

-FINAL REPORT-
Evaluation of the
Career Readiness to Eliminate
Disparities (CRED) Program of
Heartland Workforce Solutions
(HWS) Year 5
2021

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PRPG

CRED Final Evaluation Report Year 5

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CRED - Link to Past Research Findings (2017-2020)

In early 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020, the HWS Board of Directors was presented respective overviews of the Career Readiness to Eliminate Disparities (CRED) Program Evaluation. In all three evaluation reports, PRPG outlined both the program's yearly successes along with suggestions to further build on the program for the upcoming year(s). The following pages provide a brief overview of PRPG findings from the 2017-2020 evaluations.

2017 Evaluation:

Finding 1: Good effort toward engaging Stakeholders.

There was a great deal of effort toward engaging a number of stakeholders in the CRED initiative. In addition, the culmination of businesses that signed onto recommend or recognize the NCRC was a key beginning for the success of the CRED program, of which NCRC was a critical piece. It was difficult to identify whether this outreach is "successful" in year one, as there were no benchmarks available to the researchers by which to judge these numbers. Nevertheless, these preliminary numbers gave some basis for future efforts that could help to identify the number of stakeholders (or potential stakeholders) in the community going forward.

Finding 2: Good "Buy-In" from Employers.

It was clear that the employees we spoke with believed deeply in the goals and efforts of HWS and in the CRED program. They not only viewed this as a "win" for their individual company, but also deeply believed in the value of engaging the community. Some of the employers were eager to recruit additional employees, and spoke very knowledgeably and positively about the CRED program specifically, and about the larger goals of HWS more generally. Literature suggests that employers and companies who are invested in the health and

well-being of the community long-term tend to be more successful in retaining employees from that community, (as well as in successfully maintaining their goals), and HWS and its CRED program built a solid foundation with business partners in the city.

Finding 3: Employers Desire More Communication & Involvement

There was a desire on behalf of the employers to increase the amount of communication with HWS. This included the desire to be included regarding “trends,” as well as efforts to recruit additional business partners into the program. Several verbalized that they would welcome consistent, long-term evaluation visits and meetings to regularly assess the progress of the program through their business.

In addition, some of the employers believed that earlier communication with potential employees through their schools was critical to long-term success. It was suggested that even middle school may not be too early to begin employer engagement, as many students may already be considering employment options by this time. For the most part, this idea was shared by Omaha Public Schools and Metro Community College. Communication early and often with students in the Omaha Public Schools, and into high school and beyond was seen as a necessary element to long-term success.

Finding 4: Desire to Head off Retention Issues.

Several of the employers felt that, even though they believed in the CRED program, that they worried about disconnect *after* employees were hired. Most notably, these employers are dealing with high turnover in their companies, and the CRED workers were also at risk. To this end, some wondered about expanding the program to include ongoing “coaching” or another way to ensure that employees have bigger “buy-in” to the company they are working for.

Finding 5: More Discussion about “Root Problems”

One of the most poignant themes from employers was that they believed that any program that aimed to address workforce disparity, as well as un and under-employment would have a difficult time succeeding unless it also addressed “root” problems that affected the health of the larger community. This may include issues such as neighborhood infrastructure, transportation, housing and crime. These “outside” influences, while much more complex and systemic, were seen as one of the largest barriers to successful, sustained employment training and employer progress. And while there was an understandable sentiment among employers that there was limited power they had over these root problems, several believed it was imperative that the employers and HWS engage with other groups that are concentrated on many of these problems. For instance, making sure that HWS / CRED was well-represented at any talks or meetings where issues such as city transportation, housing developments or crime reduction were addressed so that the information could be incorporated into the broader CRED plans.

2018 Evaluation:

Employer Participation

Finding 1: Designing and utilizing assessment of “Employer Tools”

The employer interviews suggested that the employers who were more familiar with the CRED strategy were very pleased to be able to trust the process to appropriately identify, screen and begin to socialize employees. It was also evident that these employers desired more broad participation in the CRED strategy, especially in expanding it and acting as “conduits” for the strategy, which they clearly buy into. Conversely, those employers who were not as familiar or engaged with the process seemed to indicate that they wanted more participation at the *employee* level, with more access to potential workers.

Finding 2: Consider a “speaker’s bureau” of very engaged employers

In addition to utilizing the employer tools in particular ways based on employer level of engagement, we might suggest finding ways in which very engaged employers can more formally become spokespeople for the CRED strategy to other businesses. We recognize, of course, that this is being done already through informal avenues, because those employers who were less engaged testified to the notion that it was the influence of the more engaged employers that made them ultimately become involved.

Finding 3: Standardize “CRED” brand / Explain relationship between strategy and initiatives

Standardizing the branding of the CRED strategy would help employees to more readily get on board and become involved. Because many of the employers were not familiar with the term “CRED” as a strategy, we discussed this at a team meeting, and it was noted that the term “CRED Strategy” was more of an internal tool rather than one utilized in external marketing or engagement. We suggested that creating a clear and consistent “brand” for the CRED strategy would be helpful for employers as well as other potential supporters of the program.

Expansion of Early Involvement

Finding 4: Begin conversations about high school/middle school involvement

Feedback from participants indicated that access to components such as the NCRC may be helpful earlier for potential employees, and information from employers indicate that they share this sentiment. Knowing their skill level and also their skill area in high school (or even earlier) may help students to make choices that would fit with their skill set. Tracking this information specifically in targeted zip codes would be even more informational. It would be important to set up this process so that students were not “funneled” away from other career or education choices,

but giving them the tools to know their strengths may be of help with entering the workforce after their schooling.

Finding 5: Continue conversations surrounding re-entry

The CRED initiative may be able to expand into re-entry, engaging individuals returning into their communities after incarceration. We recommended incorporating a comprehensive assessment to identify the ways in which the CRED strategy might be introduced alongside other re-entry programs, and also closely tracking these individuals to determine success longer-term.

Retention Plan

Finding 6: Explore possibility of “retention specialist”

In both the interviews with potential employees and employers in 2018, there emerged a desire for additional or ongoing training or education throughout the first few years of employment. As noted, one employer even recommended a “retention specialist” to look at ways in which retention could be tracked and improved.

