

SEEKING WORK IN SOUTHERN NEW JERSEY

What job seekers and employers in Southern New Jersey and the City of Camden see as workforce barriers and opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic

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In Partnership With

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Senator Walter Rand Institute
for Public Affairs





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INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs (WRI) at Rutgers University-Camden, in contract with the Rowan University / Rutgers - Camden Board of Governors, partnered with Camden Community Partnership and the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University for a project aimed at better understanding the barriers that both employers and job seekers face.

The Rowan University / Rutgers – Camden Board of Governors serves as the funder and purveyor of projects and programs that contribute to vibrant educational institutions and communities that will attract business to the state of New Jersey. Camden Community Partnership (formerly Cooper’s Ferry Partnership) is a private, non-profit corporation dedicated to planning and implementing high-quality urban redevelopment projects to revitalize the City of Camden. The Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs is an evaluation and research center at Rutgers University - Camden, and conducted research design, participant recruitment, synthesis of secondary data, data collection, and data analysis for this project. The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University is a university-based organization devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels and participated in data collection and analysis.

The project, Seeking Work in Southern New Jersey, set out to explore the economic landscape, identify barriers and opportunities to finding and securing a job, and outline challenges to connections between job seekers and employers in Southern New Jersey and the City of Camden.

Southern New Jersey, while it bears no official definition, is a regional term that comprises the geography and culture of the eight counties that sit at the southern part of New Jersey - including Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, Ocean, and Salem Counties. Project partners serve the communities and residents of these counties, and focus the report on opportunities and barriers across these counties. The project funder and multiple partners’ home base in the City of Camden also distinguishes the City as a separate entity for data collection included in this report.

The project’s goal was to illuminate the story behind traditional economic numbers - to explore the perspectives of job seekers and employers in Southern New Jersey and the City of Camden. We know what the labor force participation rate and unemployment rate are - but how can we understand for what reason an applicant is not hearing back from a local employer? How can we understand where employers are posting job positions, and how they recruit employees? Questions like these are where this report provides context.

Researchers conducted a series of focus groups and individual conversations with both employers and job seekers, and captured the experiences, challenges, and opportunities posed by individuals both seeking and filling jobs in a pre- and -post pandemic economic landscape. Researchers then combined

this qualitative input with current labor force data to inform understanding of workforce trends and barriers across the region's eight counties. *In addition to short report inserts, separate [data stories](#) with economic background information on Southern New Jersey and the City of Camden were also created for the project and can be [found here](#).*

This report is the result of that data collection and analysis, and aims to provide insights into unique workforce trends and barriers across the region's eight counties and within the City of Camden. Job seeker and employer responses showed the choices residents made to advance their careers, how companies have shifted and changed, and considerations related to economic opportunities and structural barriers. Key themes emerged from our data, centered on job seekers' and employers' responses through the pandemic. Echoed throughout this report, these themes were: **opportunity, flexibility, and access.**

How have economic and job opportunities both stalled and grown throughout the region?

During interviews and focus groups, participants shared their views on changing industries across Southern New Jersey and in the City of Camden. These conversations reflect a theme of a mismatch of skills, jobs, and location for some people and in some places. Taken together, an economic opportunity gap exists in the region, and opportunities embracing emerging industries and aligning skills and jobs can address the gap.

What are ways to shift available opportunities to meet the challenges and barriers faced by job seekers and employers?

'Flexibility' emerged as a theme as both job seekers and employers shared their desire for, and ability to, exhibit adaptability in job recruitment, hiring, and training. Job seekers expressed challenges in being under or overqualified for jobs, and not meeting exact educational or experience requirements. Flexibility in hiring requirements and certain disqualifiers varied by employer. Employers challenged themselves to find avenues to lessen the barriers to entry for applicants.

How did job seekers and employers define access and create awareness around opportunity?

Accessibility emerged as a prominent theme as participants shared views of how to best provide job information and career resources to residents, including early education. Resources and support services can focus on job search skills, soft skill development, and key employment barriers. This theme also reflects how existing infrastructures continue to present challenges or issues for individual job seekers during the pandemic, primarily related to financial and physical wellbeing, cost of living, and awareness of services.

The data we gathered captured the nuance of barriers and opportunities that job seekers and employers face, and the findings can point to areas where local institutions, policy makers, and organizations can further explore current disconnect between these two groups - and work together to bridge these gaps.

COVID-19 CONTEXT AND IMPACT

The data collected for this project were all collected and synthesized during the pandemic, and the immense challenges and shifts in daily life induced by COVID-19 were echoed by both job seekers and employers. We know that the COVID-19 pandemic has decimated families, the entire U.S. economy, and our social structures. In April 2020, just over half of the February workforce (35 percent of all adults) lost their job, had hours reduced, took a pay cut, or were furloughed as a result of the coronavirus outbreak (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020). This included three-fourths (76 percent) of those who were employed part-time, about two-thirds of hourly or contract workers (68 percent), and 65 percent of workers from lower-income households (those earning less than \$40,000 annually).

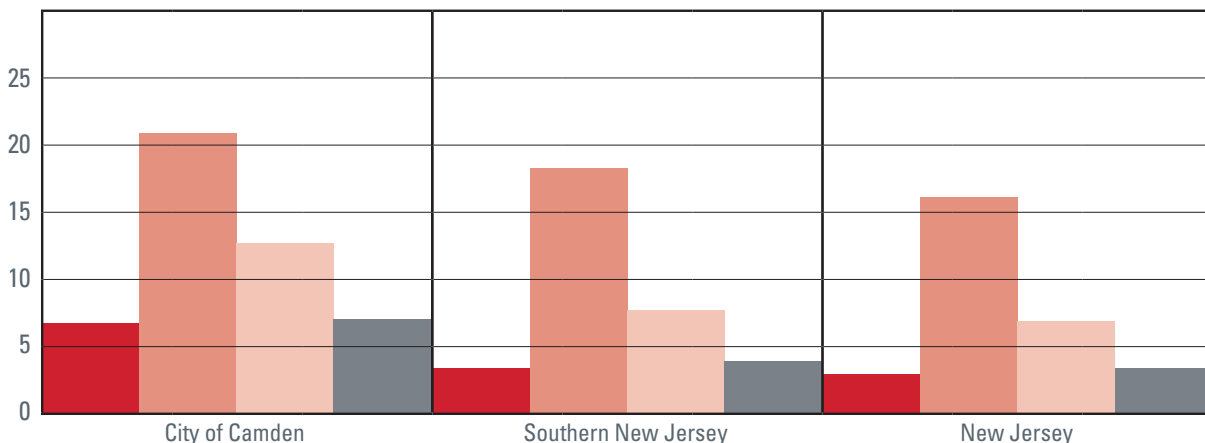
Daily routines were disrupted and many work activities (including job search and hiring processes) were shifted online - exposing gaps in technology access and a loss of in-person communication. Both job seekers and employers expressed the apprehension and questions that will remain as businesses and residents reflect, reopen, and reconsider what economic development and what working in or offering a “good” job means.

The pandemic deeply affected Southern New Jersey’s economy as well. According to a recent report from Stockton University, the COVID-induced recession of 2020 was far more damaging to the regional economy than the Great Recession of 2009 and Hurricane Sandy in 2012 (The South Jersey Economic Review, 2021). This same report estimates that the gross domestic product (GDP) of Southern New Jersey decreased by about 12 percent to 28 percent during the pandemic, losing as much as \$5.1 billion from the economy during this time (The South Jersey Economic Review, 2021).

Many of the communities hardest hit by COVID-19 job losses have workers in industries that bore the brunt of the economic shutdown, such as hospitality and transportation. Across Southern New Jersey, the low-income jobs lost were primarily in the accommodation and food services, healthcare and social assistance, retail trade, and other service sectors. Southern New Jersey shopping malls were shut down for 86 days at the pandemic’s beginning, resulting in a \$29.5 million quarterly loss (Walsh, 2020).

The pandemic caused higher income losses among those that work in the restaurant, hospitality, retail and other service industries. Additionally, many health care workers, grocery store workers, and delivery people worked amidst precarious health dangers. Workers in these front-line industries are disproportionately likely to be low-wage, with about a fifth of low-wage workers employed in each of the entertainment, accommodation, food services (20 percent) and retail (19 percent) industries, and another tenth in service (5 percent) or construction (5 percent) industries (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020). We also know that low-wage workers are more likely to be young adults, female (58 percent, versus 47 percent for all workers), and disproportionately Hispanic or Black Non-Hispanic race/ethnicity when

Unemployment Rate (%) by Area, May 2019 –May 2022



Source: New Jersey Department of Labor & Workforce Development

■ May 2019 ■ May 2020 ■ May 2021 ■ May 2022

considering the population racial/ethnic layout nationally. Among those in front line jobs, 17 percent are Black compared to 11.9 percent of all workers (Economic Policy Institute, 2020). Moreover, many of these workers faced additional health risks, and often were not offered paid time off/sick leave or proper personal protective equipment (PPE) while on the job (Walter Rand Institute, 2020). Even months following data collection and analysis for this project, the emergence of the Omicron variant and various sub-variants in the later half of 2021 and throughout 2022 continue to emphasize health, safety, and economic recovery priorities for all residents.

