

# Counties at Work

## Dakota County, Minnesota Case Study

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## About NACo:

The [National Association of Counties](#) (NACo) **strengthens America's counties**, serving nearly 40,000 county elected officials and 3.6 million county employees. Founded in 1935, NACo unites county officials to:

- **Advocate county priorities** in federal policymaking;
- **Promote exemplary county policies** and practices;
- **Nurture leadership skills** and expand knowledge networks;
- **Optimize county and taxpayer resources** and cost savings; and
- **Enrich the public's understanding** of county government.

The National Association of Counties Research Foundation (NACoRF) is a non-profit organization recognized by the U.S. Department of the Treasury Internal Revenue Service as a 501c3 public charity providing education, technical assistance and research to counties. NACoRF's mission is to ascertain, develop and distribute knowledge about county governments and training of public officials, prospective public officials and other interested parties.

## About NACo's Landscape Analysis:

In partnership with the [ECMC Foundation](#), NACo conducted a national landscape analysis on counties' role and decision-making authority in post-secondary education. This analysis identified impactful county efforts including directly allocating local funds, pursuing regional and intergovernmental partnerships to leverage federal resources and coordinating post-secondary education systems with county systems, such as health and human services, as well as with local private industry. Such efforts maximize educational and employment opportunities and increase access for residents. Recently, counties have led and supported their post-secondary education institutions in mitigating local challenges related to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Through an electronic survey and group and individual interviews, NACo examined how county leaders:

1. Make decisions affecting the post-secondary education sector;
2. Allocate public funding impacting higher education institutions;
3. Create partnerships with the post-secondary education sector to strengthen its connection with other systems; and
4. Work to slow the spread of COVID-19 in post-secondary education settings.

In conjunction with NACo's report ["Counties At Work: Counties Support Post-Secondary Education and Workforce Opportunities for Residents."](#) NACo published a set of case studies sharing county examples and best practices in creating cross-sector partnerships with higher education systems to improve economic resiliency and mobility, workforce preparedness, educational attainment and gainful employment for residents. County leaders representing local colleges and universities, workforce boards and human services agencies participated in a series of interviews with NACo to share their local efforts and best practices. For more information, please contact Rashida Brown, Associate Program Director for Children, Youth and Families at [rbrown@naco.org](mailto:rbrown@naco.org) or Arabella Pluta-Ehlers, Program Manager for Children, Youth and Families at [aplutaehlers@naco.org](mailto:aplutaehlers@naco.org).

# Counties Support Post-Secondary Education and Workforce Opportunities for Residents

## Dakota County, Minnesota

**Interviewees:** Michael Berndt, President, Inver Hills Community College and Dakota County Technical College; Mark Jacobs, Workforce Development Director, Dakota County and Director, Dakota-Scott Workforce Development Board; Jill Pittelkow, Program Supervisor, Employment and Economic Assistance Department, Dakota County

**County name, state:** Dakota County, Minn.

**Rural, suburban, or urban:** Suburban

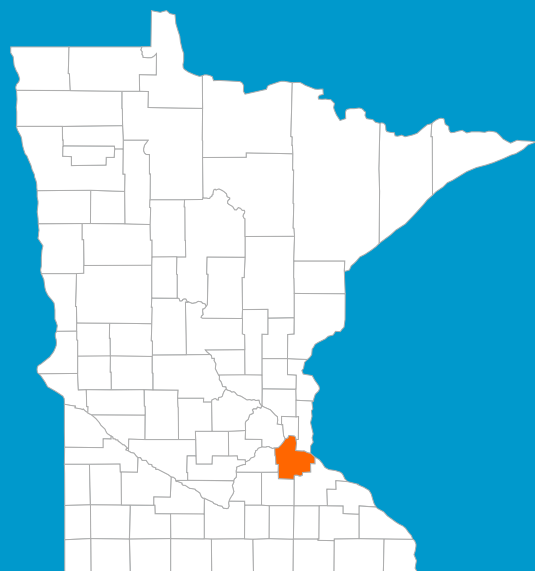
**Population:** 425,423

**Poverty rate:** 6.3%

**Unemployment rate:** 3.7%

**Number of post-secondary education institutions in the county:** 5

**Student enrollment in the county's post-secondary education institutions:** 13,100



### About Dakota County, Minnesota

Dakota County, Minn. is situated in the southeast corner of the Twin Cities Metropolitan area and is the third-most populous county in the state of Minnesota. Dakota County has a land use mixture of one-third urban, one-third suburban and one-third rural. The county indicates that “this combination of land use and the confluence of two major rivers (the Mississippi and Minnesota) that form the county’s northern and eastern borders makes Dakota County a unique geographic area.”<sup>i</sup> Dakota County is also home to several community colleges in the regional area.

