

Counties at Work

Erie County, Pennsylvania Case Study



Rashida Brown

Associate Program Director, Children, Youth & Families

Arabella Pluta-Ehlers

Program Manager, Children, Youth & Families



© NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES
RESEARCH FOUNDATION, INC.

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 or Arabella Pluta-Ehlers, Program Manager for Children, Youth and Families at aplutaehlers@naco.org.

Counties Support Post-Secondary Education and Workforce Opportunities for Residents

Erie County, Pennsylvania

Interviewees: Charlotte Berringer, Director, Community Health Services, Erie County Department of Health; Kathy Dahlkemper, County Executive, Erie County; Gary Lee, Director of Administration, Erie County; Andrew Miller, Manager of Adult Services, Erie County Public Library

County name, state: Erie County, Pa.

Rural, suburban, or urban: Suburban

Population: 272,061

Poverty rate: 16.0%

Unemployment rate: 4.7%

Number of post-secondary education institutions in the county: 10

Student enrollment in the county's post-secondary education institutions: 27,400



About Erie County, Pa.

Erie County, Pa. is a midsize county that is home to the Presque Isle Downs and Casino and a bustling retail corridor. The county is also a large manufacturing hub for the plastic, welding and automotive industries and is home to several industrial equipment supplier companies and small businesses. There are also several major universities and community colleges in the county that educate residents and prepare them for growing industries.

The county role in post-secondary education

The Erie County Council is a seven-member body of elected officials who allocate funding for county-based services as mandated by Commonwealth law. The County Council is responsible for passing the county budget, which in FY2020 was about \$455 million.ⁱ Councilmembers serve as liaisons to county government agencies and the public. County residents also elect a County Executive, who oversees the administration of county departments and works with stakeholders to promote economic development in the county.ⁱⁱ

Erie County has four major universities – Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, Gannon University, Mercyhurst University and Penn State Behrend – as well as Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine, the largest medical college in the country.ⁱⁱⁱ Recognizing the benefits of having more affordable options for higher education and skills-based training programs for residents, County Executive Kathy Dahlkemper and the County Council spearheaded the process of establishing a local community college for the county.

In June 2017, the county sponsored the application for

establishing the Erie County Community College (ECCC). From 2017 to 2020, the County Council held public hearings to hear recommendations from experts and the general public and gathered information from counties within and outside of the state to help inform the process for establishing ECCC. Erie County then created the ECCC Committee to provide guidance and advance the application to the Pennsylvania State Board of Education. The ECCC Committee was comprised of members of Erie County Council and the County Executive's administration, as well as a representative of a local non-profit and a financial consultant. The ECCC Committee led state and community engagement efforts, which helped the county gain approval of the ECCC plan from the Pennsylvania State Board of Education in July 2020. In August 2020, Erie County Council selected ECCC's full board of trustees, which has decision making authority over college operations and programming and informs the initial phases of planning.^{iv}

Funding for post-secondary education institutions and programming

The planning and formation of ECCC is supported by local funding. Erie County government will be providing a local match as ECCC's startup fund to support planning activities



for establishing the college. The projected startup funds will include about \$10 million from the Redevelopment Authority Capital Program, a statewide grant program that supports the construction of regional economic, cultural or historical improvement projects.^v Approximately \$7 million of the county's match is projected to come from the Erie County gaming revenue funds, and \$3 million from the Erie Community Foundation. The county is not dictating how ECCC spends the funding, however, ECCC is charged with developing a budget to determine projected needs and costs. This includes plans to educate approximately 500 equivalent full-time students and prioritize programs and majors that ECCC can offer in the first years.

Coordination and collaboration for improved workforce outcomes

Erie County coordinates with community partners to support residents seeking workforce and post-secondary education opportunities. Since 2010, partners, including county government and post-secondary education institutions, have led a countywide initiative called Erie Together. Erie Together offers programming that provides youth engagement, career building services and connections to post-secondary education, including *Erie County Career Pathways Alliance*, a countywide system that aligns high school coursework with post-secondary education. The program also prepares youth for careers in the local workforce and supports their efforts in continuing their education. The program is supported by school districts, unions, manufacturing groups and post-secondary education institutions in the county.^{vi} Once fully established, the county anticipates that ECCC will also be a key partner in this initiative. Erie Together also operates *Career Street*, a program that works with businesses, non-profit organizations, county government and K-12 schools in creating opportunities for students to intern, tour companies and shadow professionals, hear from job readiness and placement experts and participate in career workshops and fairs. The program engages employers to

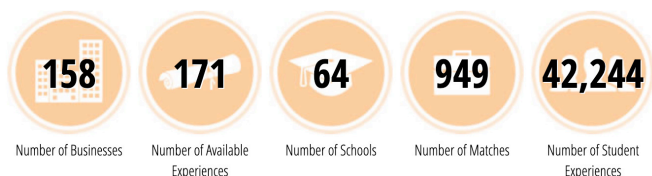


ensure that these opportunities are preparing students of all ages for local jobs.