As noted above, research has shown that COVID-19 has disproportionately affected low-income residents and people of color that are already often socially and economically marginalized. Because COVID-19 disproportionately affected low-income residents and people of color, recovery policies need to focus on those same groups. In a recent survey of nonprofit organizations, financial institutions, government agencies, and other community organizations serving people in low- to moderate income households, over half of respondents (56 percent) indicated it will take more than 12 months for their communities to return to the conditions prior to the disruption of COVID-19 (Federal Reserve System, 2020).

The data collected in this report occurred during the pandemic, and reflect the real-time barriers and struggles of Southern New Jersey and City of Camden employers and residents. At this point in the pandemic, racial, structural, and economic inequities have been exposed, and the data and voices shown here offer context in rebuilding the region and creating economic opportunity for all residents moving forward.

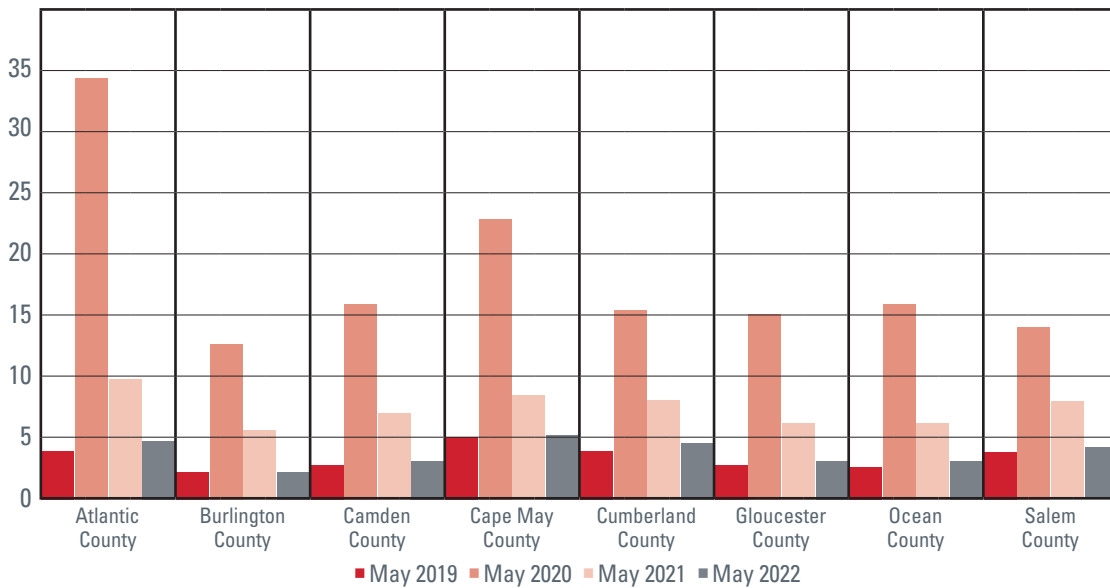
MISMATCH BETWEEN EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES - BACKGROUND

Conversations around job, skill, and location mismatch have permeated workforce development efforts prior to both the pandemic and the Great Recession, and the discussion around these terms and trends will continue to evolve as we collectively experience and recover from COVID-19. Taken together, this mismatch is a discrepancy around job qualifications or requirements related to skills, abilities, education, knowledge, values, and interests between employers and job seekers. Narrowly, this means that education and training avenues are not providing the qualifications demanded in the labor market, or that the economy may not be creating jobs that correspond to individual job seekers' qualifications (Autor, Katz & Kearney, 2006).

More broadly, we can say that opportunities in the labor market are not aligned with the people available to participate in the labor market. Even before the pandemic, 1 in 3 working families in the U.S. was low-income or experiencing poverty (Working Poor Families Project, 2018). Rising inequality, racial and ethnic disadvantages, and service jobs dominating low-wage work can all be attributed to stagnant incomes (Working Poor Families Project, 2018). The pandemic further exacerbated financial and wealth gaps, often symbols of economic security that people in lower-income roles often cannot obtain (Autor, Katz & Kearney, 2006). With employers, higher wage paying companies tend to look for a higher level of skill in job seekers, often defined through formal means of education, credentials, or previous work experience. Prior criminal records, state and federal regulations for undocumented individuals, and mandated job/work requirements also present barriers. Additional informal barriers, such as lack of networks and discrimination, can also be barriers for individuals looking for work. There are many factors that make it difficult to find better jobs - lack of skills, qualifications, location, and access. Together with economic conditions and regional nuances, these barriers contribute to an economic opportunity divide in the workforce.

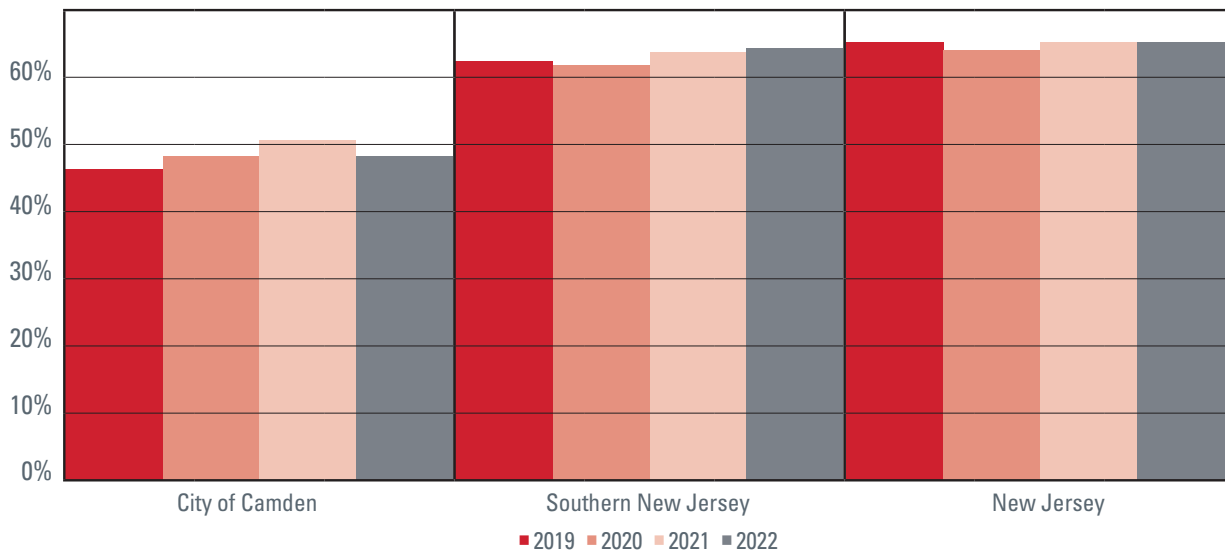
When people are unable to find jobs that align with their interest, skills, or that are even accessible, they may exit the formal labor market. Despite low unemployment rates across the country pre-pandemic, research has identified groups of individuals “disappearing” from the labor force at higher rates than past decades, as indicated through a decline in the overall labor force participation rate (Abraham & Kearney, 2018). In 2016, over one-third (37.2 percent) of adults in the United States, including nearly one-fifth (18.7 percent) of prime working age adults (between 25 and 54 years old), were not in the workforce (Schanzenbach, Bauer, Nunn & Mumford, 2017). The labor force participation rate reflects the number of individuals who are interested in participating in the workforce. As the labor force participation rate declines, the number of individuals disconnected from the labor force, also categorized as nonparticipants (individuals who are neither working nor actively seeking work) rises. Prior to the pandemic, Southern New Jersey faced lower labor participation and higher unemployment rates than the rest of the state. The 2019 unemployment rate in Southern New Jersey was 3.7%, compared to 3.6% in the U.S., and 3.0% in New Jersey (New Jersey Department of Labor & Workforce Development, 2022).

Southern New Jersey Counties Unemployment Rate (%), May 2019 – May 2022



Source: New Jersey Department of Labor & Workforce Development

Labor Force Participation Rate (%) by Area, May 2019 - May 2022



Source: New Jersey Department of Labor & Workforce Development and U.S. Census

	UNEMPLOYMENT RATE				LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE			
	May 2019	May 2020	May 2021	May 2022	May 2019	May 2020	May 2021	May 2022
Atlantic County	4.2%	34.8%	9.8%	4.8%	57.7%	56.2%	56.9%	59.3%
Burlington County	2.8%	13.5%	5.4%	2.8%	65.5%	63.5%	66.1%	67.0%
Camden County	3.4%	16.2%	7.0%	3.7%	64.5%	64.0%	65.6%	66.1%
Cape May County	5%	23.7%	8.4%	5.2%	60.9%	55.3%	61.5%	60.4%
Cumberland County	4.3%	15.8%	7.5%	4.5%	58.7%	58.1%	59.4%	57.6%
Gloucester County	3.1%	15%	6.2%	3.3%	65.7%	65.1%	66.9%	67.6%
Ocean County	3%	16.2%	6.1%	3.3%	60.7%	59.8%	61.5%	61.3%
Salem County	3.9%	14.0%	7.4%	4.3%	60.0%	59.0%	60.2%	58.2%
Southern New Jersey	3.7%	18.7%	7.2%	4.0%	62.5%	61.3%	63.2%	63.6%
New Jersey	3.0%	16.0%	6.6%	3.4%	64.8%	63.1%	64.8%	64.8%
City of Camden	6.8%	21.5%	13.1%	6.9%	47.8%	48.9%	50.2%	48.9%

The labor force participation rate is a gauge of living standards and economic vitality. A decline in the rate indicates that more individuals have given up on finding work; therefore, they are no longer counted as either working or unemployed. An increase in these subgroups of disconnected workers may show that improvements in the economy may not be reaching all levels of society.