Finding 7: Explore possibility of “cross-training” for CRED participants, , encourage ways to facilitate education about company/industry

Several potential CRED participants expressed a desire to be given the opportunity to learn more about the company. We would recommend exploration with some companies the possibility of either “cross-training” CRED individuals who have done a good job after a certain number of months, or offering the possibility of seminars or other educational opportunities that would allow employees to both see the “big picture” of the company that they work in and also be able to articulate the even larger picture of the company’s place within that industry.

Finding 8: Look at implementing “early warning”

Companies may be interested in the possibility of investing in an “early warning” system for employees, or at least to discuss implementing some aspects of early warning systems (such as yearly climate surveys, implementing outsourced exit interviews, etc.). We believe that if the CRED strategy team could offer to employers some specifics on how to head off or deal with retention issues for both CRED participants and all of their employees, it would offer a substantive “carrot” for employers who may be “on the fence” about participating in the program.

Finding 9: Better specify how to measure/advertise retention rates

Rather than an “overall retention” rate without reference to how many employees each company has hired, using a more standard “6 month” retention rate (although this could be 3, 6 and 12 months) as a cohort retention would help for comparison purposes. This would also provide an opportunity for better identification of what point in their tenure these employees tend to leave. In turn, this would allow the CRED strategy to zero in on where extra support for these individuals might be most needed, and pass that along to the employers.

Engagement with Other Groups

Finding 10: Begin to articulate how CRED strategy fits with other groups

It was clear both from the interviews with the employers as well as the public presentations (and requests for presentations by the CRED team) that HWS and MCC have engaged a great deal with other groups in the Omaha metro community, and are very well regarded in the city and beyond. As a true “backbone organization” HWS has maintained their commitment not only to their organizational goals, but also to those of others in the community.

While it is clear that both HWS and MCC, who we have worked with most closely, have close ties to other community organizations and entities such as the Empowerment Network, the Urban League, OPS, Douglas County, and a host of others, we are not sure if there is a clear action plan that sharply identifies how the CRED strategy might fit with other areas that address distinct root problems that our community has struggled with. Creating a space where consistent and systematic discussion of this effort may be a lofty goal, considering all the efforts underway already, but may be one that pays off in the long run.

Finding 11: Begin researching data collection software

Strategic Data Collection

Creating a database that strategically and systematically collects data especially on participants would allow the CRED team, including the research team, to obtain information about individuals in real time, and would be useful for identifying areas of improvement as well as glean information that could be shared about the program. Our recommendation in this area would be, for the short term, to begin exploring data collection tools that are user-friendly and that have the ability to interface with many other platforms.

Finding 12: Explore similar data collection options/ work with employers/other agencies to identify shared goals

In addition, the CRED team had a number of discussions about the value of utilizing a data collection system that would have the ability to interact with other agencies. These could be used in such a way as to fully identify individuals' needs, and the various agencies that could help to meet those needs. This would truly be data collection based on a larger goal of collective impact and would ultimately aid in long-term partnerships that could substantially benefit the community

in a number of ways. Ideally, a number of agencies would have input and oversight over a common data collection tool, understanding that there are few that may meet various needs of a number of agencies, and that other considerations (such as privacy concerns) would need to be addressed.

Finding 13: Articulate CRED strategy as distinct from CRED/other initiatives

CRED Strategy/Initiative Clarification

As additional materials and even more specific programs spring from the CRED strategy to address needs of the populations served, it may be more likely for currently unengaged businesses, prospective participants and the community at large to become confused between the CRED strategy and the different aspects of the *programs and initiatives* that comprise that strategy. It would be helpful to develop either an infographic or larger presentation that clearly and succinctly identifies the CRED strategy as an overarching “umbrella” that comprises such initiatives as the CPP, Workforce Ready Communities, etc. as well as programs such as the Career Training Academies, the NCRC, etc. This would also allow the evaluation to have a much clearer “road map” of how the various elements of the CRED strategy fit and should be evaluated.

Finding 14: Create evaluation meeting schedule that is frequent and consistent

More Fluid Evaluation Process

Consistent and frequent meetings with the CRED team prove beneficial, and recommended the invitees include, perhaps, very engaged employers do help strategize, or even participants if they are able. Their input in the context of these group meetings might offer unique insight regarding how the evaluation might be better executed (or conversely, what has gone well with the evaluation).

Finding 15: Re-evaluate evaluation goals quarterly

Finally, because the CRED strategy has the potential to change and many unforeseen opportunities may arise, we would recommend actually re-visiting the evaluation goals on a quarterly basis, along with the quarterly report. This past year, the evaluation kept the same goals and the quarterly reports identified the progress made on these goals, but it was clear that by the end of the year, those goals needed to be updated to better assess some of the new opportunities and directions that were taking place.

2019 Evaluation:

Finding 1: Continue to standardize “CRED” brand, explain relationship between HWS and CRED as a Collective Impact strategy

Less engaged businesses and potential agencies/partners were not particularly familiar with the CRED team, and tended to conflate CRED with HWS. Standardizing the branding of the CRED strategy would help potential collaborative partners (including those doing re-entry work) to more readily get on board and become involved in the collective impact model.

Finding 2: Expand on conversations surrounding re-entry

There are a number of entities in the metropolitan area focused on re-entry, and the CRED team would do well to continue dialogue with them as they move toward a collaborative network of partners.

Finding 3: Continue to explore data collection software options

A shared platform could fully identify individuals’ needs, while highlighting the various agencies that could help to meet those needs, substantially benefitting the community. Ideally, a number of

agencies with overlapping goals would have input and oversight over this common data collection tool.

Finding 4: Continue to identify and work with other agencies, more systematically identify shared goals (consistent with Collective Impact strategy)

The CRED strategy has increased momentum among businesses and partners after the Work Ready Community designation, and the successful growth of the CPP is notable. There is a need to more clearly define this among mutually interested agencies and community leaders. Given that the collective impact approach requires developing a shared set of goals/shared strategy among participating entities, the CRED team (particularly HWS as the backbone of the network) can use this momentum to further identify and translate shared goals among the diverse array of current and potential employers, partners and community leaders.

2020 Evaluation:

Finding 1: Continue Momentum Toward Sustainability and Impact (Phase IV) of Collective Impact Strategy

Collective Impact efforts tend to transpire over four key phases (Kania and Kramer, 2011); to Generate Ideas and Dialogue (Phase I), to Initiate Action (Phase II), to Organize for Impact (Phase III), and finally, to Sustain Action and Impact (Phase IV). The four components for successful Collective Impact efforts (Governance and Infrastructure, Strategic Planning, Community Involvement, and Evaluation and Improvement) each move through the four phases until, ideally, the Collective Impact Strategy is sustaining its momentum and engagement.

