



# READY

KENTUCKY COMMUNITIES PROVE THEIR DEDICATION TO THE WORK FORCE

# TO WORK

BY ROBIN ROENKER

**JACKSON ENERGY CEO CAROL WRIGHT UNDERSTANDS THAT HER MEMBERS NEED** their cooperative to provide more than just dependable electricity. They need a co-op that's a true community partner, committed to bettering the quality of life in the region.

That's why, when Wright learned about the Kentucky Work Ready Communities initiative, she knew Jackson County needed to be involved—and Jackson Energy approached community leaders to help make it happen.

“Jackson Energy primarily serves seven counties in southeastern Kentucky, several of which have some of the highest unemployment rates in the state. We need jobs. We need folks trained and ready to work. That's why we took on the challenge (of spearheading the Work Ready Communities application process in Jackson County),” Wright explains. “We're just trying to be a partner, to try to stimulate the economy in our region.”

The Kentucky Work Ready Communities program offers counties a means of quantifying the level of educational attainment and career readiness of their residents. It launched in 2012 as a collaboration between the Kentucky Workforce Innovation

Board and the Kentucky Education and Workforce Development Cabinet.

Kentucky was just the third state nationally to adopt a Work Ready program, and its Work Ready qualifying standards are among the most rigorous in the country, says Robert Curry, the program's executive director.

Already, 25 Kentucky counties have been certified as Work Ready Communities, while 39 more have been designated as Work Ready In Progress, which denotes that at least one of the criteria for certification has not been met there. An additional 30 counties have letters of intent on file, signifying their desire to begin the Work Ready application process, Curry says.

“Over and over again, communities tell us that they never anticipated how beneficial actually going through the process of applying would be,” says Curry. “The way the criteria are set up necessitates that counties bring together people from many different areas of their community, who then sit down together to collaborate in order to make the certification application work. And in many counties, it's bringing together groups—like educators and industry leaders—who should have been talking all along, but perhaps hadn't been.”

### Preparing tomorrow's work force

Case in point: Nelson County, where, thanks to the Work Ready Communities program, new relationship-building opportunities have emerged among the county's industrial leaders and its school systems. Recently, for example, several of the county's industries pledged to partner with the Nelson County Area Technology Center to help adapt and modernize the school's curriculum.

“Our industries are collaborating with the school's instructors to help change the curriculum into more of an industrial maintenance and industrial engineering focus, which are areas so needed by our companies here,” says Kim Huston, president of the Nelson County Economic Development Agency. “That will allow our students to start training (for in-demand jobs) while they are still in high school, so they'll be on a career path and ready to enter directly into our work force, should they decide not to pursue secondary training after high school.”

In Russell County, Work Ready Communities advocate Darryl McGaha, associate director for work force development with the Cumberland Workforce Development Area, has begun visiting area high schools to create mini one-stops, providing services



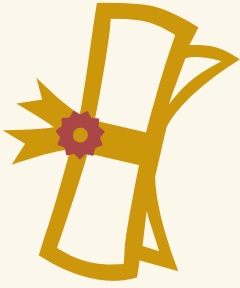
Above, from left, Coby Taylor, Hailey Taylor, Gabriel Alfaro, and Eli Redmon learn about opportunities available through service in the United States Army at the Adair County High School Career Fair on October 2, 2015. Photo: Shamarie Harper

Previous page, Occupational Technical Division Chair Mike Hazard from Elizabethtown Community and Technical College, on right, instructs a student on the FANUC Robotic trainer. Photo: ECTC

TO QUALIFY AS “WORK READY,”  
A COUNTY MUST DEMONSTRATE THAT  
IT MEETS MINIMUM CRITERIA ACROSS  
**6 CATEGORIES**



**HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE**  
of **88.9%** in  
2014-2015, with a  
plan to achieve **98%**  
by 2022.



**POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION RATE**

requiring that at least **25%** of  
the county’s working-age population  
ages 25-64 must have at least an  
associate degree and a plan to reach  
the **32%** level (the Kentucky  
average) in three years, and **39%**  
(the national average) in five years.



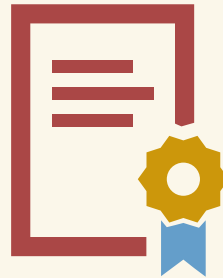
**INTERNET ACCESSIBILITY**

at least **90%** of housing  
units must have access.