Securing high-quality jobs for residents is critical to increasing economic mobility within Southern New Jersey. Simultaneously, providing a viable workforce to the region’s employers is essential for the continued economic growth, while ensuring this growth reaches all residents equitably. Thus, the declining numbers of labor force participation and the increased growth of employers in the region represent a gap – pools of workers available to fill jobs, and pockets of employers looking to hire. Together, this gap shows both groups seeking opportunities. The findings from this project both support the data we see from prior studies and provide further context to the region’s nuances that relate to gaps in economic opportunities.



BACKGROUND ON SOUTHERN NEW JERSEY ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE

Read the accompanying Southern New Jersey data story [here](#)

Southern New Jersey today is a major industrial center, an important transportation corridor, and a long-established destination for summer vacationers. From close-knit town centers, to robust downtowns, to picturesque shorelines that attract millions of visitors each year, the region's 3,700 square miles are full of opportunity.

There are agricultural mainstays, rising waterfront developments, healthcare and higher education investments, new aviation and renewable energy endeavours, and a host of other positive economic drivers. The top key industries across all regions in Southern New Jersey are health care and social assistance, government, retail trade, and accommodation/hospitality and food services (including tourism). According to the 2019 data from the New Jersey Department of Labor & Workforce Development, most of the economic and employment growth in Southern New Jersey has been seen in six sectors of the economy including administrative service, accommodation/hospitality, healthcare, professional services, real estate service, and transportation. These service-providing industries provide more than 90 percent of employment in the region.

The primary economic industries in Southern New Jersey have historically evolved from first based on natural resources, to manufacturing, and to currently to more reliance on service and technology-based industries. The focal points of Southern New Jersey's natural-resources based economy were port settlements where agricultural commodities and natural resources were produced and transported to other regions. In the decades after the Civil War, Southern New Jersey played a leading role in manufacturing across the nation through its easy accessibility to raw materials and export centers, cheap and efficient workforce of immigrants, and key railroad transportation networks. In the 1970s, Southern New Jersey gradually lost its manufacturing advantage in lower-cost labor and energy supplies, experiencing the highest level of unemployment since the Great Depression ("Economy Overview," 2020). Even though urban manufacturing in Southern New Jersey lost its competition, a major industry transformation driven by technology was already well underway. Since the 1990s, the primary industries have shifted to service and technology-based industries because of enormous education resources and their role in the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area ("Economy Overview," 2020). The region offers a diverse portfolio of labor markets, businesses, populations, resources and assets, yet it also has unique needs between its counties and in relation to other parts of the state.

The region could be thought of as three sub-regions. One sub-region consists of the coastal counties of Atlantic, Cape May and Ocean counties. The coastal region has developed its distinct economy centered on the hospitality and tourism industry since the legalization of gambling at Atlantic City in 1978. The coastal counties region saw a huge boom in tourism and gambling industries which dramatically transformed the economic landscape of the region. The gambling industry added over 50,000 jobs between 1978 and 1995 (Perniciaro, 1995). Construction, automotive, and personal care services are additional key industries in the coastal counties, in addition to developing aviation and technology industries.

Southern New Jersey's western counties consist of Burlington, Camden, and Gloucester counties. These counties are more densely populated and economically linked to the greater Philadelphia labor market, together comprising the Camden Metropolitan Division of the greater Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington core-based metropolitan statistical area (CBSA). The three counties share similar trajectories of historical economic and industrial development patterns, as well as employment and commuter networks. In these western counties, a variety of small businesses and an array of large corporations are more prevalent than in other parts of Southern New Jersey. Healthcare operations and educational institutions represent a very large portion of the industry in these counties, along with professional services (i.e. banking, communication, engineering, legal services), retail, food production, and manufacturing.

Southern New Jersey's most rural counties, Salem and Cumberland, are nestled at the bottom portion of the state along the Delaware Bay and include open spaces of rivers, meadows and marshlands, beaches, woodlands, and lakes and ponds. Historically these counties' economies developed around industries such as glass making, food processing, textiles and maritime trades. Today, both counties have a strong agricultural base with targeted industry sectors that include healthcare, construction, hospitality/tourism and advanced manufacturing.





BACKGROUND ON CITY OF CAMDEN ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE

Read the accompanying
City of Camden data story [here](#)

Camden

The City of Camden was named after Charles Pratt, Earl of Camden, in 1773. The Pratt family settled in Camden and neighboring areas around the Delaware River, jumpstarting economic growth in the area (Camden Daily Courier, 1917). For the next 150 years, Camden was a secondary economic and transportation hub for the Greater Philadelphia Area.

It was not until around 1828 that Camden became a city with its own economic wealth and identity. Two years later a railroad station was built in the city that eased traveling and generated business. People travelling from New York could get off the train at Camden and take a ferry to Philadelphia. By the outset of the 20th century, Camden became industrialized. The RCA Victor Corporation had 23 of its 25 electronics factories in Camden. 12,000 workers were employed at RCA Victor and 30,000 workers at New York Shipbuilding (O'Reilly, 2013; Madden, n.d.).

After 50 years of economic growth and reaching a peak of 43,267 manufacturing jobs in 1950, Camden experienced a period of economic stagnation. Companies like RCA, Campbells Soup, and New York Shipbuilding moved production or factories elsewhere. The shutdown and outflow of these major companies caused a drastic decrease in jobs and slowed economic growth in the City. Nearby developments like a mall in Cherry Hill (in Camden County) increased neighboring towns' property values in comparison to Camden, further contributing to population decline and disinvestment in the City. By 1982, Camden experienced a low of 10,200 manufacturing jobs. For a half a century, the Camden community was disproportionately impacted by an outward migration of companies, public and private disinvestment, and racial inequity. In 2002, Camden was placed under state control, which expanded to include law enforcement in 2003. The state allocated \$175 million to the City during this time and the state authorized takeover formally ended in 2010 (Katz & Tamari, 2010). Camden City School District was placed under state purview in 2013.

In recent years, the City of Camden is in the midst of considerable transformation. Through significant collaborative partnerships spurred at the turn of the 21st century, Camden's economic landscape started to change. City departments were restructured, under-resourced neighborhoods were invested in, and policies shifted to support City of Camden residents. Many community resources, such as culture, arts, and social ties coming from residents' leadership remain vibrant throughout the City and continue to inform local decisions and neighborhood developments. The City Invincible continues to create avenues for its residents to participate in the social

and economic opportunities available. Before the pandemic, the City of Camden had an unemployment rate of 6.8 percent in May 2019, its lowest in decades (New Jersey Department of Labor & Workforce Development, 2022; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Unemployment in Camden had consistently declined in the post-Great Recession years and, and as was true in most areas, saw a significant increase during the pandemic (21.5 percent in May 2020, 20.2 percent in August 2020, and 14.9 percent in December 2020). COVID-19 restriction rollbacks and hiring increases have contributed to recent data showing a recovery in unemployment, with the rate falling to 13.1 percent in May 2021, and 6.9 in May 2022.

The City has invested significantly in educational and medical development and Camden today has a robust but specific labor market. A statewide reorganization of higher education led to the dissolution of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey and the creation of the Rowan University/Rutgers-Camden Board of Governors. In 2012, Cooper Medical School of Rowan University was founded. These two new entities have joined CAMcare, Camden County College, Cooper University Health Care, Lourdes Health System, Rowan University, Rutgers- Camden and Virtua in a collaborative dedicated to promotion of educational and medical growth throughout the city (CamConnect, Fall 2015).

In 2014, 10.3 percent of employees in the City worked in health care occupations (Rowan University- Rutgers Camden Board of Governors, 2015). According to the Camden Higher Education and Healthcare Task Force Economic Impact Report in 2015, out of 29,962 total jobs in Camden, 12,060 of those jobs (40% of total jobs in Camden) were in education and healthcare fields, and 17,902 of jobs in Camden (60%) were in other industries. The next largest industries in the City are manufacturing, retail, and arts, entertainment, and recreation.

In 2013, the New Jersey Economic Development Authority (NJEDA) created the New Jersey Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) which provided incentives in the form of tax breaks for companies to relocate or remain in certain cities. This act stimulated investment of around \$1.4 billion, and created or retained 1,939 jobs per year in the City (EConsult Solutions Inc., 2019). Amidst multiple large corporations committing to Camden headquarters, in 2015 a plan to remodel and rehabilitate the Camden Waterfront was proposed. Today Camden is home to many large companies like Campbell Soup Company, Subaru, American Water, and EMR, Philadelphia 76ers, and smaller companies such as Contemporary Graphics and CamdenYards Steel (Camden Works, 2019).

