. The 10 zip codes with the highest poverty rates have substantially fewer workforce development organizations per capita compared to more affluent zip codes. Memphis

averages 2,450 people experiencing poverty per workforce service provider, which is 40 percent more than the Shelby County average of 1,700 per provider. The inefficiencies of Memphis' workforce development system are incompatible with the needs of job seekers living in poverty.

This business case proceeds with a discussion of the facts substantiating the roadblock, an introduction to the evidence-based interventions and case studies that are effective at overcoming it, and an analysis of existing efforts in Memphis seeking to address the roadblock. The business case concludes with a discussion of several opportunities to address this roadblock in Memphis.

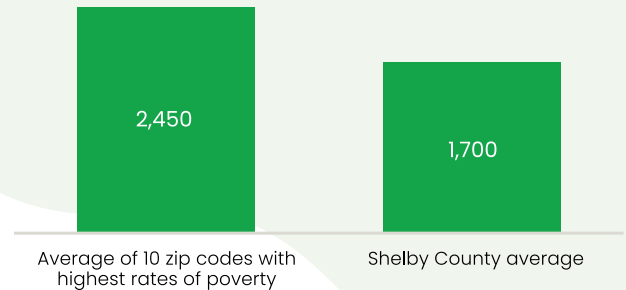


ROADBLOCK OVERVIEW

Limited coordination within and between workforce systems makes accessing workforce services unmanageable. To access support from more than 130 workforce service providers in Memphis, people must navigate inefficient systems that frequently require working with multiple organizations across multiple sites. Moreover, barriers such as multiple appointments, distance to providers, childcare schedules, and exhaustive paperwork compound the difficulties people face, acting as significant barriers to accessing necessary workforce services. Without these critical support services, fewer Memphians experiencing poverty are able to find and keep living-wage jobs. The result is a workforce system that is unable to sufficiently meet the needs of job seekers living in poverty.

More than 130 organizations across Shelby County provide at least one type of workforce service. While there are many workforce organizations, the proximity and distribution of these services pose a major challenge for Memphians looking to build their careers. More than [70,000 Memphians](#) between the working ages of 18 and 65 years old live in or near poverty. Seven out of 10 workforce service providers are located in zip codes with an average household income that exceeds \$50,000. The 10 zip codes with the highest poverty rates average 2,450 people experiencing poverty per workforce service provider, which is 40 percent more than the Shelby County average of 1,700 per provider.

Number of people experiencing poverty per workforce service provider



No zip code has providers that collectively offer all types of workforce services, with only 75 percent of workforce services, on average, accessible within each of the 10 zip codes with the highest rates of poverty. Academic remediation services critical to jumpstarting workforce readiness are offered in only one-third of the zip codes in the Memphis Metropolitan area.

The result is an inefficient system incompatible with the needs of job seekers living in poverty. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) service providers can play a critical role in connecting benefit recipients to employment and supportive services. TANF is a state-operated, federally funded program that supports families living in poverty. A focus group with TANF service providers yielded this insight:

“Service providers spoke of the difficulty their clients had with going to a job that was in an entirely different part of the county from where they lived, going to [required] volunteer assignments in another area, and transporting children to yet another part of the county for childcare, with schedules that may or may not line up with one another.”

ROADBLOCK OVERVIEW cont.

**Common challenges to access
workforce services**

TANF Service Providers

Distance to and from service providers
Scheduling appointments
Childcare at or near service provider
Childcare during 2nd and 3rd shift hours
Childcare benefits not being available for job training programs

The lack of information about the workforce system and support services can pose a barrier for job seekers and students of training programs. Both students and staff members reported a lack of knowledge about supportive services available to students. This can lead to a perception that there are limited opportunities for support when that might not be the case. Many people rely on word of mouth. One postsecondary student shared, "I didn't even know that we had counselors, but I do think that is something that we can work on, to better inform everybody." During one focus group with training program participants, almost no one in the room had the same understanding of the resources that were available to them. The focus group ended up serving as a way for students to learn from each other about the resources that were available.