**A PROVEN COMMITMENT**

to the program from a variety  
of community stakeholders,  
including local government,  
industry, and schools.



**NATIONAL CAREER READINESS CERTIFICATION RATE**

which means at least **9%** of the  
working-age population ages 18-64  
must have achieved an NCRC within  
three years, and **15%** must have  
the certification within five  
years (see sidebar).



**A PROVEN ESTABLISHMENT**

of a program to teach “soft” skills, including the  
importance of attendance and punctuality, a strong  
work ethic, teamwork, communication skills, and more.

such as resumé writing, job search, labor market information, training assistance, and postsecondary education guidance—all to help educate students about skilled job opportunities that are in demand in Kentucky.

“For the students who may not want a four-year degree, we have to reach them and let them know early on, here are the jobs that are available, and this is what you need to do to be prepared for them,” McGaha says.

Many certified Work Ready Communities and Work Ready Communities In Progress have established Work Ethics Seal programs—a type of “soft skills” training strategy—in their area high schools. Participating students receive a seal on their diploma or on a certified letter to show to potential employers that they have met criteria for exemplary attendance, school or community involvement, and career-building skills.

In Shelby County, the Work Ethic Certification program is being introduced as early as eighth grade, and students participate and are evaluated throughout high school, says Shelley Goodwin,

“We need jobs. We need folks trained and ready to work. That’s why we took on the challenge. We’re just trying to be a partner, to try to stimulate the economy in our region.”

—Carol Wright, CEO of Jackson Energy

executive director of the Shelby County Chamber of Commerce. “We wanted our students to be able to demonstrate four years’ worth of good work habits, so that hopefully by the time they graduate and move on to careers, those good habits and those skills are ingrained in them,” she says.

In Fleming County, where Fleming-Mason Energy’s Director of Community and Economic

Development Lori Ulrich also serves as president of the Fleming County Chamber of Commerce, high school students who are members of the county’s Future Business Leaders of America will soon be serving as Fleming County Chamber of Commerce ambassadors—a result of relationships between schools and civic leadership that were strengthened through the Work Ready Communities certification process, Ulrich says.

“It’s a great opportunity to get these students plugged into their local community, so they see what is working, and what they like to do. And then, when they get their education, they just might be inspired to come back and work in the local bank or work in the local utility company,” Ulrich says.

### Promoting the skills of today’s work force

While several components of the program focus on training new or emerging workers, the Work Ready Communities program is also, fundamentally, about lauding the talents of Kentucky’s existing labor force.



Adair County High senior Kandace Carroll enjoys time in Bank of Columbia's Career Time Machine on career day. The theme, "Begin with the end in mind, don't just pull a career out of the air," is from 7 Habits of Highly Effective People and The Leader In Me school programs. Photo: Shamarie Harper

For communities clamoring to attract new or expanding business and industry, having the Work Ready certification is key: "Many of the industry site selection committees won't even look at you now if you're not Work Ready or working toward that certification," explains Jackson Energy's Wright.

Work Ready allows communities to "provide real assurance to employers, whether existing or potential new employers, that there is a skilled and available work force in that particular county," says Kurt Krug, vice president of Human Resources at INOAC USA in Bardstown, who chairs the Kentucky Work Ready Communities review panel.

David Pace, vice president of Member Services and Marketing at Meade County RECC and chairman of the Meade County-Brandenburg Industrial Development Authority, agrees: "We work to recruit companies all the time, and we see the importance of being able to show them that we have employees here that are employable, and that we have youth coming out of our schools who understand what's needed by employers." Thanks to collaborative work



Elizabethtown Community and Technical College students receive hands-on training and industry certification in robotics. NELCO Training Inc., a training consortium serving Nelson and Washington counties, schedules training for member companies and serves as the networking organization that brings local industries and educators together to discuss work force issues. Photo: ECTC