Multiple partnership programs help connect the City's education, medical, and business fields to its employers and residents. Camden Works leverages resources from various entities to provide training, education, and jobs placement, and provides wraparound social services to City high school graduates, citizens returning from incarceration, recent local college graduates, and displaced homemakers (Camden Works Reimagining Workforce Development in Camden, 2019). The program put 400 people in jobs in Camden during 2020 (Galletto, 2021).

The City of Camden is a city full of vigor and opportunity. Yet it is also challenged by economic barriers and intentional disinvestment that existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic. Full recovery from COVID-19 and continued movement towards economic opportunity will take an inclusive, sustained effort by leaders across all sectors to address the disparities that have persisted.

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODS (OVERVIEW)

The primary modes of data collection for this project included a series of both focus groups and individual interviews. Due to COVID-19 research restrictions and social distancing requirements at the time of data collection, all focus groups and interviews were conducted remotely, either through Zoom technology, or over the phone from January 2021 through April 2021. The research team used focus groups to target the perspectives of employers in the region about the skills they demand, how they tap into the talent in the region, and where they have the greatest difficulty in finding and retaining workers. We convened a series of 12 focus groups with employers and business stakeholders from specific counties in southern New Jersey. Three of the 12 focus groups were employers and business stakeholders exclusively from the City of Camden. The focus groups were comprised of employers in industries with the greatest employment in the region, employers from industries that are projected to grow, and members of local employer associations and local chambers of commerce. Additionally, the research team used semi-structured individual interviews with job seekers in the region and in the City of Camden to learn about their experiences in various jobs. We sought to gain a deeper understanding of how people were navigating the job search process in the region, particularly during the pandemic, and how support services and employers could better meet their immediate and long-term needs. The 20 interview participants' towns of residence spanned the eight-county region. Some participants lived and worked in different counties. Following conclusion of data collection through the focus groups and interviews, researchers engaged in multiple rounds of thematic data analysis.

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODS (DETAILED)

Three main exploratory research questions guided our methods for this project:

What are the unique challenges to labor force connection for job seekers and employers in Southern New Jersey and the City of Camden?

For individuals seeking work, what are the barriers to finding and securing a job?

For employers struggling to fill open positions, how can they connect with potential workers? What are current and future employer needs?

To explore these questions, the primary modes of data collection included a series of both focus groups and individual interviews. These qualitative methods were chosen to engage in a structured inquiry of perceptions; to explore how economic trends relate to people, to understand the disconnect between job seekers and employers in the region. These methods provide greater context to existing economic data and deeper nuance to current trends.

The research team conducted all focus groups and interviews to maintain consistency across data collection. This project was approved by the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB process at

Rutgers University is based on the rules and regulations stipulated by federal agency regulation of human subjects research. All research must be completed in accordance with these guidelines. The Rutgers IRB has the authority to approve, require modifications in planned research prior to approval, or disapprove research. Approval was granted on September 11, 2020 (Protocol #2020001643).

The researchers involved are Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Human Subjects Research certified. All Rutgers University faculty, students, and other individuals involved in human subjects research are required to be CITI Human Subjects certified. The certification ensures training in human subjects research and addresses the historical development of human subject protections, ethical issues, and current regulatory and guidance information for research (CITI Program, 2021). Research team members have conducted both in-person and virtual interviews and facilitated both in-person and virtual focus groups across a range of content areas, including interviews for health needs assessments, interviews and focus groups for workforce development programs, interviews with social service providers in southern New Jersey, and interviews with educational providers and administrators.

Due to COVID-19 research restrictions and social distancing requirements at the time of data collection, all focus groups and interviews were conducted remotely, either through Zoom technology, or over the phone from January 2021 through April 2021. All focus groups included 1-2 notetakers. All interviews were recorded (either audio and/or audio/visual), and the researcher also took hand-written notes during each interview. Each of the study participants was interviewed or participated in a focus group only once over the course of the study.

The study's purpose and procedures were explained to each potential respondent, and informed consent was obtained from each individual participating in the study. Participation in the interviews and focus groups was voluntary and each participant answered and elaborated on questions as they chose, with follow-up questions from the researcher as appropriate.

Focus Groups

The research team used focus groups to target the perspectives of employers in the region about the skills they demand, how they tap into the talent in the region, and where they have the greatest difficulty in finding and retaining workers. The team sought feedback about changes in the economic, political, or industry landscape that is not captured in the labor market information; understand the challenges employers face in finding and retaining quality talent; and to collect information on the talent pipeline

that they currently tap into when hiring. Additionally, the focus groups sought input from the employer community on how counties, and the Southern New Jersey region/ City of Camden more broadly, can facilitate a workforce development system that better engages all partners, including community-based partners that could connect employers to untapped talent and disconnected job seekers.

We convened a series of 12 focus groups with employers and business stakeholders from specific counties in southern New Jersey. Three of the 12 focus groups were employers and business stakeholders exclusively from the City of Camden. WRI utilized its existing network, reaching out to over 60 associated organizations and employer-representing individuals, to recruit participants for the county focus groups. The focus groups comprised of employer participants from the City of Camden used Camden Community Partnership's connections for recruitment. Recruitment took place from November 2020 to January 2021.

The focus groups consisted of employers in industries with the greatest employment in the region, employers from industries that are projected to grow, and members of local employer associations and local chambers of commerce. The 41 individual participants represented an array of industries - banking, construction, education, engineering, government, healthcare, manufacturing, retail, social service, technology, tourism/hospitality, trades and utilities, and transportation. County-specific participants came from the eight Southern New Jersey counties. Each discussion lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and had one facilitator and at least 1 to 2 note takers.

Interviews

The research team used semi-structured individual interviews with job seekers in the region and in the City of Camden to learn about their experiences in various jobs. The team sought to gain a deeper understanding of how people were navigating the job search process in the region, particularly during the pandemic, and how support services and employers could better meet their immediate and long-term needs.

WRI conducted outreach to 120 community organizations operating in southern New Jersey counties, several of which distributed the recruitment material to their networks. Camden Community Partnership led recruitment of participants from the City of Camden. Recruitment took place in February and March 2021. Potential participants were asked to complete a brief online screening survey to determine their eligibility for participation and allow for stratified random sampling if the sample size was large enough. The

screening tool was administered via Qualtrics and received 54 responses in total. 31 respondents were contacted to schedule an interview.

Of those 31 contacted for interviews, 20 interviews were completed as 11 respondents were not reachable following their initial interview scheduling. Interviews lasted 37 minutes on average and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interview protocol featured questions related to prior employment experience and current situation; job search methods and resources; barriers to job search and employee retention; future employment goals; and recommendations for employers and support services.

The towns of residence of the 20 interview participants spanned the eight-county region. Some participants lived and worked in different counties. Nearly all participants were women with English as their primary language. Twelve participants self-identified as white, five as Black or African American, and three as “other.” Five participants were divorced, and 15 were single, never married. Participants had an average of one child and lived in households with three residents (including themselves). Regarding participant education, three had a high school degree, six had some college but no degree, two had an Associate’s degree, and nine had a Bachelor’s degree.

When asked about current employment, six participants were not currently working any job, ten were working one job, and four were working two or more jobs. Two participants indicated that their hourly wage was under \$11, seven participants earned between \$11 and \$13, eight were between \$14 and \$19, and two made \$20 or more per hour (one did not respond to this question). Nine respondents reported working less than 20 hours per week, seven worked between 20 and 40 hours, and three worked 40 or more hours per week. One respondent did not report wages or weekly hours. Eight of the participants reported currently receiving unemployment insurance payments.

Data Analysis

Following conclusion of data collection through the focus groups and interviews, researchers transcribed all audio and/or audio/visual recordings into text and created a master transcript, which included all cases in chronological order. In addition, all hand written notes from focus groups and interviews were typed up into one electronic document. Specific names and/or identifying information that would violate confidentiality agreements established through consent were removed from the data at this stage.

For both the focus groups and interviews, from the master transcript, researchers then analyzed for overlapping themes. Codes were created for the interview data to identify patterns related to identified topic areas from the protocol. Specific topics to guide analysis in interviews included respondents' perceptions on job searching/ hiring and recruitment, the region's labor market, barriers to employment, and recommendations for workforce investments and future initiatives.

Researchers individually generated a list of themes and categories with content descriptions. Researchers then met to discuss individual lists and worked collaboratively to compile a final list of themes and categories that emerged from the notes. Separately, for both the interview data and focus group data, these two lists of thematic codes were then taken to code data through NVivo software. Coding by transcript was reviewed by the analysis team for consistency, negative case analysis, and agreement prior to this second round of analysis.

Following the first round of analysis to identify patterns within the data, a second round of analysis of codebook creation and coding for an initial findings summary of the data, a third round of analysis through open coding was conducted for another thematic analysis, enabling additional and/or confirmatory themes to emerge inductively from the data. A process of iterative review and revision of codes was undertaken through repeated reading of the data. These processes resulted in major themes outlined in the Findings section below.