With improved coordination, workforce services in Shelby County can better connect workforce participants with the services they need most which will have a significantly larger impact on nurturing a strong Memphis workforce.



EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS

Summary of effective interventions

The research uncovered five models that show efficacy in combating uncoordinated workforce systems and enabling these systems to work more effectively for students, job seekers, and employers. These models can be broken into three categories:

- 1 Workforce Intermediaries
- 2 Employer Practices
- 3 Student Support Services

1 WORKFORCE INTERMEDIARIES

Workforce intermediaries are critical players in helping connect program graduates and prospective employees with career support and jobs. [Navigator and liaison partnerships](#) create a dedicated position within community colleges and technical programs to manage industry relationships and build workforce development partnerships. This practice helps identify and even anticipate labor market and industry needs. This information can serve to guide students and identify necessary updates to curricula. Strong navigator and liaison partnerships create sustainable pipelines for full-time jobs or internships for students, and they also help industry partners navigate the ever-changing postsecondary institutional landscape. Success for these partnerships depends on full leadership buy-in within the postsecondary institution and across industry leaders. This buy-in provides the institutional momentum for partnerships to succeed.

The [WorkAdvance Model](#) or Dual-customer Approach builds on navigator and liaison partnerships by adopting a sector-focused approach to training with significant industry involvement in the design and operation of the training program. The model aims to identify and provide training in a sector with strong local employer demand by forming close working relationships with regional employers, which leads to placements in targeted sector jobs that have better wages and benefits than individuals could obtain on their own. A study of the WorkAdvance Model showed large increases in training completion, credential acquisition, and employment in the targeted sector, compared with what would have happened in the absence of the program. People living in poverty, in particular, saw strong earnings increases. [61 percent](#) of participants of one training program that incorporates the WorkAdvance Model reported working in the information technology sector at their current or most recent job, a 41 percentage point increase over the control group. More broadly, [77 percent](#) of WorkAdvance group members that were studied found employment, compared to 71 percent of the control group, reflecting a statistically significant 6 percentage point increase. These partnerships typically require a long start-up period because building trust between employers and postsecondary programs is critical. A deep understanding of the local labor market is also required.

[Cross-Systems Collaboration](#) builds partnerships across workforce development organizations to support mutual referrals of existing clients of active workforce development programs. For example, a workforce intermediary could develop a partnership with the main housing stability coordinator and food bank in a city. If the partnering case managers are given

EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS cont.

clear instructions on how to refer job seekers to job support services and navigate the complex system, it will improve these referral processes and help job seekers find what they need more easily. The approach expands access to various services and also helps people more efficiently navigate paperwork and procedures. Established recruitment pipelines reduce uncertainty and enable applicants to more easily identify programming that meets their needs, interests, and skill levels. To help job seekers effectively navigate support systems, staff members must become experts at navigating the system themselves. This hands-on strategy of guiding people through the process of accessing services frequently yields the most impactful results.



learned. Retention can also improve with skills-based hiring, with some companies indicating that they have increased their retention by up to 65 percent and improved overall staff performance.

This model is not applicable for all occupations, as many roles require specialized skills that must be built through a degree program. Some of the top roles where employers are lifting degree requirements are entry- and mid-level information technology help desk, data analytics, cybersecurity, sales, healthcare, and administrative roles. For jobs that fit the skills-based model, in-depth engagement with hiring managers is required to help design job descriptions around competencies and certifications rather than academic degrees.

Employers also need to update evaluation criteria and algorithms so candidates with the requisite skills, but not traditional postsecondary degrees, are not filtered out of the process before they can interview. The onus is on the employer to execute a well adapted skill-based hiring process.

