

**JUST
TRANSITION
FUND**

2026 Local Economy Lab

Request for Proposals: Workforce Development

Deadline: June 12



ABOUT THE JTF

The Just Transition Fund is on a mission to create economic opportunity for the frontline communities and workers hardest hit by the transition away from coal.

We know that coal community recovery requires investment across multiple fronts. Closures don't just eliminate jobs, they strip away tax revenue and the economic base on which communities depend. That's why our **Framework for Economic Transition** accelerates investment in three interconnected areas: workforce development, entrepreneurship and small business support, and place-based infrastructure.

Launched in 2025, our **Local Economy Lab** is our central hub for helping coal communities seed, grow, and scale transformative economic projects across all three areas. Through this Workforce RFP—one of three we're launching this year—we're investing in bold, community-driven approaches that address the full range of barriers that workers face. We will support projects at every stage of development, from early planning and piloting to full implementation and growth.

Whether you are testing a new idea or expanding a proven model, we want to hear from you! For more information on our other funding opportunities, and for help determining which RFP is right for you, visit justtransitionfund.org/local-economy-lab to check out our short guide.

2026 WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT CYCLE

We know that energy communities are facing a pervasive skills and workforce gap as closures occur and communities look toward diversification strategies.

In this funding cycle, we will support innovative, community-led workforce development projects that draw on proven strategies to prepare local workers for high-quality jobs in growing economic sectors. Based on what we've learned from leading workforce practitioners across the country, we're prioritizing three approaches that address the persistent challenges in workforce development:

1. Employer-Driven Job Training

Deep, iterative employer partnerships that design training around real hiring needs—moving beyond “train and pray” to programs built on demonstrated demand.

2. Removing Barriers to Training

Supportive services—transportation, childcare, and housing—so workers can complete training and enter quality jobs.

3. Youth Career Pathways

Programs that create early, accessible pathways for young people to earn credentials and connect to good jobs—right in their own communities.

FUNDING PRIORITIES

We welcome applications in any of the three priority areas below. Projects that creatively combine elements across multiple priorities are strongly encouraged. While these priorities reflect our preferences, we will gladly accept other projects that meet the criteria.

Priority 1

Employer-Driven Job Training

A significant and persistent challenge in workforce development is “train and pray”—designing programs with limited employer input, training workers for jobs that may or may not exist, and hoping that graduates get hired. The most effective workforce programs break this pattern by building deep, ongoing relationships with employers who are actively hiring and who treat training design as a collaborative, iterative process.

We are looking for projects that build or significantly deepen employer partnerships to ensure that training leads directly to jobs. Successful projects will demonstrate:

- Employer partners who are actively engaged in curriculum design and real-time adjustments
- Clear, documented hiring pipelines from training program to employment
- Flexibility to adjust training content as employer needs evolve

Projects that target employers in growing sectors with strong local fit—including clean energy, advanced manufacturing, healthcare, and technology—and that can demonstrate employer commitment through MOUs, letters of support, or co-investment are strongly encouraged.

Priority 2

Removing Barriers to Training

We know it’s difficult to upskill or reskill workers, particularly in rural communities. Workers juggling jobs, caregiving, and the costs of daily life face immense practical obstacles to completing training programs. Research consistently shows that workforce programs that provide help for these supportive—or wraparound—services are more likely to see participants complete training and earn more after completion.

We’re looking for projects that establish or expand dedicated funding mechanisms that provide workers with immediate, flexible access to the supports they need to complete training and secure good jobs.

Eligible supports may include:

- Transportation assistance
- Childcare and dependent care support
- Interview coaching, work attire, and other job-readiness supports

Successful applicants will demonstrate how their barrier removal fund complements existing federal workforce funding, fills gaps left by bureaucratic processes, and can be sustained through local or philanthropic investment.

Priority 3

Youth Career Pathways

Young people in coal-affected communities face a particularly acute challenge: they are more likely to leave their communities in search of opportunity, and they often lack visible proof that careers in growing sectors are accessible to them. Programs that build pathways to good jobs—co-located with schools or grounded in local employers—can keep talent in the region while giving young people a tangible foothold in a changing economy.

We are looking for projects that create structured career pathways for young people, with a clear focus on hiring outcomes. Strong proposals will include:

- Work-based learning experiences co-designed with local employers to help young talent find jobs almost immediately
- Credentials, certifications, or associate’s degrees earned during or after high school
- A defined job-placement goal, with metrics to track both short (immediate) and long-term hiring outcomes
- Active employer involvement, including mentorship, apprenticeships, or guaranteed interviews

Projects informed by models like “six-year schools” or similar industry-aligned youth programs are welcome, provided they are appropriately adapted to the realities of rural coal communities.