Multiple techniques were employed to enhance the rigor of the study and the credibility of the findings. Throughout the research process, researchers acknowledged their positionality as evaluators in the higher education space and their own subjectivities on the workforce challenges, particularly as they became increasingly acute during the pandemic. Notes about participants' comments during data collection and researchers' thoughts both brought to light and challenged many notions about unemployment, job availability, and potential "solutions." These contemplations refined researchers' subjectivity and are inherently embedded in the data analysis process. Given the researchers' focus areas in Southern New Jersey and economic study/evaluation projects, the researchers attempted to seek out findings that did not fit with existing quantitative data and/or other respondents' experiences. The researchers did this through negative case analysis, as mentioned above. Iterative questioning during interviews and focus groups enabled the researchers to follow-up with participants around emerging themes and gain additional information around certain topics framed in slightly different ways to capture more nuance or elaboration on the topics being discussed. Multiple collaborative sessions throughout data collection and data analysis enabled researchers to

engage in peer debriefing around emergent themes, areas of discrepancy, and considerations for analysis and content. Lastly, an audit trail of scheduled interviews/focus groups, correspondence around interviews/focus groups, and interview/focus groups notes helped to corroborate the recorded interviews with notes taken during the interviews and to highlight emerging concepts while interviews were underway. This document trail helped the researchers remain accountable to the findings within the data and contextualize what was shared within the span of the time and place of data collection.

FINDINGS - BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The findings presented below are derived from 12 focus groups and 20 interviews. The number of participants from each county varied, and the data presented here addressed overlapping themes from all counties, while noting there may be additional themes that remain uncaptured. The same data collection note holds true for the City of Camden. Findings are based on overall perspectives of the respondents across the region during the period of data collection in COVID-19; and although participants hailed from specific counties, their feedback should not be seen as a general representation of that respective county and/or the City of Camden. Employers and job seekers shared from their own experiences during the time of data collection, which are unique to their own specific industries and experiences.

INTERVIEWS WITH SOUTHERN NEW JERSEY AND CITY OF CAMDEN JOB SEEKERS

COVID-19, Employment Experience, and the Southern New Jersey and Camden Landscape

COVID-19

COVID-19's impact on the labor market changed many people's job responsibilities and restricted business and job opportunities. The halting of the national and local economies led to the lay off of millions of workers and not only devastated some industries more than others, but also deeply impacted individuals' well-being and their return to work plans. A separate study on working families showed that nearly two-thirds of respondents (65 percent) reported a drop in household pay from wages; layoffs, hours reductions, lower tips, and family member unemployment all led to lower total wage income in May-June 2020 than before the pandemic began. In most cases, this drop in pay translated to a drop in household income: about half of the sample (48 percent) reported lower total income since the start of the pandemic (Duke Report, 2020).

Most participants in this project discussed having hours cut, being let go/laid off, and the struggle of maintaining employment and/or finding new or additional employment throughout the pandemic. A separate Spring 2020 report found that four in ten (42 percent) adults said that either they or their partner experienced a job loss or a cut in salary or hours due to the pandemic. Overall, three in ten adults (29 percent) said they fell behind in paying bills or had problems affording household expenses like food or health insurance coverage since February 2020 due to the coronavirus outbreak. Nearly half

(46 percent) of those who had an income loss due to coronavirus said they have had difficulty paying bills or affording household expenses since the outbreak (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020). One person recounted their shift in jobs during this time, “I started working at a grocery store, which is a different change of pace because it is like a front line and a person. And I was working there from August to a couple of weeks ago in March...they [the grocery store chain] were experiencing budget cuts due to the pandemic, and because of that, my hours were cut down and I couldn’t really afford to not work, so I had to find another job. And the only one I could find at the time was working for another grocery store. And because that was like a conflict of interest and I had to stop working my old job.”

Many participants shared their safety concerns about childcare facilities while at work, exposure to COVID-19 at work while caring for older family members, and general anxieties during this time. “It made me very cautious and a little weary of ending up with a job at this point. Like I want to be working but I’m really, a little nervous about it, so I don’t know, maybe they’re picking up on that. It’s my mom and my sister and myself and all three of us have underlying health issues. My mom, she’s 73, so the idea of going out and having to work with people, and knowing that not everybody’s taking precautions seriously, that has definitely hindered me...I just don’t know, it has made me cautious, very cautious.”

A few job seekers shared picking up work as professional grocery shoppers during the pandemic. Others mentioned the loss of their jobs (i.e. at a distribution center for a large manufacturer, ride-hailing company driver, project management assistant) due to the pandemic. Still others left their jobs to care for children who were engaged in virtual schooling, and/or were concerned about the safety of themselves and their families during the pandemic. Shared one mother, “I think it’s difficult because I decided to do this at the wrong time. That’s how I feel because of the pandemic. You know there’s not a lot of availability for full time. I notice that there’s a lot of part time or per diem, but nothing full time. You have a job search that has impacted my job situation as well because I’ve had to cut down hours because I don’t have anyone to stay with my child during her virtual days so that has affected me.”

One person explained how the pandemic opened the doors for businesses to enable remote work, and expanded avenues for job seekers to find a remote job that fits their skill set if jobs of interest are limited in their area of residence. These remote opportunities were discussed in consideration of the lack of sufficient transportation infrastructure in the region that often contributes to job search challenges.

Participants overall expressed a combination of positivity, hesitancy, and apprehension about a shift in employment opportunities and the labor market overall as vaccine distribution ramped up and businesses reopened in New Jersey in the spring and early summer of 2021. “People who are out of work for such a long time. I mean, I know it’s changing now and getting better. So I don’t know how many people are going back, I don’t know how many people are still laid off. So I think it’s improving compared to six months ago. I don’t know about compared to a year and a half ago,” shared one participant.

Unemployment Insurance and Return to Work During COVID-19

“They just gave me 11 more weeks, so after that, that puts me until like the end of April..it’ll put me out till and then I mean, they did extend it until September, but I don’t know if they extend it just the \$300 or if they extended the actual program till September. And I don’t want to keep living like this. You know, I want to be able to find a job, but I don’t want to do like Uber. And I want a job where I can depend on money to have a career you know, and unfortunately at this time, I’m not going to get a career.”

One of the most prominent storylines from the data, and featured in recent media, highlights the rise in unemployment during the pandemic, using unemployment benefits, and returning to work. Unemployment rates peaked in June 2020 at 18.0 percent in Southern New Jersey, and 16.6 percent in the state (Robert D. Niehaus, Inc., 2020). Many participants noted their own experiences with

unemployment, stemming from lost jobs and other circumstances. One person shared they were let go from their employer of 10 years after a new owner had taken over, “my tenure meant nothing to them and I wasn’t doing what they liked. So, you know, I was forced to go, which it really hurt in the beginning but I’m on disability. So, it was part time hours and you know, I miss the check, because I haven’t been able to get anything else. Thank God for unemployment but being that I’m on disability, I didn’t realize how much I actually needed. I’m just one of those people that, you know, I just keep going regardless of what my body is doing and so I needed the break...when I was fired, I went around, did the rounds, dropped off applications and resumes. I had to redo my résumé, you know, and nothing. I haven’t gotten anything.” Another person was laid off in March 2020, applied for unemployment in July, and received it for the first time in October 2020.

I just wish there was more opportunities, and [for] people that have degrees, you know, they’re offering very minimum minimum wage. So why, and then if you think about it, why am I going to come off unemployment to get less than what I am making [on unemployment]? But, especially, I need a job. I want a job. I need to buy a house. I need, you know, because that’s going to affect your credit in the long run. ‘Oh well, you haven’t been working for this amount of time,’ now I can’t give you a mortgage or you can’t fix your credit. So right now, this whole COVID thing got everybody screwed up.

In the transition back to work, participants commented on the costs and benefits of participation in the labor market. Some unemployed participants remain receiving unemployment, and participants shared that in some circumstances unemployment provides more funds than offered wages.

“Well, right now we live in a major industrial area where there’s a lot of industrial parks and a lot of factory work. There is a lot of positions opening open right now. And there’s a lot of people that are not working because of unemployment. The unemployment amount that they get would be like equal to a \$20 some dollar an hour job. So why are you going to work? Why are you going to go to work for \$13 an hour if you could make the unemployment amount of money – where you don’t have to deal with the stress of going to work every morning, or the stress of finding child care, the stress of everything. I mean, you’re going to get the unemployment.”

In both seeking work and returning to work, participants expressed their desire to be able to find a well-paying job and achieve their goals. Job seekers noted the challenges of COVID-19, and expressed desire for individual and regional opportunities to work and/or return to work. Opportunity gaps to find work exist during COVID-19 as well. Shared one participant, “I might put my kids in daycare at this current moment, but now I have all the resources I need to be able to have a job. I have a car. I have a support that can watch our children. You know, I have everything I need. It’s just opportunity.” Commented another job seeker, “I think in this area, it’s hard. Whether it’s just a regular factory job, I think it’s very hard in this area. There’s a lack of opportunities for anyone pre and during COVID-19. I don’t see that changing.”