In partnership with the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority and the Erie Community Foundation, Erie County's government provides funding for the Summer Jobs and More (JAM) program, which creates employment and career preparedness opportunities for young adults. Through JAM, program participants ages 16 to 21 gain new skills from on-the-job training experiences and apply them while working in local industry jobs. This sparks students' interests in obtaining higher education and/or the necessary training for future careers. Since 2014, the JAM program has received approximately \$2.215 million and served over 1,000 youth in the county. In 2019, the program reported an 88% success rate.^{vii}

Through the Erie County Public Library system, Erie County government is supporting residents interested in pursuing entrepreneurship or starting a small business. The library system partners with four post-secondary education institutions in the county to serve as an accelerator for business expansion and development by providing hands-on learning experiences and classes for beginning entrepreneurs. Known as the NWPB Innovation Beehive Network, the program gives residents access

Career Street by the Numbers



Source: Career Street

“The key for us was being able to identify a small group of persons within each university [serving as] our main points of contact. That way, we’re not sending mixed messages...we’re talking to people consistently.”

-Charlotte Berringer, Director of Community Health Services, Erie County Department of Health

to and support in learning cross-cutting technologies.^{viii} Recognizing limitations in broadband access, the library system also offers five spaces across the county for residents to access WiFi and public computers.

Erie County coordinates with neighboring communities to develop and leverage regional partnerships that increase career readiness opportunities for residents. Erie County is one of six counties served by Northwest Pennsylvania Job Connect (NWPJ Job Connect), a Workforce Development Board (WDB). County Executive Dahlkemper serves as a “chief local elected official” for the WDB where she appoints members and approves NWPJ Job Connect’s budget and local and regional plans.^{ix} NWPJ Job Connect, which has a dedicated position serving on Erie Together’s leadership team, works with residents and employers to ensure county residents are prepared for careers in the local economy.

NWPJ Job Connect also manages *Northwest PA CareerLink*, which is a collaborative workforce development system that connects and coordinates partner agencies across the six counties. Through two one-stop career centers, *CareerLink* connects jobseekers to employers, resources, training and post-secondary and adult education opportunities.^x

The program also operates a mobile model that delivers services and resources to sites such as community centers and libraries, allowing jobseekers to access *CareerLink* in these spaces instead of visiting the career centers. The flexibility of the mobile model helps increase service access during the coronavirus (COVID-19).

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

The Erie County Department of Health (ECDH) is working closely with post-secondary education institutions by providing guidance on public health precautions for slowing the spread of COVID-19. During the summer of 2020, ECDH held regular calls with higher education institution leaders to offer guidance from the state Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Moreover, many colleges and universities in the county have pandemic coordinators, who support students’ health and other needs during COVID-19.

Several post-secondary education institutions in the county are using a hybrid approach, with students attending classes both in-person and online. Trade schools, whose programs often require hands on skills-based training for fields such as manufacturing, healthcare and hospitality, remain primarily in-person. These programs are implementing social distancing standards, reducing class sizes and requiring mask use. Post-secondary education institutions are also shifting semester schedules to minimize student travel and allow more time for quarantining before returning to campus. One Erie County post-secondary education institution is using an innovative technology application for students, faculty and employees to monitor and report any COVID-19 symptoms.

Conclusion

Recognizing the need for affordable post-secondary education options in the county, Erie County took a bold step by establishing and funding a local community college. The county also brings public and private partners to the decision-making table to connect youth and disconnected residents to workforce development programs, training and education. Throughout the pandemic, the county has worked in partnership with local post-secondary education institutions to guide the COVID-19 response and ensure students are fully supported by county resources.

Endnotes

ⁱ Erie County, Pennsylvania. (n.d.). *County Council*. <https://eriecountypa.gov/departments/county-council/>

ⁱⁱ Erie County, Pennsylvania. (n.d.). *County Executive's Office*. <https://eriecountypa.gov/departments/county-executives-office>

ⁱⁱⁱ Erie County, Pennsylvania. (n.d.). *Living in Erie County*. <https://eriecountypa.gov/about/about-erie-county/living-in-erie-county/>

^{iv} Erie County, Pennsylvania. (n.d.). *Community College*. <https://eriecountypa.gov/departments/county-executives-office/initiatives/community-college/>

^v Erie County Redevelopment Authority. (n.d.). *Grant Services*. <https://ecrda.net/grants.php>

^{vi} Erie Together. (n.d.). *Erie County Career Pathways Alliance*. <https://www.erietogether.org/erie-county-career-pathways-alliance>

^{vii} Greater Erie Community Action Committee. (n.d.). *Summer JAM*. <https://www.gecac.org/work/employment-and-income/summer-jam>

^{viii} NWPA Innovation Beehive Network. (n.d.). *Who We Are*. <https://www.nwpabeehive.com/>

^{ix} NWPA Job Connect. (n.d.). *Chief Local Elected Officials*. <https://www.nwpajobconnect.org/lwda-chief-local-elected-officials>

^x NWPA Job Connect. (n.d.). *Northwest PA CareerLink®*. <https://www.nwpajobconnect.org/careerlin>

 [FB.COM/NACODC](https://www.facebook.com/NACODC)

 [TWITTER.COM/NACOTWEETS](https://twitter.com/NACOTWEETS)

 [YOUTUBE.COM/NACOVVIDEO](https://www.youtube.com/NACOVVIDEO)

 www.NACo.ORG/LINKEDIN

660 NORTH CAPITOL STREET, NW
SUITE 400 • WASHINGTON, D.C. 20001
202.393.6226 • WWW.NACO.ORG



© NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES
RESEARCH FOUNDATION, INC.