At the end of 2019, PRPG asserted that the CRED collective impact initiative was in either Phase III or IV for each component and furthered this momentum in 2020 with the successful growth and virtual optimization of the CPP, the allocation of CARES and other dollars for affected individuals. Their Best Practices model also worked as a springboard to strengthen collaborative communication and efforts with the Omaha Chamber, multiple nonprofits, governmental agencies and businesses. We recommended that the CRED team continue to identify new potential partnerships, and to systematically identify shared goals among current partners/entities with an

eye toward ways in which current short-term connections (which might have been born out of the needs of the pandemic and its ensuing challenges) might become more long-term collective efforts.

Finding 2: Build on existing networks/entities to provide broader outreach and access for Career Seekers

While initial dialogue with libraries (necessarily) halted during the pandemic, relationships like these are integral to build and maintain collective impact (through regularly reinforcing engagement and advocacy within a community, building goodwill). We recommended that a CRED team member or informed HWS staff member make pointed (and regularly reinforced) contact with these and other durable and/or similarly trusted institutions (including churches, community centers, etc.) in and perhaps immediately surrounding the targeted zip codes. Such contact both broadens the community's understanding of HWS and the One Stop Workforce system, while also helping solidify relationships among entities with shared goals without relying on or necessitating any additional CRED funding.

Finding 3: Return to Conversations Surrounding Re-entry

While the pandemic functionally disallowed further discussion specific to re-entry, we recommended revisiting dialogue with a collaborative network of partners already dedicated to working with re-entry populations. We further suggested that the virtual CPP might be a good entry point within prisons/detention centers for individuals who are nearing re-entry.

Finding 4: Continue to participate in collection software options

CRED's ultimate goal toward a One Stop Workforce system garnered more support and resources in 2020 from the Chamber of Commerce, the governor and other invested entities, partly due to the increased awareness of disproportionately affected populations in the COVID-19 era. We suggested a return to discussions concerning a shared database/platform to better fully identify

individuals' needs, while highlighting the various agencies that could help to meet those needs. We suggested that this could potentially developed through another entity (via another revenue stream), as the CRED team has been actively sought and involved in discussions of these efforts (including the Talent Initiative).

2021 Data and Methodology

The 2017 report primarily looked at data from quarterly reports and employer interviews, and the 2018 report used semi-structured interviews with potential (and current) CRED participants, employers to complement quarterly reports and data. The 2019 evaluation included semi structured interviews with employers, partners, and community leaders alongside HWS/MCC data to assess the overall impact and effectiveness of the Work Ready Communities Initiative, the Career Placement Pipeline (CPP) and the ultimate goal of the CRED strategy being an ultimately self-sustaining Collective Impact Approach with HWS continuing to operate as a backbone. The 2020 evaluation assessed CRED team members' responses to questions relative to workforce development and employment during an unprecedented time (i.e., the onset of a global pandemic).

Cred 2021 Overview Reports

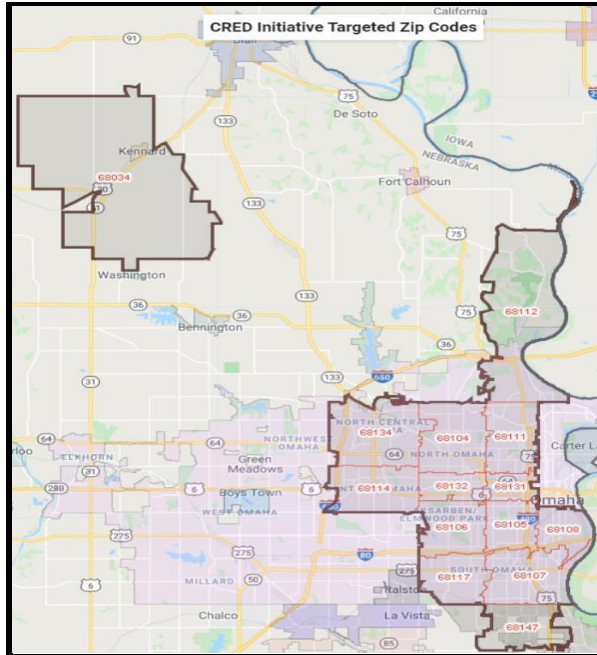
Much like the previous year, 2021 also posed unique challenges to workforce development in already disproportionately affected communities. The current 2021 report PRPG performed CRED team member interviews, the current Executed Agreement with the city, CRED 2021 Quarterly Progress Reports, past PRPG evaluations, the *Greater Omaha Local Workforce Development Plan for Program Years 2021-2025*, and PRPG Zoom meeting discussions and shared documents/materials.

1) Outline of Best Practices

Story of CRED Initiative: Evolution and Key Analytics/Data points

Heartland Workforce Solutions (HWS), the entity through which the CRED initiative was born, is both a non-profit and a quasi-governmental agency (est. in 2010 by a Mayoral Task Force) with a separate 501(c)(3) status. HWS is the administrator of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds for the Greater Omaha Workforce Development Area/Board (GOWDB), serving Douglas, Sarpy and Washington counties, and housed the American Job Center (AJC) at 5752 Ames Avenue. HWS's mission "is to promote and develop a workforce system that is responsive to the needs of business and career seekers resulting in economic prosperity[...] efficiently connect[ing] skilled career seekers to in demand industry talent needs (HWS 2022: 1).

The Career Readiness to End Disparities Initiative (CRED) was launched in 2016 "to assist job seekers in identifying their skill levels, receiving training to improve any deficient areas, and communicating their competencies to employers" in targeted areas within Douglas, Sarpy and Washington Counties (HWS: 2018). Zip codes within these counties reported that roughly two-thirds of residents over the age of 18 lacked a high school diploma or GED, while "certain census tracts in North and South Omaha" reported "unemployment rates of 31-32%," income levels "as low as \$10-12,000," and poverty rates ranged between 40-50% (Ibid.). A map (developed and first included in PRPG's 2020 report) with the CRED targeted zip codes (68034, 68104, 68105, 68106, 68107, 68108, 68111, 68112, 68114, 68117, 68131, 68132, 68134, 68147) is included below.