### **The county role in post-secondary education**

In Dakota County, most decisions involving public post-secondary education institutions and their programming are made through higher education boards and in collaboration with local workforce boards, secondary institutions and the county's human services agency. Together, these partners focus on initiatives that work to expand career readiness and employment opportunities for residents. Dakota County's Board of Commissioners has seven elected members and operates under Dillon's Rule, which limits the county's decision-making authority and abilities. Thus, local action must involve the Minnesota state legislature, which places restrictions on the county as legislative matters are voted on in biennial sessions.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Funding for post-secondary education institutions and programming**

The county's public post-secondary education institutions are primarily supported by student tuition and state funding as approved by the state legislature. Despite its limited decision-making authority in post-secondary education, the Dakota County Board of Commissioners worked with community college leaders to expand residents' access to local higher education institutions by funding a public

transportation expansion effort. Recognizing the need to improve east-west connections and address mobility gaps and barriers, Dakota County Technical College (DCTC), Inver Hills Community College (Inver Hills) and county elected leaders came together to review Minnesota Valley Transit Authority (MVTA) ridership data and findings from student surveys regarding preferred public transit options to and from campus. While MVTA is a statewide public transportation system, county leaders leveraged this partnership to share data and use MVTA's expertise to help inform the county in making decisions on a potential transportation expansion.

In 2020, the county Board of Commissioners allocated "seed money" to fund the initial phases of the transportation capital improvement project that expanded bus routes and services within several communities leading to the colleges.<sup>iii</sup> They also set aside funds for transit service expansion and operating costs as a part of Dakota County's transportation priorities in accordance with its comprehensive plan.<sup>iv</sup> In addition to its public investments, Dakota County received a grant from the Kresge Foundation to bring together higher education and human services agencies to create an ecosystem of service and supports for county residents to achieve economic mobility.



“Understanding residents’ struggles with limited access to food and housing led to conversations on how to improve public transit.”

– Michael Berndt, President of Inver Hills Community College and Dakota County Technical College.

### **Coordination and collaboration for improved workforce outcomes**

*To increase enrollment in post-secondary education institutions and provide students with a variety of higher education offerings in the county, secondary education systems partner with DCTC, Inver Hills and other institutions to host campus tours and showcase programs to high schoolers. DCTC and Inver Hills are the primary public colleges educating residents in Dakota County. DCTC is a public, two-year technical college that is located in Rosemount, Minnesota and sits inside the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. The college is also a part of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System and one of five stand-alone technical colleges in the state. The majority of DCTC students work toward degrees and diplomas in a variety of programs to prepare them for employment or transfer to a four-year university of college.<sup>v</sup> Inver Hills is a public community college in Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota and a part of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System. The majority of Inver Hills students also work toward degrees and diplomas in a variety of programs to prepare them for transfer or employment.<sup>vi</sup>*

*Dakota County’s 2020 Board Priorities and Strategic Plan Goals outline a vision for Dakota County and provide strategic direction and context for the work of county government. One of its strategic goals includes*



having a successful place for businesses and jobs. This includes fostering business and employment success through modern infrastructure, low taxes and a prepared, connected workforce.<sup>vii</sup> In support of these goals, DCTC and Inver Hills collaborate with local chambers of commerce to engage businesses in its career readiness efforts. Additionally, the colleges work with the Dakota County jail and the Minnesota Department of Corrections to provide outreach to incarcerated adults.