2 EMPLOYER PRACTICES

[Skills-based Hiring](#) reduces barriers to employment and simplifies the system significantly because prospective employees do not need traditional two- or four-year postsecondary degree to be eligible for certain roles. This model focuses on removing degree requirements for select roles and substituting certifications or demonstrations of skill competencies instead. Skills-based hiring increases access for prospective employees and broadens the skilled candidate pool for employers. It also helps increase diversity in the workplace by reducing biases in the hiring process because skills are assessed regardless of where or how they were

3 STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Workforce experts and employers alike have long hailed the importance of **soft skills training** as an effective way to increase employee retention

EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS cont.

and also a bulwark against automation in roles that still rely on interpersonal interactions. Soft skills—grit, perseverance, focus, confidence, self-efficacy, and others—form an important foundation that enables students to better navigate the employment ecosystem. Students with strong soft skills have been shown to have [more success](#) in internship and short-term apprenticeship programs. [LinkedIn's 2019 Global Talent Trends report](#) highlighted that 89 percent of recruiters believe a lack of soft skills is the main reason hires fail. The emotional intelligence developed through learning soft skills helps people succeed in the workplace and provides career durability. Postsecondary programs that offer soft skills programs better equip students to navigate the ecosystem.

Concluding thoughts

The models that bring about successful workforce coordination are varied, but when implemented together and coordinated across workforce providers, they can be a powerful tool in increasing employment rates, improving employee retention, and ensuring students are pursuing the types of degrees and certifications that are aligned to in-demand roles.



EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS cont.

Case examples of successful approaches

The research identified several examples that provide powerful illustrations of the above models and can help inform how they might be successfully implemented in Memphis. Prior to any attempt to implement these models, they need to be adapted and refined for the local Memphis

context. The first column lists the name of the organization, the second column identifies the interventions described above that it employs, and the third column provides a brief description and commentary about its applicability for Memphis.






Organization	Interventions Employed	Description
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dual-customer approach 	<p>CareerWise Colorado is an apprenticeship program that enables high school students to gain college credit, industry credentials, and work experience. It supports collaboration between schools, colleges, and employers to ensure enriching and coordinated student experiences. The program’s scalability is particularly promising for Memphis. However, its success hinges on local business engagement and the broader acceptance of apprenticeships as a legitimate alternative to the traditional college pathway, highlighting the need for a mindset shift in perceptions about education and career readiness.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-systems collaboration 	<p>Delaware Pathways is an organization that increases career awareness for students by providing resources detailing career fields, required courses/credentials, and local organizations offering them, alongside information like projected salaries and job responsibilities. This approach to disseminating knowledge on career pathways could effectively address various challenges in Memphis, with no apparent limitations to its applicability, as it serves more as an informational resource than a direct intervention.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-systems collaboration 	<p>JobsFirstNYC is a workforce intermediary that helps improve economic mobility pathways for young adults by facilitating connection between stakeholder organizations and enhancing systems coordination. Its success at connecting local entities to uplift economically disconnected NYC residents showcases a model of effective employment matching that could offer valuable insights for Memphis, particularly its principles of employer engagement and collaboration. However it would require tailoring to the distinct economic landscape of Memphis to suit the city’s workforce development needs.</p>

Chart continued on next page.



EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS cont.

Organization	Interventions Employed	Description
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dual-customer approach 	<p>Partner4Work in Pittsburgh, PA, serves as a vital workforce intermediary, addressing the needs of both employers and job seekers by offering resources for career awareness, training opportunities, and support in building networks and retention strategies. Its dual approach of providing employer-side interventions and coordinating job seeker support presents a model that could be beneficial for Memphis, especially in enhancing employer engagement and workforce development. While replicating Partner4Work’s model might not be feasible in Memphis due to its uniquely influential position in the Pittsburgh community, its approaches can inform tailored workforce development strategies in the city.</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soft skills training 	<p>Youthforce NOLA is an intermediary that collaborates with educational institutions and employers to offer public school students real-world internships, credentialing, and soft skills training. Such a model could meet the needs of Memphis stakeholders, given its potential to enhance workforce readiness. However, integrating this programming within Memphis’ current network of stakeholders might present challenges because of the current lack of a central workforce intermediary.</p>



THE MEMPHIS LANDSCAPE

The Memphis landscape analysis highlights six organizations that help address limited coordination in the workforce development ecosystem. While this list might not be comprehensive, it provides a valuable understanding of the current services available and approaches in use in Memphis seeking to address this roadblock. In some cases, the organization does not directly employ one of the

interventions noted above, but it employs a similar model that illustrates the purpose or function of the intervention. In cases where the model is not directly employed, *italics* are used to denote the distinction. The first column lists the name of the organization, the second column identifies the interventions described above that it employs, and the third column describes the organizations' work as it relates to this roadblock.