CRED features a national-recognized system to match skilled labor to potential employers, meant “to generate short term credentials attainment that leads to employment, thereby decreasing poverty/unemployment in the [Greater Omaha] area.” In order to meet these goals, HWS collaborated with MCC to administer the National Career Readiness Certificate™ (NCRC). While the NCRC is utilized by employers throughout the country to help identify qualified applicants, is not currently recognized within Nebraska’s system (NEworks) as an approved criterion, thus ineligible for WIOA funding. Using CRED funding, MCC has been able to help career seekers identify and complete individualized credential testing to increase career readiness. Post completion, career seekers can use their individual NCRC recommendations to further develop education components KeyTrain® training (HWS Development Plan 2021: 17).

Alongside work with career seekers, CRED also builds relationships with businesses in the community, ultimately to “help connect individuals participating in [CRED] to existing opportunities within the community.” While all career seekers living in the GO Workforce area (Douglas, Sarpy and Washington counties) can potentially apply for CRED participation, priority

eligibility is given to individuals facing employment barrier(s) such as “re-entry, youth, veterans, [and/or living in] high-poverty high unemployment zip codes.” CRED facilitates a pathway for individuals to pursue training that coincides with “existing job opportunities on an H3 pathway (high wage, high skill, high demand)” (HWS 2022: 4).

CRED participants are aligned with career opportunities through the Career Placement Pipeline (CPP), which is designed to optimally prepare individuals to meet current and upcoming workforce needs. The CPP is considered best-practice related to “industry and corporate culture, job skills, and retention strategies.” This alongside CRED’s HWS’s business engagement allows for real and growing potential to “capture their unique workforce needs” while building new “forums to connect employers [...] with the job seeker marketplace” (Ibid.)

By early 2019, the Heartland Work Ready Communities Initiative, a partnership with Economic Development, K – 12 Education, Community College, Businesses, the Workforce Development Board, and Local Government, met its 2-year goal to become a Certified Work Ready Community (this included 1,453 NCRC certificate-holders and 228 businesses signed-on to recognize the NCRC credential).

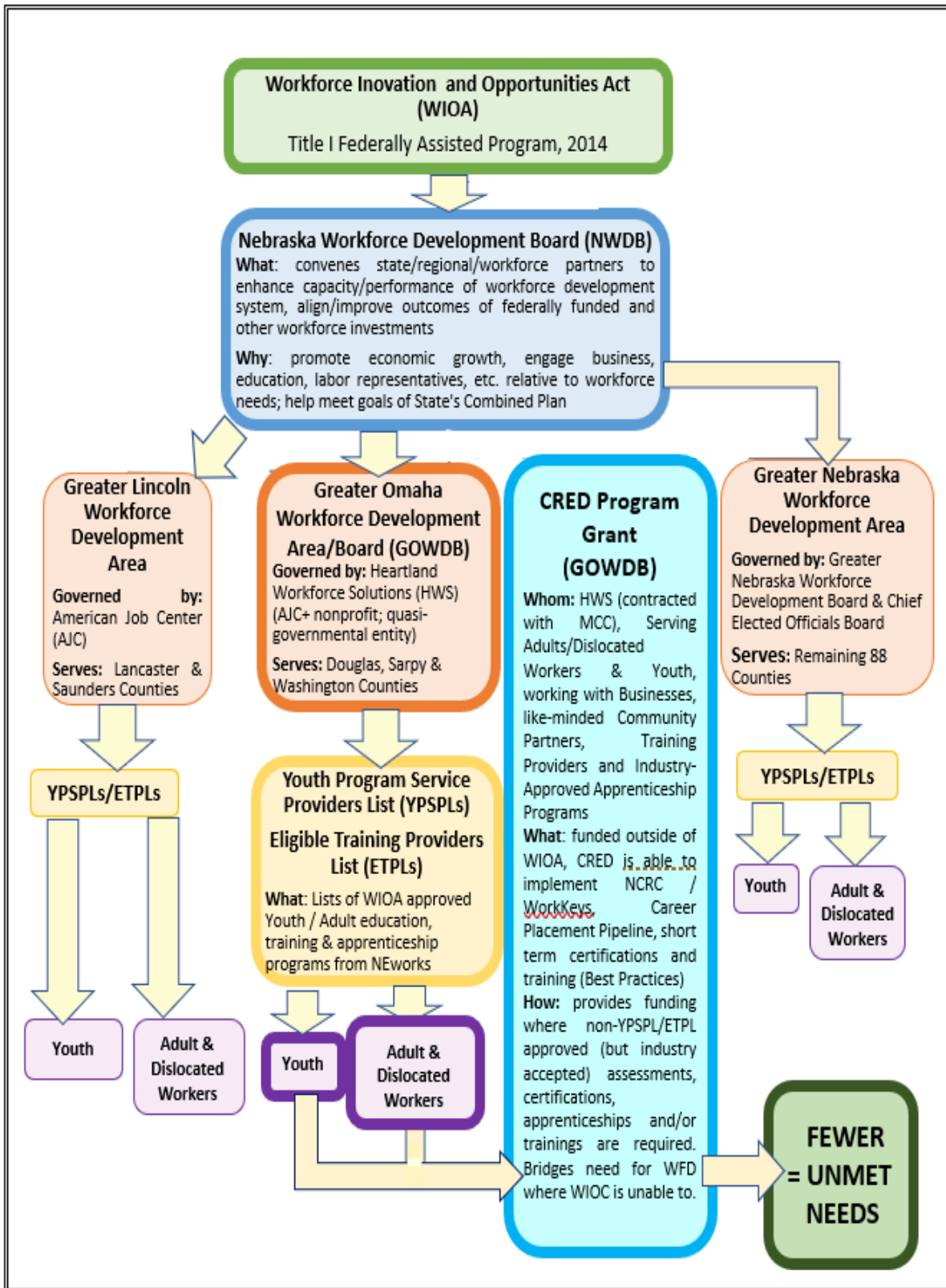
When the pandemic began in 2020, the CRED team optimized the CPP for a virtual audience, increased access to needed technology, developed and administered virtual training (including a transition to online certification programs, virtual interview coaching, held virtual Zoom interviews and meetings at the Ames location), and (via MCC) contracted with ACT to pilot and systematize a virtual NCRC testing protocol. They continued to demonstrate the efficacy of the NCRC/CPP in the targeted zip codes through 2021, while also reflecting the CRED strategy’s nimbleness and adaptability relative to the unique pandemic-related challenges. The continued growth and success from the Best Practices Method (CPP and credentialing) alongside the Work

Ready Community designation has been key in the successful growth and continued potential for the CRED Initiative, unique compared to other cities where there is not something like HWS.