Unique Aspects of the Southern New Jersey Economic Landscape

“I just think it’s the economics, we don’t have a grocery store here anymore. A lot of people have moved out of town because of higher taxes. So I think that all influences it.”

Some participants referred to Southern New Jersey’s mix of geography and economy, and the lack of infrastructure and job opportunities in the area *For a more detailed view of the Economic Landscape of*

Southern New Jersey - read the data story [here](#). Together, the conditions of each county impact the region's job opportunities and unemployment rate overall. For instance, the City of Camden is one of the cities in the region largely connected to the greater Philadelphia area and there typically are more job opportunities and infrastructure in Camden (and in surrounding Camden, Burlington and Gloucester Counties) than other towns and cities across the region. Also, because of decades of deindustrialization, the City has been the focus of economic development programs like the Camden "eds and meds" corridor (Coulter, 2016). **For a more detailed view of the Economic Landscape of the City of Camden - read the data story [here](#)** Salem and Cumberland counties are two of the least populous counties in the state and face other unique conditions, such as a lack of transportation infrastructure. Coastline counties' (Atlantic, Cape May, Ocean Counties) share of jobs are often limited and dependent on the summer months each year. These socio-economic barriers are place-based and were discussed in both interviews with jobs seekers and focus groups with employers.

Even still, the pandemic added another layer of complexity to existing regional nuances, as noted by one participant, "you know, employment where I live is not as it was, where if I would live closer to like Camden and that area. They definitely have a smaller market here for things. But I've even looked closer to Camden, I've looked in different locations. So it's not really my location at this time. I just think in New Jersey in general, they're not trying to hire as much as they should be. It's not normal, I mean, life isn't anywhere near back to normal."

In thinking about employment opportunities, the unique aspects of the Southern New Jersey labor market and economic landscape arose in conversations with participants. Participants' interviews show job mismatch related to disinvestment and deindustrialization across the region. As noted above, within Southern New Jersey, an economic opportunity gap exists.

"I mean there's just not a lot of jobs around here for everyone. Most of the jobs around here are at diners or the [dollar store]!. The jobs that exist like industry jobs are like far away, so then transportation comes into play."

Additionally, multiple respondents commented on the cost of living in New Jersey, and in their counties specifically. Shared one respondent, "I love living where I am [Cape May County], but it's coming to the point where I can't afford it."

"The hardest thing about finding a job probably is the lack of jobs, and then how to make it easier – come up with more job opportunities because it's... things are getting knocked down to build more houses, build more condos. And I'm like, why are you building houses for people who can't move in because there's no jobs attracting them? You need the jobs to attract and then the people will move in and then hopefully that'll streamline the economy a little bit."

The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) has developed an index called "Family Budget Calculator" to measure cost of living for a two-parent, two child household across six key factors (including housing, food, child care, transportation, health care, taxes and other necessities) (Economic Policy Institute, 2018). Based on EPI's 2018 data, the cost of living of Southern New Jersey is slightly lower than New Jersey overall. The average monthly cost of living is \$8,143 in New Jersey (\$97,716 annually) while it is \$7,720 in Southern New Jersey (\$92,640 annually). Ocean County has the highest monthly cost of living in the region, which is \$8,447 per month (\$101,370 annually) for a family of four.

Combined, the region is losing out on job seekers interested in working. Commented one participant, "the full time job I have doesn't really compare to the housing market I can live in. And then they [other people] just end up moving to Philadelphia, most of them, because there's more full time job opportunities there or because there's more competition, they're not underpaid and they're compensated for the work. I know people that are working 70 hour weeks at times that are only getting, maybe not even \$35,000 a year."

Participants noted the shift in economies and rise of the cost of living, and the need to bring in businesses to replace industries that have been lost in both Camden and Southern New Jersey overall. “It’s a tough job market, in general. [Chemical company] was basically king in the county and then they kind of ran away in the last, you know, they cut back in the last 30 years. So, no companies have really stepped in, you know what I mean? It was so easy to get a job at [chemical company]. They hired you right out of high school. So, in the last 30 years, it’s been a real challenge. I guess the industry in our county was the chemical industry, and we have the nuclear industry.” Another shared, “companies don’t really want to invest in our county because we’re so sparsely populated and it’s a rural area. So that affected my job search. There are companies that I try to apply to online, like large companies, say specifically [large retail company] and the application process was close to two hours.” Participants discussed how jobs were far away from homes, and even for those in more densely populated towns and cities, only certain jobs or types of occupations were available or accessible.

Amidst the acknowledgment of lack of job and development opportunities, participants called on companies and government officials to invest in their towns and cities. Participants wanted businesses and the government to take a chance on them and their city/county. “Anybody who was trying to bring their company, just maybe just think about bringing it in our small town or try and build it. A company or anything that will give us a chance to have better jobs in our community, where we wouldn’t have to travel for and we wouldn’t have to worry about transportation,” one participant commented. Another shared, “just if companies would just come in and take a chance. I saw...[e-commerce company], they were building another headquarters and they had a couple Jersey cities on their list. I was like, if they could come to Atlantic City..I think it was like 50,000 people. That would attract more people, that would attract more things, it’s the people. People set the trends. Wherever that is they’ll follow the jobs. Just the jobs need to be there.”

One participant commented on the lack of industry in their area and expressed hope for future projects in the area. They discussed a new [e-commerce company] warehouse being built [in Carneys Point, Salem County] and the development of a new energy industry using water power.

Employment Experience and Future Employment Goals

“So once I lost the job in December, I was still working part time. Currently I’m just doing the part time work while I kind of regroup and figure out exactly what I want to do, where I want to go, to get a more permanent full time position.”

Participants from the City of Camden and the Southern New Jersey counties shared a variety of current work arrangements. Some participants were currently unemployed and not looking for work, others were currently unemployed and looking for work, while others were working part-time and/or full time, and looking for additional or different work; still others had just landed a new job.

The types of jobs participants engaged in varied greatly, and ranged from temporary contract work to full-time work. Participants’ jobs found them working for local governments, nonprofits, apartment complexes, school districts, corporations, local companies, restaurants, and for their own small businesses. A few respondents worked in inhome-care, and noted the challenge of uncertain hours, low pay, and safety concerns during the pandemic. Shared one respondent, “I took a course for a certified nursing assistant, which was basically working in a nursing home. So my goal was to end up at least working as like a nurse at the hospital. That was my goal. But I’m like, let me start slowly by making my way up. So then after 2016, I went for the home health aide license so till today, I’m still certified to the board of nursing.”

Other industries and jobs mentioned included the agriculture production industry, manufacturing, and cleaning services. Shared one participant, “what I have done all my life was warehouse work, picking

and packing positions.” Others worked directly with people - as a classroom aide, a substitute teacher, in a daycare, as a case manager for a reentry program for young adults.

Multiple respondents had experience in business office settings, such as working as an administrative assistant/human resources for a trucking company, working in benefits counseling, for a construction services project management company, as an executive assistant, in quality control, as a project managers’ assistant, and completing clerical duties for a nonprofit organization. Former and current roles also included much retail and restaurant/hospitality experience- at pizza shops, grocery stores, and in fast food restaurants.

When discussing future employment goals, participants expressed a range of interests across many occupational fields and a pattern of desiring stable, quality employment arose. Participants wanted to have a job closer to home, typically around 30 minutes in commute time, and desired roles that offered a livable wage, a traditional and/or predictable schedule, and benefits, including a 401K and/or medical insurance. Noted one participant, “I’m looking for something that’s going to pay me enough to be able to take care of my family and everything. And right now, most locations are only paying minimum wage, even for people with backgrounds that I have. And even the things that are like \$15 an hour, I’m still, I’m overqualified or I don’t qualify for what they want.” Another shared, “a lot of things come down to pay for me, and flexibility. The hours, you know.”

Participants discussed salaried versus hourly work, longer term employment history at a single company/organization, and the pros and cons of working at a smaller vs. larger organization. Shared one person, “I think just working at a smaller company, is that it makes it a little bit harder to stay somewhere. But I think the flipside is that I’ve noticed that the barrier for getting into larger companies, you’ve got more applicants. Those are harder to get into as well.”

In terms of ideal next roles, participants shared many goals: wanting to travel for an international business, work for themselves, work in an office or administrative job, serve as a inventory control lead in a manufacturing plant, be a college basketball coach, work concierge in a retirement community and/or nursing home, and “anything administrative, even if it were at the casino.”

Barriers and Opportunities Related to the Job Search

Types of Jobs and Mixed Messages on the Availability of Jobs

The occupations and jobs available in the region are related to the unique economic landscape of Southern New Jersey. As one participant from the coast shared, “I know I live in a seasonal town. I’m not trying to fool anyone, but I tell people all the time, unless you’re a city employee, education, medical, or you own your own business. It’s hard to have a full time job down here.” This participant also discussed students [they worked with] only talking about wanting to be teachers or owning a business because that is all they are exposed to, noting that if they were exposed to more things out in the world, they could aspire to more diverse careers.