Organization	Interventions Employed	Description
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soft skills training • <i>Dual-customer approach</i> 	<p>Agape's TeamWorks program provides holistic support to clients who are pursuing postsecondary education, technical education programs, and career pathways. Clients work with a TeamWorks connector who provides wraparound services that are intended to enrich the client's skill sets and build confidence. These services include soft skills training on etiquette, work ethics, team building, communication skills, financial literacy, credit counseling, and time management.</p> <p>Agape goes a step further to understand the labor market in Memphis and identify in-demand industries. Agape's Competitive Edge program tracks clients progress toward training programs for in-demand industries, increasing the likelihood that clients can find roles that lead to career paths.</p>
 American Jobs Centers (AJC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soft skills training • Dual-customer approach • Cross-systems collaboration 	<p>The AJC aims to support job-seeking Memphians in finding jobs through a variety of programming. The American Job Center offers workshop sessions that teach the workplace skills in demand by employers. Workshops cover topics like how to approach a job search, how to interview effectively, and how to prepare for long-term success in a role.</p> <p>The AJC also aims to connect job seekers with employers through job boards, employment referrals, job fairs, job training, and apprenticeship referrals. The AJC does this through cross-system collaborations with employers as it builds an understanding of the Memphis labor market.</p>

Chart continued on next page.

THE MEMPHIS LANDSCAPE cont.

Organization	Interventions Employed	Description
 <p>THE COLLECTIVE BLUEPRINT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soft skills training • <i>Navigator-liaison approach</i> 	<p>The Collective Blueprint tracks its students into technical training programs that prepare students for career paths in high-demand industries. Before beginning training programs, all participants receive a soft skills training program complete with mental health and wellness guidance and employment panels. The Collective Blueprint runs a career service program that aims to cultivate skills in resume building, cover letter composition, networking, and interviewing.</p> <p>The Collective Blueprint has established partnerships with training partners and employers that enable its students to more easily access internship opportunities and future job opportunities.</p>
 <p>MOORE TECH</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Navigator-liaison approach</i> • <i>Dual-customer approach</i> 	<p>Moore Tech is a technical trade higher education institution offering a number of technical certifications and some Associates degrees. The organization develops relationships with local employers and aims to help match students to in-demand occupations through its technical trades and apprenticeship program. Moore Tech collaborates with some employers and labor unions on specific apprenticeship programs that provide on-the-job experience and a potential post-program career path.</p>
 <p>Neighborhood Christian Centers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soft skills training 	<p>Neighborhood Christian Center is a holistic two-generation program that supports families living in poverty across several domains. The CEO Concepts program delivers modules on job skills and financial literacy. The Career Concepts program offers training classes to help people prepare for the workforce.</p>
 <p>TECH901</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soft skills training • Navigator-liaison approach • <i>Dual-customer approach</i> 	<p>Tech901 integrates soft skills and career readiness training with technical training. This includes three to four lectures on soft skills assistance with writing resumes and cover letters, professional networking, practicing job interviews, and financial literacy.</p> <p>Tech901 partners with employers to understand their information technology needs and offer interviews and internships for its students. Tech901 is able to stay apprised of sector needs and tailor its programming accordingly.</p>

THE MEMPHIS LANDSCAPE cont.

After reviewing the available services in Memphis seeking to support postsecondary attainment, several potential gaps were identified. These gaps include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Memphis lacks a centralized workforce intermediary to coordinate the complex interactions between industry, nonprofits, and postsecondary programs.
- Large community colleges lack the in-depth coordination programs described above that ease transitions for students into jobs and career paths.
- Comprehensive navigation support for workforce participants could be more prevalent across the Memphis ecosystem.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT

Several opportunities for impact could improve the coordination of the Memphis workforce ecosystem. The opportunities will develop the infrastructure to enable job seekers to pursue roles that are a fit for their skills and interests. These

recommendations aim to empower stakeholders in Memphis' workforce ecosystem with specific, evidence-backed ways this roadblock can be effectively overcome.