Prior to COVID-19, the CRED team received some feedback that HWS had the reputation of being the “unemployment office” in the community, meaning that the many services and programs available were not widely understood or known by community members. While PRPG’s past interviews with engaged businesses and collaborative partners were familiar with the CRED team, less engaged businesses and partners tended to conflate CRED with HWS. Much discussion around previous recommendations to make the CRED initiative well known among multiple partners was necessarily halted during the pandemic.

Given CRED’s effectiveness and successes in becoming recognized as the gold standard in workforce development areas, 2022 is an ideal time to capitalize on this momentum and furthering partnerships with other community partners, career-seekers, businesses and community members. PRPG designed the following flow chart based on its research and discussions with CRED team members, which might help to translate CRED’s place within the GO Workforce Development Area, the larger Nebraska Workforce system, and its substantive contribution relative to both the requirements and limitations of WIOA.

This graphic is for non-specialists (including potential career seekers, businesses, other non-profits/governmental agencies, and institutions) who are likely unfamiliar with HWS, CRED, WIOA or the complexities of workforce development efforts in the city and state.



Best Practices

Drawing from CRED team member interview material, the current Executed Agreement with the city, CRED 2021 Quarterly Progress Reports, past PRPG evaluations, the *Greater Omaha Local Workforce Development Plan for Program Years 2021-2025*, and PRPG Zoom meeting discussions and shared documents/materials; PRPG posed the question, “What are the “best practices” relative to workforce development?”

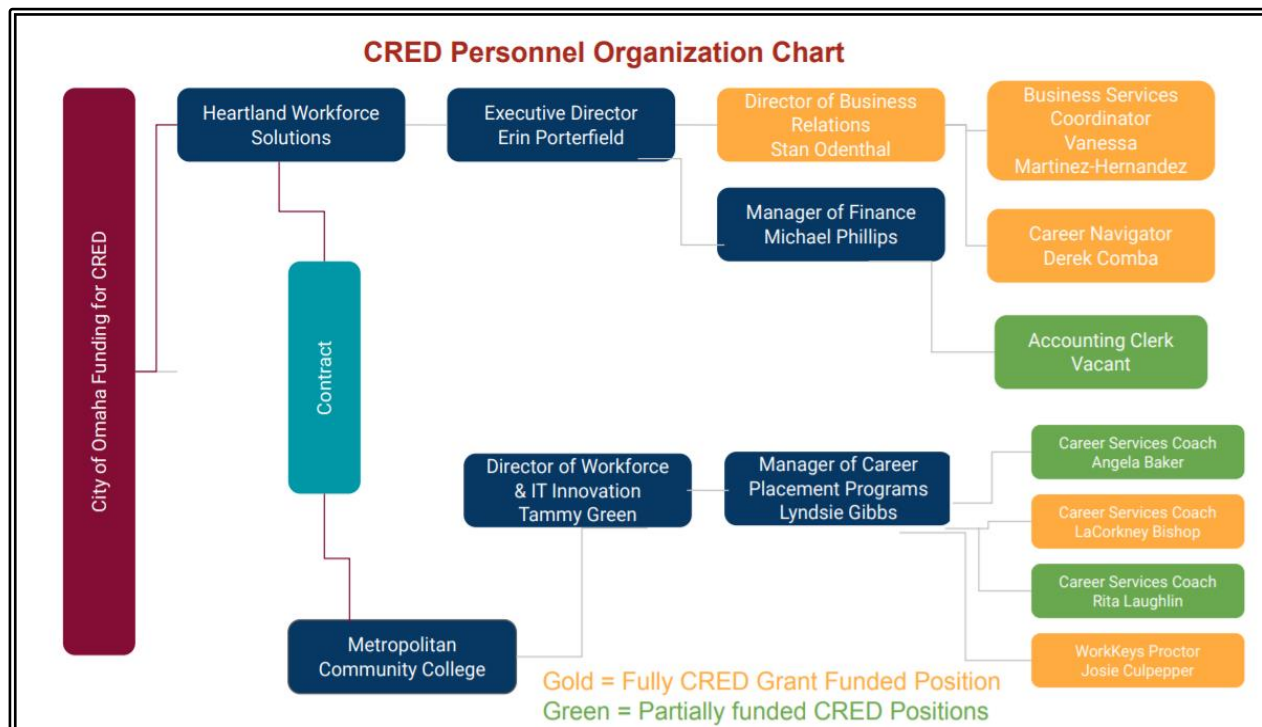
CRED members generally offered overlapping tenets in their responses, although important nuances remained which might benefit the team to synthesize while working toward the ultimate goal being an ultimately self-sustaining Collective Impact Approach with HWS continuing to operate as a backbone. All CRED team interviewees agreed that “best practices” should not be considered permanent or static, one noting that they preferred the term “promising practices” to indicate this malleability. Another noted, “...notions that are “best” should be re-examined from time to time and that they should be ever evolving. For instance, a best practice is a reminder to not do something because “it’s what we’ve always done” or because it’s the easiest thing. It’s something to strive for, as a standard of operation.”

CRED’s ability to help participants move more quickly within the greater workforce system has been directly related to its nimbleness as a strategy. It’s overall work to connect short term training and resources with disproportionately affected career seekers, for example, has allowed for quick pivoting toward pandemic-affected workers and businesses, and virtual optimization, in 2020 and 2021. While recognizing that current best practices within the CRED strategy are always open to being reframed or added to, team members generally offered responses similar to the following excerpt from HWS’s executed agreement with the city: “CRED’s success

rests on the effectiveness of best practices methods like the NCRC and the CPP and the engagement of sustainable partners.”