Another shared, “there are a lot of like medical type jobs or whatever, or like dental work, so many, like dentists that are like looking for like assistants or secretaries and stuff like that. So many chiropractic practices and health centers. And all of those things require some type of like previous training, like whether it was like a test or a certification, a lot of those jobs require that. And it’s like if you don’t have it, then it makes it like super, super hard. So I would definitely say that’s a unique feature about this area definitely makes it harder looking for a job.”

One participant commented there were really no jobs in their area at all, and that you could work in a grocery store. Another shared, “in my experience in the industry I work in, coming from production, agriculture, there’s a need for skilled laborers or even finding people that are willing to learn the skills.” Similarly, another explained the large agricultural based job opportunities and careers in their county,

from production farming to cold storage to transportation. Another participant shared that the jobs available were not what she was interested in, saying “I was interested in working with children and adults with special needs. So there wasn’t much of a demand for that, so I ended up doing home daycare.” One participant wished there were more photography or music jobs in the area.

In 2018, New Jersey’s full and part-time employment was approximately 5.56 million people and Southern New Jersey accounted for 23.7 percent of the state’s employment. Following recovery from the Great Recession in the 2010s, total jobs in Southern New Jersey grew by an annual average 1.5 percent between 2014 and 2018, which is approximately double its annualized growth rate between 2010 and 2014. (Robert D. Niehaus, Inc., 2020).

Varying views abound about the availability of jobs during this time. Multiple participants expressed a lack of availability of jobs in their towns, and a lack of full time employment opportunities. Noted one job seeker, “I think it’s tough. I think it’s tough because I don’t think there’s a whole lot of availability now...I mean you’re not limited to casinos but if you’re looking for a job here, you’d be better off going that way because the availability, I think the supply and demand as far as like trying to get an office job, they’re just really not out there.” Another person who lives in one county and works in a different county shared, “there hasn’t been anything available and I have found that’s available, it’s like kind of far out from where I live. I feel like that’s the biggest barrier, I don’t want to be too far away just because I am the person that if something happens to my daughter, I’m the one that needs to be able to get out of work to go get her.” The pandemic also severely limited available jobs - “I think it’s definitely worse than it was. I mean, you just didn’t see a whole lot in classifieds because there was a hiring freeze pretty much, I mean you could call it that.” One person said they were stunned they were still looking for a job and had not landed anything after searching for multiple months.

Others expressed different opinions on job availability, one person sharing, “I don’t think I’ve ever had that struggle, I’ve always been able to find the job, it’s not always the job I want, but I’ve always been able to find jobs that I could apply for.” Another participant shared that there are a lot of career opportunities, people just have to look for them. “I think one of the problems is that people don’t want to work as hard. I think there’s jobs out there. And I think I noticed with my students they want to work, but they don’t. They want a job, but they don’t, you know, they don’t want to work at a fast food restaurant and they don’t want to work at a [retail company], they don’t want to work at entry level jobs. But that’s really, you know, that’s where they should start at.” Another participant expressed that while it is a difficult job market, their current job fell into their lap. One person commented that it was better to find jobs before the pandemic because you could go into a building and ask questions about the jobs, whereas now it is not as accessible to get questions answered directly in person.

Transportation

“There’s no buses that go to the Swedesboro or even the Glassboro area (in Gloucester County), there’s no buses that run to do these jobs on a constant basis or not even never. You know, you usually have to pay somebody to take you to work or, and if they don’t feel like going in there, you missed a day or you’re getting fired.”

Whether living and/or working in Camden, Vineland or Hammonton, participants overwhelmingly agreed upon the lack of transportation in the region. Many residents do not have their own car, and the lack of reliable transportation is a huge hindrance to people being willing and able to work. One respondent noted that their availability to work is limited to areas where a bus would go. The networked bus system across Southern New Jersey was mentioned, but many participants had critical reactions to its routes, reliability and frequency. “I would say transportation is a real challenge, not for me, but for a lot of people because we do have a bus that comes through, I think maybe hourly, but it’s very limited. It

stays on the main highways. And that's what you get when you're in a rural county basically. So, I would say transportation definitely is a big deal. I've seen local residents on Facebook say, the bus doesn't come by my way or I can't get a job in [industrial complex] which is in Gloucester County, which is 15 minutes from us. They can't even get the bus out there from 15 minutes away because there's a third shift jobs available in [company at industrial complex] but the bus doesn't run overnight. So that's you know, that's a major challenge right there," shared one participant.

Even in the job search, transportation is paramount, "I wanted my job to be close to where I live, so I do want to be in the Camden area, that way I would be able to take public transportation back and forth. But I also needed to be on a bus route or a train route. That way I wouldn't have to order a Uber or Lyft every day to work. So that was really what I was looking for."

One respondent mentioned hearing of a ride sharing program, but not knowing if it still existed and another shared they bike to work. Nonetheless, there was a participant who did not see transportation a major employment barrier, "I think the county does a good job of providing transportation. I mean, there's no trains or anything like that, but there are buses and I've had a couple of friends who need to take buses to go from here to here to there."

Childcare

“So I picked up a job at a local pizza shop a couple nights a week to try to get off all the unemployment...you know, the school where they go. It's Monday to Friday at 8:30, 12:30. And that's another issue. Who's going to pick up my kids if I'm at work, to find a job that works around that?”

The availability, safety, and cost of child care [centers], especially during COVID-19, posed a particular challenge for job seekers. Childcare was noted as the number one issue by multiple participants. Some participants shared that child care centers were not open early enough, late enough/overnight, or open on the weekend for people that needed to go to work during those times. Another person noted that child care centers cannot afford to stay open because of all the rules and regulations they have to adhere to, and another noted they were fighting to get their children on a waiting list for a daycare center. "I have three small children, and right now with school not being in session, it is hard for me to find daycare for them. And also it's hard for me to work as many hours as I would like. And it also is causing me to have to pay somebody extra money out of my pay to take care of my children," they commented. Participants weighed the cost and benefit of childcare, especially if they were able to receive Unemployment Insurance. Shared one person, "childcare is more expensive...you might as well sit home if you say you're making like \$600 a week and your childcare is like \$400. You know, I'm coming out with nothing and to find adequate childcare at this point of it..." One participant commented how receipt of food stamps from the Board of Social Services was affected by childcare. They chronicled, "normally an application will come back in one to two weeks before COVID-19. But now it's taking 3 - 5 weeks because there are people that work for the Board of Social Services that are not working right now because they don't have childcare for whatever reason. They're very overworked because there are a lot of employees that are out because they don't have childcare, and they can get the unemployment."

Human Interest - Other Barriers

In discussing finding work, interview participants commented on other life circumstances, some of which they desired employers to become more aware of and be flexible in understanding different circumstances. Regarding interviewing, one participant shared, "I have bipolar disorder and anxiety. And though not fully technically diagnosed with autism, I struggle with social things, so I really struggle with interviews." Another participant shared that they have panic attacks when driving at night, and the job she just applied for required late nights, "and I said, you know, I'm willing to stay if I've got

transportation. I said, you know, and at the time when we had interview, she [the interviewer] said, well, we can work with that. She said, that's not a problem." Another participant mentioned the prevalence of domestic violence and making sure that people who are in a domestic violence situation have the resources, and if they have to go to court, they are still able to retain their jobs. Still another participant mentioned other mental health challenges that employees may experience, and learning how to seek help for anger management and/or coping skills to maintain a job.

Federal, State, and Local Policy Considerations

An important caveat to note is multiple policy barriers/stipulations that job seekers faced in their decisions and accessibility to work. Employers also expressed policy barriers, but to different extents (as outlined in the Focus Group Findings section). Multiple participants mentioned the limited hours they can work while enrolled in social security and/or disability insurance, and difficulties in trying to find jobs that meet their needs. Shared one participant, "There's not a lot out there right now. And what makes it more difficult is that I can't do 40 hours a week because I'm on social security." Blanket hiring and employment policies are not suitable for all employees. Another shared, "Being on disability, I only work a certain amount of hours. I'm hoping like through the summer I'll be able to get something since things are opening up and I have more of a chance to get into it."

Job Searching and Available Resources

“It gets pretty frustrating when you're looking for a job, like [it's] a second job, I was looking for a job and that was my other job. Looking for a job is kind of frustrating when you're not seeing results.”

Participants expressed both vexations and limitations when explaining their approach to searching for jobs. Those looking for work primarily relied on websites - Indeed, Monster, USAJobs, Glassdoor, LinkedIn, CareerBuilder, Snagajob, and the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (NJDL) website were all mentioned. Others relied on social media and word of mouth. Shared one person, "one of the best ways that I found for me to find things that will just work for my schedule was just posting on my Snapchat story and being like, 'hey guys, where are friends [working]? Like, looking for a part time job if anyone can help me out.' And so many of my friends put it up on my story and just reached out to me or texted me and said like their place of work was hiring or like they recommended me or they like to talk to their boss about me. And like that was where I was able to get all these opportunities."

Participants offered mixed messages on the availability of resources, with many noting that they were aware of workforce development and/or career/job searching resources and had used them, but that these resources could be difficult to access (particularly during the pandemic), and that many other job seekers might not know about the resources available or how to access them.