OPPORTUNITY #1 **Create a centralized Memphis workforce intermediary**

Memphis currently lacks a centralized workforce intermediary. There is an opportunity to create an intermediary that successfully coordinates with stakeholders across Memphis to prioritize employment pathways that lead to living-wage jobs with career advancement opportunities. The responsibilities of this organization could include:

- Serve as a convener of workforce ecosystem and industry leaders and act as a one-stop facilitator for every organization engaged in workforce development support and hiring in Memphis
- Partner with leading employers across major industries to understand job opportunities and the desired skills and qualifications
- Guide employers on what to look for in qualified candidates across the Memphis workforce ecosystem
- Develop sector-based strategies across employers, postsecondary institutions, training programs, and job seekers that help match people to career paths
- Ensure the necessary menu of services exist for an effective workforce development system, including offerings such as soft-skills training, aptitude alignment, and wraparound supports, among other services
- Execute marketing strategies that share information about pathways to living-wage jobs with career paths from training to hire

A robust referral system would ensure job seekers are connected to postsecondary programs and employment opportunities. Funding for this new intermediary over the long-term would initially require philanthropic support to seed the entity, but over time funding could come from employers and potentially state and local governments.



OPPORTUNITY #2
**Adopt skills-based hiring practices and
streamline application processes**

Memphis' employers suffer from persistent labor shortages while there remains a large pool of people who are looking for work. There is an opportunity for employers to alter their hiring requirements to adopt skills-based hiring practices and simplified application processes. By focusing on applicant skills and technical certifications rather than degrees, applicant pools should grow for jobs that do not require specific formal academic achievement. Technical assistance and support could help local employers make these adjustments seamlessly and in accordance with national best practices. Additionally, a workforce intermediary would be able to examine high-wage, high-demand industries where skills-based hiring makes the most sense for jobs within those industries.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT cont.



OPPORTUNITY #3
**Incorporate centralized and comprehensive
navigator roles into organizations that assist
workforce participants in Memphis**

Memphis needs an organization, or organizations, that help job seekers navigate the workforce development system. Akin to a care navigator that helps patients navigate the complexities of different providers across a healthcare system, this organization would help job seekers navigate disparate workforce development services to align their aptitudes, obtain needed soft skills and technical training, apply for jobs, retain those jobs, and advance in their careers.

Navigators need training in the workforce system and local labor market with regular updates on available opportunities and referral pathways. Navigators should be skilled at listening to the needs and interests of job seekers and helping people make choices about how to apply those needs and interests to long-term skill paths. The navigator role is distinctly different from the centralized workforce intermediary, but it must closely partner with the organization that plays this function.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

Coordinated action on these opportunities for growth will establish a new workforce intermediary for Memphis and improve the coordination of the workforce ecosystem for job seekers and employers alike. The workforce intermediary through coordinating efforts with local workforce nonprofits could improve the navigability of the workforce ecosystem with improved information sharing about available services. By building navigation services into the operations of legacy organizations, the system will be primed for smoother transitions and easier navigation for people seeking employment and career opportunities. A central intermediary could enable Memphis' opportunity youth to reconnect with education or employment opportunities, reducing a total population of opportunity youth that is 1.5 times the national average. Enhanced coordination could significantly reduce unemployment for the two-thirds of Memphians experiencing poverty who do not have jobs.

Over time, and through these coordination efforts, a relocation of service sites for workforce nonprofits could bring services closer to job seekers. Instead of one workforce organization per 2,450 people living in poverty, an improved workforce system would place one workforce organization per 1,700 people living in poverty, which matches the Shelby County average. This could be achieved through a thoughtful and deliberate relocation of service sites to improve convenience.