Sustainable partners such as those engaged through the Work Ready Community Initiative, and continuously (re)engaged with throughout the year, are one aspect of CRED’s framework that is unique among workforce systems. CRED has three fully-funded positions delegated to Business Relations, including 1) Director of Business Relations, 2) Business Services Coordinator, and 3) Career Navigator. While the WIOA requires community and business engagement (via the HWS Board of Director’s, for example), on-staff coordinators who are also intimately familiar with the utility and application of the NCRC alongside current and upcoming industry needs is paramount for long term success: as one CRED member responded, it is important to “utilize the NCRC to connect the business community and career seekers,” we explain “to employers all the time how they can easily utilize this to know they are making a good hire on the front end because this certification lays out what skills someone brings to their business and specially the role they are looking to fill.” Further, the business liaison can translate NCRC benefits to career seekers through “helping them understand what skills they have.” Several CRED members commented on the way career seekers might begin the process not feeling as though they have any skills, but after taking the NCRC (as opposed to a standardized test meant to assess grade level abilities), their perspective can shift greatly. The NCRC can aid in, “building their confidence to know they have skills, and they may exceed what they thought their skills were. It’s a confidence booster in most cases.” CRED staff who is allocated to building and maintaining relationships with businesses while also engaging with career seekers is unique among entities like HWS. They Organizational Chart (built and distributed to PRPG by the Current Director of

Business Relations) is pertinent to documenting as what allows for the implementation of best practices relative to CRED’s demonstrated success.



Source: (Odenthal 12/17/2021)

Industry-Specific Transferable Certifications to Career Seekers

In 2021 CRED had the most certifications, trainings and classes on record since its inception. Funding requests were made in order to account for the increased need both in 2021 and going forward in 2022. The CRED team also identified several industries where the workforce system had high demand and opportunities for H3 jobs, including healthcare and IT. In 2021, the MCC side of CRED launched several GAP programs in health care, where career seekers are able to seek and obtain ground up certification and continuing credentials (including financial literacy, mock interviews

The CRED also developed and implemented a similar training and certification model for IT – another burgeoning field for potential career placement and advancement. They note that IT will require more training than industries such as construction, and will continue to build and improve education and training programs with engaged IT businesses who can invest going forward.

2) Malleability of CRED initiative relative to Career Seekers, Employer engagement/needs, etc. in 2021

Covid/Pandemic-Related Adjustments/Related Solutions/Platforms

The 2020 evaluation noted that CARES dollar allocation was heavily influenced by CRED's example (career coaching, business engagement, and training to employment), as well as how the training initiative was administered throughout the state. The 2021 challenges included transitioning out of CARES allocation and into a more hybrid-style (virtual and in-person) campaign relative to business (re)engagement, certifications, training, and testing.

The CRED in 2020 and 2021 looked at part of the recovery in our community to include necessary inoculations, healthcare staff, and pivoted via the Pharm-tech program. The training offers career seekers a next step to advance, a connection to the workforce system; and an introduction into the health services industry while also meeting community and business needs.

The CRED team also worked toward tailoring how the workforce system could be more responsive to employer needs/ businesses still urgently hiring during the pandemic and ensuing Great Resignation. The CRED team coordinated and organized multiple virtual, hybrid and in-person job fairs while continuing to host best practices in Zoom interview training.

The Dec. 2020 Talent Availability and Job Market Reporting and Analysis for the Greater Omaha

Area demonstrated that African Americans have by far disproportionately affected during the pandemic, and the CRED team was highly engaged with the resulting (emerging) economic development initiative (specific to north Omaha) to help inform community needs, opportunities, and how to best engage (relevant) businesses with Career Seekers.

Continued Optimization of Virtual Job Seeking, Certifications, etc.

The CRED maintained virtual systems (CPP, certification programs, Zoom coaching and interviews, virtual meeting) developed in 2020 and expanded with more virtual, alongside hybrid and in-person formats throughout 2021. The current data (below) uses some of the information gleaned in the quarterly and final reports created by HWS with input from MCC, but it is important to note that much more specific numbers regarding Career Placement Pipeline (CPP), NCRC and Employer contacts have been collated in a separate report submitted by HWS.

Cred Accomplishments – By the Numbers

By the end of 2021, Omaha's unemployment rate was 1.6%, markedly reduced from December 2020 (3.3%). Unemployment remained more concentrated in North and South Omaha. Industries most actively hiring in 2021 included Leisure and Hospitality, Trade, Transportation, and Utilities (Nebraska Department of Labor, as cited in HWS October 1, 2021 – December 31, 2021). Overall, career seekers continued to engage the NCRC testing, lowered partly due to limited ability to work with schools during the pandemic. The Career Placement Pipeline (CPP) program and associated training and certification requests and completions, however, increased over previous years in virtual, hybrid and in-person formats.

2021 Progress for National Career Readiness Certificate

2021 Quarter numbers	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
Bronze	22	86	43	86	237
Silver	26	75	44	77	222
Gold	13	17	22	31	83
Platinum	8	16	17	7	48
Certificates Earned	69	194	126	201	590
Pre-Bronze	2	74	23	44	143
Completed all 3 certificates	71	268	149	245	873
Incomplete	3	21	10	135	169
Retest	3	17	52	13	85
Didn't complete 3 certificates	6	38	62	143	249
False starts		8			8

Source: Compiled from HWS Quarterly Reports 1-4, 2021

CPP Placement Data from MCC for Individuals Served

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2021 Totals
# of individuals placed in employment in the following industries:	17	34	33	114	198
Manufacturing	0	8	3	9	20
IT	1	5	3	3	12
Transportation, Distribution, Logistics	0	1	7	5	13
Construction	1	1	3	2	7
Healthcare	8	9	9	6	32
Financial Services	5	7	1	0	13
Hospitality	2	3	7	4	16

Source: Compiled from HWS Quarterly Reports 1-4, 2021

Expanded Number of Places for Career Seekers

The CRED team sought to evaluate how they have served career seekers with employment resources and connections in 2021, and how they might continue to build on these responses as

needed. While working with employers and business services throughout 2021 (even while things began transitioning back to in-person events), the CRED team also worked to make sure that information about job services and training were available both virtually and on site.

3) Identification and Expansion of Program (Sustainability and Collective Impact) in 2021

New Partnerships (i.e., Entities with Shared Goals) in 2021

CRED facilitated outreach to both north and south Omaha community-based organizations with similar goals in 2021. In South Omaha, CRED met and collaborated with Catholic Charities to help translate CRED's value to the formers' work with entrepreneurs. CRED engagement centered on increasing awareness among these entrepreneurs relative to CRED's strengths in helping them to find employees' who best meet their long-term needs. CRED also began dialogue via a meeting and touring at the new Camino Latino Center at Bellevue University.

In North Omaha, CRED also expanded on its relationship with 75 North, and has agreed to work with them on a grant the former received from Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The 2021 partnership brings together HWS/MCC (CRED), the OHA, and 75 North, and includes a resident HWS staff member (funded by the HUD grant) on site at 75 North and the Spencer Residence. The HWS staff member will work as "a connector between all one-stop programs at the American Job Center and the neighborhoods around the North 30 Corridor in Omaha" while also coordinating "various events with onestop [sic] partner such as job fairs and workshops on-site at 75 North" (HWS October 1, 2021 – December 31, 2021).