#### ONLINE



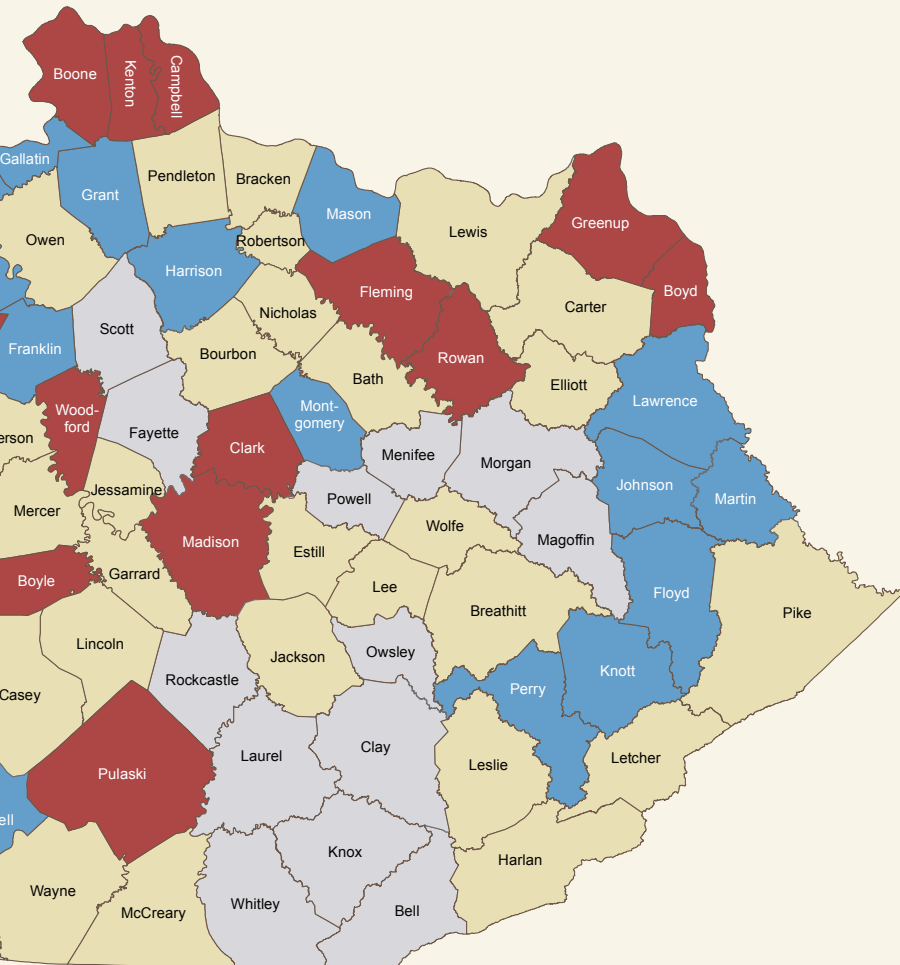
### Ready and working

Work Ready certification proves that communities are walking the talk when it comes to preparing their work force. Lori Ulrich, Fleming-Mason Energy's director of Community and Economic Development and president of the Fleming County Chamber of Commerce, explains the importance of the program in her community in a video you can watch online when you search for "Ready to Work" at KentuckyLiving.com.



## WHAT IS NCRC CERTIFICATION?

The National Career Readiness Certification (NCRC) is an assessment of workers' preparedness in three areas: applied mathematics, reading for information, and locating information. The assessment is a product of ACT, the same company best known for the ACT college-entrance exam. In many Work Ready participating communities, students enrolled in the county's adult education programs or at area technical schools are encouraged to take the NCRC exam. For more information about NCRC certification, go to [www.act.org/certificate](http://www.act.org/certificate).






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between the county's Industrial Development Authority and Chamber of Commerce, as well as its industries, local government, educators, and other stakeholders, Pace says he believes Meade County will be prepared to submit its Work Ready Communities certification application next spring.

Ultimately, as Shelby County's Goodwin puts it, Work Ready is about much more than achieving a certificate to put on a wall. "This is a program that encourages communities to keep improving (communities must be recertified every two years) and to develop and promote programs that have long-term, lasting effects on the community," she says.

East Kentucky Power Cooperative's Associate Manager of Economic Development Brad Thomas has been an avid supporter of Work Ready, helping EKPC's 16 member cooperatives promote the initiative within their service counties.

"A lot of people don't understand why a cooperative would care about efforts like Work Ready," Thomas says. "But it's about community building. And the stronger our communities are, the stronger our co-ops will be." **KL**

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### FIND OUT MORE

Find out more about Kentucky's Work Ready Communities program online at <http://workready.ky.gov>.