*Community college, local workforce development and human services leaders convene regularly to collaborate on ways to improve and expand higher education programs and training for strengthening the skillsets needed for employment in high-demand industries in the county. Dakota County is working to expand short-term training opportunities for low-income residents and other job seekers, changing the mindset from “having a job” to obtaining a sustaining career that transitions them from welfare to work.*

Minnesota's one-stop career center, CareerForce, is a collaborative group of private for-profit, public and non-profit partners offering a range of innovative services. With 50 locations throughout the state, CareerForce provides one-on-one guidance, training, networking and labor market information for job seekers and works with employers on talent recruitment and retention plans.<sup>viii</sup> Dakota-Scott CareerForce has three locations providing these services to county residents. CareerForce works with about 1,000 low-income residents in Dakota County who are engaged in Minnesota's Family Investment Program's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and dislocated worker program for adults seeking employment and training services.<sup>ix</sup> The county also works closely with the Minnesota Department of Human Services to coordinate local workforce development activities with those of the state. Due to high unemployment rates as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19), the county has experienced an increase in referrals for employment services and training programs at community colleges.

### **Slowing the spread of COVID-19 in post-secondary education settings**

To help slow the spread of COVID-19, several post-secondary education institutions in the county are conducting online courses and using a hybrid model to minimize the number of students on campus. The county reports that about 95 percent of its courses at Inver Hills Community College are being held online and it is restricting on-campus courses in science labs and programming that requires hands-on training, such as nursing and other medical services. At DCTC, about 40 percent of its courses are being held on-campus because they mostly require hands-on technical training. To mitigate challenges with COVID-19, DCTC is reducing classroom sizes, requiring mask use, conducting student questionnaires, taking students' temperature and monitoring positive COVID-19 cases to determine whether to shift on-campus courses to online. Moreover, DCTC holds regular calls with state and county public health officials to receive regular updates on COVID-19. To alleviate COVID-19 related costs, DCTC and Inver Hills received approximately \$3 million in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act funding, which was allocated by the state.

During COVID-19, DCTC and Inver Hills partnered with Open Door, a local foodbank, to connect students experiencing food insecurity with mobile pantry services on their campuses and are exploring ways to increase students' access to other social services in the county. During

this time, Dakota County's Employment and Economic Assistance Department is also providing outreach to residents enrolled in the SNAP program to participate in job fairs as a result of the increasing unemployment rates.

### **Conclusion**

DCTC and Inver Hills serve as key post-secondary education institutions in Dakota County. While Dillon's Rule limits Dakota County's decision-making authority on post-secondary education systems, the county Board of Commissioners invested in a major transportation project that expands student access to local community and technical colleges. DCTC and Inver Hills actively partner with community services and workforce development agencies to expand career readiness opportunities for residents. While most courses at these institutions require hands-on training, the colleges are using precautionary measures to help slow the spread of COVID-19.



# Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> Dakota County. (2020, July 31). *About Us*. <https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/About/Pages/default.aspx>
- <sup>ii</sup> National League of Cities. (2016, December 13). *Cities 101 — Delegation of Power*. <https://www.nlc.org/resource/cities-101-delegation-of-power>
- <sup>iii</sup> Dakota County. (2020). *Capital Improvement Program, 2020-2024*. <https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/Government/BudgetFinance/2020/Documents/2020-2024CapitalImprovementProgram.pdf>
- <sup>iv</sup> Dakota County. (2019, June 18). *Dakota County, Minnesota Comprehensive Plan*. <https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/Government/Planning/CompPlan/Documents/DakotaCounty2040ComprehensivePlan.pdf>
- <sup>v</sup> Dakota County Technical College. (n.d.). *About the College*. <https://www.dctc.edu/about-us>
- <sup>vi</sup> Inver Hills Community College. (n.d.). *About Inver Hills*. <https://www.inverhills.edu/about/index.aspx>
- <sup>vii</sup> Dakota County. (2020, August 18). *Strategic Plan Goals*. <https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/Government/Analysis/StrategicPlan/Pages/default.aspx>
- <sup>viii</sup> CareerForce. (n.d.). *About Us*. <https://www.careerforcemn.com/about-us>
- <sup>ix</sup> Dakota County. (2020, July 8). *Dislocated Worker Programs*. <https://www.co.dakota.mn.us/HealthFamily/FindJob/DislocatedWorkerPrograms/Pages/default.aspx>

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