Expanded or Reframed Existing Partnerships in the COVID-19 Pandemic Era

At the end of 2021, the CRED team launched the Re-Engaging Work Ready Community (WRC) Employers for the Douglas County Initiative, designed to provide outreach and support to

currently signed on ACT Work Ready Community employers. Douglas County is at the Maintenance Phase of the Work Ready Initiative, with roughly 300 Nebraska employers participating. The pandemic brought a lot of turnover for previously engaged employers, and the first session was held to address immediate next steps for these employers relative to their needs. The Business Engagement team also designed and held multiple business job fairs, workshops, and other platforms centered on both drawing in new and reengaging existing partners (HWS October 1, 2021 – December 31, 2021).

In concert with concurrent needs, CRED continues to coordinate with other non-profits (such as the Healthcare Careers Fair, hosted by the American Red Cross) and entities to facilitate career seekers with businesses through both multi-industry and industry-specific job fairs. The first annual “Job Fair Spooktacular and Trunk-or-Treat” was both well attended (>20 employers) and well received by career seekers (Ibid.).

CRED also hosted a series of Better Business workshops throughout 2021 intended to highlight “important programs and information from our community” to businesses attempting “to grow and succeed in this challenging economy.” The monthly workshops (first held on Zoom, later transitioned to a hybrid format) provide real time content for businesses relative to HR, hiring, development and Work Ready Community data (Ibid).

The CRED team also facilitated interactive Industry Listening Sessions (in Transportation, Distribution and Logistics, Manufacturing, Healthcare and Construction) meant “to better engage business leaders” though “increasing our understanding of their hiring needs, including their current efforts to recruit a diverse and skilled workforce.” Alongside data collection relative to employer needs, CRED these sessions will offer another avenue to “identify some of the job

opportunities for the future,” while collectively identifying “ways to better connect the resources we have available today to meet those future job expectations.” (Ibid.).

Expanded Outreach/Access for Career Seekers (Virtual, Hybrid, In-person)

The team (via MCC) also completed its contract with ACT to pilot of virtual NCRC testing in 2021, culminating in a successfully executed virtual NCRC test at Ralston High School with more than twenty students. Going forward, the team can now access and complete virtual NCRC testing for job seekers who are able to access a local computer lab. CRED created the new standard (via pilot testing), now utilized at HWS, MCC South Express, the Open Door Mission, the Latino Center of the Midlands and the Urban League of Nebraska.

Overall, the CRED team has been effective and innovative in its maximizing of the HWS website (and Dashboard), virtual and hybrid job fairs, certification/testing, training, and interviews for career seekers and community/business partners throughout 2021. At the same time the team has also continued to improve timelines for those seeking employment opportunities; so that individuals can access a faster, more swift connection to training, certification and employment. The new application process (via HWS website) ran for its first full year in 2021, allowing all career seekers to complete their application within two minutes.

The CRED team also aimed to both increase and adjust the number of places that Career Seekers could be served with career opportunities in 2021. Alongside Virtual Career Fairs, the MCC side of CRED held GAP program-specific Virtual Career Fairs (Pharmacy Tech, Project Management, Fiber Optics, and Digital Marketing) during which enrolled students meet with businesses within each of the (aforementioned) industries.

Expansion with Existing Durable Public Institutions

In 2021, CRED expanded relationships with like-minded non-profits including Seventy Five North, Project Re\$et, Catholic Charities, and the Latino Center of the Midlands. Work with other governmental or quasi-governmental institutions has also continued as multiple institutions work to address pandemic related needs in disproportionately affected populations. CRED also began collaborating to integrate the Jobs for American Graduates (JAG) Program in schools in 2021, coordinating efforts with an existing statewide nonprofit to maximize benefit to public school children facing “barriers to economic and academic success” (www.jag.org).

As the pandemic recedes, CRED members expressed their goal to make more entry with schools. We further recommend making pointed (and regularly reinforced) contact with libraries and other durable, similarly trusted public institutions (including churches, community centers, etc.) in the targeted zip codes to build on existing networks where CRED naturally benefits. Libraries with paid DOL employees, three-quarter-way half-way houses who implement career and life-skills coaching (including the Santa Monica house, where children also reside with the women in treatment) also seem congruent to CRED’s strategic collective impact approach. Finally, reaching out to social workers, parole and probation officers regularly to inform them about CRED’s utility in helping career seekers overcome barriers (as turnover can be high) could also help maximize collective impact across time.

4) 2021 "Big Wins"

A bulleted version of data relative to the successes CRED demonstrated over the course of the previous year, is located in Appendix A of this document.

Brief Summary of 2022 Recommendations (Based on 2021 Evaluation Data)

A bulleted overview of these recommendations can be found in Appendix B. The recommendations utilized information from the findings of the interviews discussed above, in-house tools and materials developed by HWS and their partners, and meetings held with the CRED team leaders.

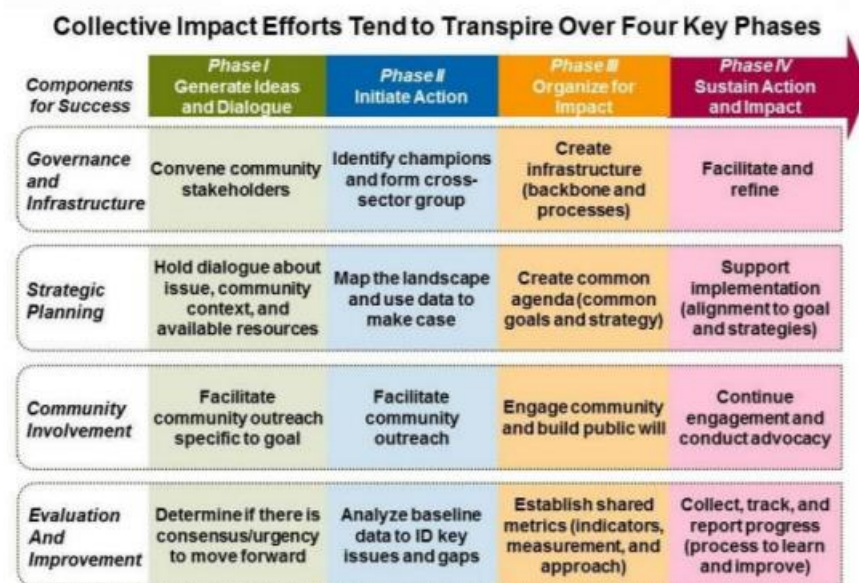
2022 Overview

Recommendation 1: Synchronize best practices and utility for non-experts relative to CRED, distinguish from HWS