SELECTION CRITERIA

Successful projects will create a significant workforce development impact, either by growing a proven model or by creating and testing a new approach.

All proposals will be evaluated against the following criteria:

- **A bold, transformative vision.** Bold ideas with potential to transform local economic opportunity. Projects building an export economy—connecting coal communities to larger markets—are strongly encouraged.
- **Alignment with a growing sector.** We are sector agnostic, but will look for demonstrated growth potential and strong local fit.
- **Strong cross-sector collaboration.** Meaningful engagement from community-based organizations, local government, employers, and educational institutions.
- **Evidence of existing investment.** Secured or forthcoming financial commitment from public and/or private sources, from seed funding for early-stage projects to significant investment for proven models.
- **Potential to serve as a replicable model.** Approaches that could be adapted in other rural coal communities with limited access to financial resources and services.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

The following examples show the types of projects we expect to support, across a range of sectors. These are illustrative, not exhaustive. Other projects that meet the criteria are strongly encouraged.

Employer-Driven Training

A community college partners with regional clean energy employers to co-design a solar and electrical apprenticeship program. Employers participate in curriculum review and provide on-the-job training slots; graduates are guaranteed interviews. The program continuously iterates based on employer feedback and hiring data.

Barrier Removal

A workforce provider serving coal community residents establishes a Barrier Reduction Fund, providing immediate cash assistance for transportation, childcare, and emergency needs. The fund complements WIOA funding—filling gaps that federal dollars cannot cover—and is capitalized through a mix of local philanthropic and public investment.

Youth Career Pathways

A rural school district launches a six-year high school program in partnership with area health systems and manufacturers. Students earn an associate's degree and industry credential alongside their diploma, with employers providing mentors, paid internships, and structured hiring pathways. Success is measured by job placement rates, not just credential attainment.

Integrated Model

A workforce organization combines all three approaches: a barrier reduction fund keeps trainees enrolled, employer partners shape the curriculum and provide guaranteed interviews, and a youth-track pipeline builds the next generation of workers—creating a comprehensive, community-rooted workforce ecosystem.

INTERSECTIONS

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

OUTCOMES

A Note on the Workforce–Entrepreneurship Intersection

We know that workforce development and entrepreneurship are deeply intertwined in coal transition communities. Many of the most effective local organizations support both workers seeking jobs and residents building businesses. This RFP is focused on workforce development, but we warmly welcome applications from organizations whose work spans both strategies. If your project integrates workforce training with small business development—such as a program that prepares workers to launch their own contracting businesses, or a co-op that employs community members while also building their ownership stakes—please tell us. Projects that serve underrepresented entrepreneurs and that integrate business development with workforce pathways are particularly encouraged. This intersection is a strength, not a complication.

Participation in the Local Economy Lab and the broader JTF network offers numerous benefits.

Flexible, one year grants that support a wide range of activities

Grants will generally range from \$50,000 to \$300,000, depending on project stage and funding need. If invited to submit a proposal, we will provide more guidance on the amount to request. This initiative is designed to be responsive to individual project needs and provides flexible funding for operating expenses. Please note that construction or capital expenses are not permitted.

Tailored technical assistance

Support based on individual project needs, including accessing public and private funding sources, employer engagement strategies, and frameworks for tracking and communicating impact.

Connection to a national peer network

Sponsored attendance at the JTF National Convening, plus access to peer learning and exchange with workforce practitioners across the country.

We will support projects that create concrete economic outcomes for workers and communities—the actual hiring and retention of workers in sustainable employment opportunities that allows workers to stay and thrive in their communities.

We will track metrics at the *individual* (median earnings, credential or skills gained), *program* (employment rates after program exit, impact of barrier removal), and *community level* (local training capacity).

Fundamentally, we believe communities must also define their own terms for success, and we will collect metrics that project leaders consider most meaningful alongside these.

ELIGIBILITY

We are accepting applications for projects serving counties that are experiencing economic distress as a result of coal plant and/or mine closures, from organizations that are deeply rooted in coal-affected areas.

Qualified 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations, local governments, and Tribal governments are eligible to apply.

APPLICATION PROCESS & TIMELINE

Apply online with our application form.

To be considered, please submit your organization's details, along with a short two-page concept paper, via our [application form](#) or visit justtransitionfund.org/local-economy-lab.

The deadline to submit is June 12, 2026.

We will invite a select number of applicants to submit full proposals, and we will provide guidance on grant amount and timeline upon invitation. **Proposals will be evaluated on a rolling basis, and we encourage submissions prior to the deadline!**

QUESTIONS?

Contact Marissa Berkley at mberkley@justtransitionfund.org.