Prior to COVID-19, the CRED team received some feedback that HWS had the reputation of being the “unemployment office” in the community, meaning that the many services and programs available were not widely understood or known by community members. PRPG’s past interviews with less engaged businesses and collaborative partners tended to conflate CRED with HWS. While discussion around previous recommendations to make the CRED initiative well known among multiple partners was necessarily halted during the pandemic, 2022 is an ideal time to capitalize on CRED’s successful momentum by reaching out to non-specialists (including potential career seekers, businesses, other non-profits/governmental agencies, and mediating institutions like churches) who are likely unfamiliar with HWS, CRED, WIOA or the complexities of workforce development efforts in the city/state. Synchronizing (and distilling) CRED’s benefits for non-specialists while distinguishing it from HWS can further aid the team’s ultimate goal being an ultimately self-sustaining Collective Impact Approach with HWS continuing to operate as a backbone.

Recommendation 2: Continue Momentum Toward Sustainability and Impact (Phase IV) of Collective Impact Strategy

Collective Impact efforts tend to transpire over four key phases (Kania and Kramer 2011); to Generate Ideas and Dialogue (Phase I), to Initiate Action (Phase II), to Organize for Impact (Phase III), and finally, to Sustain Action and Impact (Phase IV). The four components for successful Collective Impact efforts (Governance and Infrastructure, Strategic Planning, Community Involvement, and Evaluation and Improvement) each move through the four phases until, ideally, the Collective Impact Strategy is sustaining its momentum and engagement (see figure below).



Source: FSG.org

At the end of 2020, PRPG asserted that the CRED collective impact initiative was in either Phase III or IV for each component, with increased momentum among businesses and partners after the Work Ready Community designation (2019) and the successful growth and virtual optimization of the CPP. Throughout 2021, their NCRC/ CPP model also worked as a springboard to strengthen collaborative communication and efforts with the Omaha Chamber, multiple nonprofits, governmental agencies and businesses. We recommend that the CRED team continue to identify

new potential partnerships, and to continue its efforts in systematically identifying shared goals among current partners/entities. There are several pandemic- and Great Resignation- related insights that have necessitated innovative efforts and connections, all of which might become more long-term collective efforts that maximize collective impact.

Recommendation 3: Continue to build on existing networks/entities to provide broader outreach and access for Career Seekers

Prior to COVID-19, the team began to develop a relationship with the local library as a way to expand community awareness concerning HWS and the CRED team's Career Placement Pipeline. Given that individuals without access to wi-fi technology or who are generally in need of assistance in job-seeking often use their local library as a primary search location, this was an effective start. We suggest a return to this in 2022 both to help broaden the community's understanding of HWS and the One Stop Workforce system, while simultaneously solidify relationships among entities with shared goals. Public institutions such as libraries employ at least one individual from the Department of Labor, and regularly reinforced contact with these individuals will aid collective impact. Further, we suggest reaching out to three-quarter-way half-way houses who also implement career and life-skills coaching (including the Arch and the Santa Monica houses). These 501(c)(3)s also share congruent goals within the GO community, and further CRED's strategic collective impact approach. Finally, reaching out and building relationships with parole and probation officers, social workers and church elders to further integrate and clarify CRED's value.

Recommendation 4: Return to Conversations Surrounding Re-entry

While this was an intended goal for 2021, the pandemic functionally disallowed heavily invested discussion specific to re-entry. As circumstances allow, we recommend revisiting dialogue with a collaborative network of partners already dedicated to working with re-entry populations. If circumstances and staffing within the CRED team allow for earlier collaborative work to continue in 2022, the virtual NCRC and CPP might be a good entry point within prisons/detention centers for individuals who are nearing re-entry.

Appendix A
CRED Big Wins 2021

Virtual NCRC testing for ACT contract completion

- CRED created the new standard (via pilot testing)
- Now being utilized at HWS, MCC South Express, the Open Door, the Latino Center of the Midlands and the Urban League of Nebraska

Expanded presence in both North and South Omaha

- 75 North
- MCC Express South
- Project Re\$et
- Catholic Charities
- Latino Center of the Midlands

JAG Program implementation

- Collaborating with similar programs and entities

Increased Spanish-speaking aspects of CRED program

- More access for Spanish-speaking career seekers and entrepreneurs within the targeted zip codes

More requests and completions of credentials than ever before (and the numbers continue rising)

- Benefitting career seekers and businesses

Workshops, job fairs and virtual outreach to the community has continued throughout the pandemic era

- Industry-specific fairs to match credentialed career seekers with related employers
- Continued virtual formats, alongside hybrid and in-person options

Steady business (re-)engagement campaign

- Better Business Workshops, Industry Listening sessions
- Healthcare Careers Fair and Blood Drive; Spooktacular Job Fair; City of Omaha Job Fair
- Re-Engaging Work Ready Community (WRC) Employers for the Douglas County Initiative

Secret Shopper program (to gain insights relative to businesses and career seekers)

- Continued insight into best practices for career seekers and business engagement

Fully optimized Dashboard

- partners can input data and collaborate in order to share important details on industry, wage, employment needs

Appendix B

Overview of Recommendations for 2022

Synchronize best practices and utility for non-experts relative to CRED, distinguish from HWS

- benefits CRED's goal to ultimately be a self-sustaining Collective Impact Approach with HWS as a backbone

Continue Momentum Toward Sustainability and Impact (Phase IV) of Collective Impact Strategy

- build on pandemic- and Great Resignation- related efforts and connections to maximize collective impact
- continue to identify new potential partnerships, systematically identify shared goals among current partners/entities

Continue to build on existing networks/entities to provide broader outreach and access for career seekers

- make pointed (and regularly reinforced) contact with libraries and other trusted public institutions (including churches, community centers, etc.)
- regularly reinforce contact among public entities with existing positions/shared goals (and will require no additional CRED or other funding)

Return to Conversations Surrounding Re-entry

- consider how the newly optimized CPP and other virtual resources might be useful with prisons/detention centers for individuals who are nearing re-entry

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