Multiple participants mentioned the OneStop Career Centers throughout the region. One person in particular appreciated the one-on-one support from the Center. "Sometimes I think people do better with a one-on-one coach to help realize, like what other opportunities would suit them, you might think you're always good for this position. But if you spoke to a job coach who knows all the jobs in the market, they might say you'd also be good for these sort of positions. And when you're banging your head against the wall, looking up the same three terms on Indeed, having someone else [who] just has a little more experience" they shared. Others commented on the Center's support in offering computer classes and resume touch ups.

When asked what resources could be provided to job seekers, suggestions included resume building, a place where people can get interview clothes or discounted prices on interview clothes, information on different insurance and financial benefits when obtaining a job, knowing different job search terms and how to use them, and how to follow-up after an application and/or interview. One participant discussed learning how to

make yourself stand out because of stiff job competition. Another noted, “I would just say getting the word out there that people, you know, are around with these resources because a lot of people don’t know about the different resources that is available for them.” Participants echoed that navigating the job search on one’s own is hard - and unless connected directly with a program, there are not many available tools and resources.

Participants emphasized the need to meet people where they are. “Don’t expect people to just know. Like, there’s a lot of people that are not, like, they need help. Don’t just say go to this website and send them on their way. Understand that there’s a lot of people that don’t know what you’re talking about,” one participant said. Noted another, “like the unemployment [portal] basically sends you an email with some sites or that says ‘check out this [job] or check out that.’ But if you’re a person that couldn’t even read or you’re not savvy on a computer, you’re not going to know how to do all that.” Another participant shared the sense of confidence needed at times to land a job, “just being unknowing, and confused, and afraid to ask questions. Or like giving up. Those are all things that I feel like people do a lot that kind of prevent them from getting a job or keeping a job.”

Even with available resources, COVID-19 also severely hindered people’s job search. “We have an unemployment office here but since the covid you can’t even go in there. I mean I went up there to use their computers to look for jobs, and they even have a board of jobs that may be available, weekly it changes. And they wouldn’t even let you in. That wasn’t helpful at all. So that was a resource that was available, that was not available...So. The only thing you can do, the only resource you have is to look up on Monster, Indeed or CareerBuilder, or like I said word of mouth, Facebook, other people telling you stuff, because you can’t really use other resources because everybody else is closed up.”

A pattern of insufficient technology access also arose. Multiple participants commented on the lack of reliable internet or technology access to both complete job applications, check in on the status of applications, and accomplish work tasks. Noted one participant, “[Retail company] and the application process was close to two hours. I couldn’t do it because I was on my phone. That right there, you know, I shut that down. I couldn’t do that. Now I’m not in that situation right now because I have Comcast [through a program through Medicaid].” Another shared “our cell service has been a hit or miss for years. It actually affected my job when I worked for [professional grocery shopping company]...I couldn’t afford an expensive data plan with a premier carrier,” and another said that “I was so poor, I didn’t have access to the internet, so therefore I have to rely on my smartphone and the problem with that was the mobile connection and also the internet connection, if you work, you’re doing work on a smartphone.”

Quality of Jobs - Low Pay and Lack of Benefits

“I don’t want to go on welfare, to go on food stamps, but it’s really sick even when systems are still not helping me to get ahead or even to have- I mean, I live paycheck to paycheck to paycheck basically. It’s been like that for years.”

In discussing available jobs, participants noted the lack of suitable pay and/or benefits associated with advertised positions. The job seekers we spoke with noted companies offering minimum wage and that “even nursing homes don’t pay what they’re supposed to be paying.” Similarly to pay, benefits compensation was disparaged. The desire for, the lack of, and the appreciation of medical insurance, retirement plans, paid time off, sick time off, and pay raises were discussed. “A lot of jobs are part-time because they don’t want to pay the benefits [for a full time staffer]. So a lot of times they’ll see you right at the minimum before they have to pay you. So there could be a good job, but I mean, I had a good job, but they didn’t want to pay the benefits,” shared one participant.

“There’s one [dollar store] and right now they’ve got to pay you \$12 an hour because that’s the minimum wage . Before then, it was only \$8.50 an hour. And the managers made \$1 more an

hour, and there's only two people in the store at all times, so they got to do the work of four people. People don't want that kind of job.”

Another commented,

“A barrier before COVID-19 would be the necessities of needing benefits, you know, healthcare... a lot of jobs are lower paying jobs. A lot of jobs are not paying that much, which is frustrating. They're not paying as much as they used to. My mom is a retired social worker. The position they're filling right after she retired, they're giving them right above minimum wage. My mom was making \$30 an hour and then they're going to go and pay \$15 an hour to do the same job. It's not fair.”

Job and Skill Mismatch

“And I'm looking like every day, every other day. New things aren't showing up. So I do think it's a better job market. I think it's still very competitive, but it's always competitive. But I think now, just because I'm sure there are people, if unemployment runs out, they're overqualified for jobs, but are willing to take a pay cut because it's getting paid versus nothing and being able to have insurance for themselves and the family versus nothing. I think there's a bit of that extra level of competition at a lower level where there probably will be people that are overqualified, getting jobs, maybe not necessarily super overqualified because they'd want to leave.”

We are in an era of rapid economic changes related to globalization, where many businesses are operating across countries or on an international level. The internet and influx of technology is also impacting all industries (Zedillo, 2019). Some of the job opportunities and skill requirements in certain industries are not relevant anymore, especially in industries that are leaning towards an information and high skill level knowledge-based economy. This overall change can impact the existence of some jobs, leading to transitions between occupations and morphing industries. For instance, certain service sector job opportunities and requirements may not have changed significantly compared to a few decades ago but they may be outsourced or may no longer exist because of technological advancement (Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, 2019). The shifting of what is known as opportunity employment, defined as employment accessible to workers without a bachelor's degree and typically paying above the national annual median wage, adjusted for regional differences in consumer prices, arose prior to the pandemic and will continue to evolve as the economy rebuilds. These “opportunity occupations” represent industries where training and skills from a different industry can be applied to a different or evolving industry, often at higher pay above the national annual median wage (\$37,690), adjusted up or down to reflect the local cost of living (Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, 2019). Opportunity employment accounts for 20.1% of employment in the Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington metro area (Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, 2019). From the data, two main avenues continue to develop across the region - a growth towards a knowledge based economy and a second pathway towards skilled trades and labor.

In discussing the changing availability of jobs, a theme of mismatch often arose. Shared by one participant, “that would be my ideal position in a hospital and I can never find anything that fits to my education or experience.” Another shared, “I was like a manager at a local mom & pop store. So, you know, I ran everything. And even then when I went out to search for jobs, they said ‘oh, you got too much qualifications just to be a burger flipper or whatever.’” Others discussed the lack of transferability of their skills and/or the rigidity with which employers were looking for specific experiences or skills.

One person commented, “like how my resume is all home care. I feel like that is a barrier that they won’t accept me for, even though I have basically almost like customer service that you’re always dealing with people and how to treat them and stuff.”

While some participants noted being overqualified or rightly qualified for some jobs, others expressed being underqualified. One job seeker discussed the mismatch of job and degree/certification requirements, “it’s like you have all of these jobs that require...they don’t require a degree. They require certifications. So it’s like, bro, like I could have just did a certification instead of spending all this money on a degree, if that certification put me like a step above more than like a degree did, which is really frustrating . Very, very frustrating.”

Need for Soft Skills

“I’d really say what is kind of like the barrier is like the education barrier and not just education education, but smarts, because those are two different things. Intelligence and education are two different things. And I think some people lack the intelligence, respectfully, and like if they were to be taught, that’s a different story. But some people don’t even have, like the certain skills, to be able to really get a job or a job interview or even talk on the phone with a job. A lot of people can’t handle that. Honestly, I’ve heard somebody like botch a job all through a phone call.”

Participants shared the skills they have, the skills they would like to improve, and talked about skills other people on the job market possess. Shared one participant, “I don’t have anything like I’m not super proficient in [Microsoft] Word or some of the other programs. I can learn those things but I haven’t had to. I’m not able to go into a job with that experience. I do think that has been probably one of the things that works against me.” Others commented on either themselves or others not knowing how to use a computer or desiring to improve computer skills, such as learning [Microsoft] Excel. Resume building and interviewing skills also were self-identified by participants as areas desiring improvement, and where employers may discount them when hiring. Expressed one participant, “as somebody who has had a gap, you know, a lot of gaps in their employment history in the last 9 years...but I really like actually talking to people. I’m better in person, like when I first meet somebody as opposed to my resume getting out there and they don’t know me, like I said, word of mouth. And interviewing is just that’s you know, it’s difficult for me.”

Despite the mention of improvement in hard skills, participants overwhelmingly mentioned the soft skill challenges many people face. One participant chronicled that some people do not have the basic skills to know what is stealing or not, engage in inappropriate behaviors at work, and that a lot of the reasons people get fired are because of interpersonal situations with coworkers or supervisors that escalate. “They wasn’t properly educated on, you know, getting a job is one thing, but keeping a job is another thing,” one participant commented.

Another shared,

“More people just need to be exposed to more things, like you would have to create programs within the City, you have to create more resources in the City or anywhere for people to gain more knowledge, you know what I mean? That’s not, nothing an employer could do if that person was just not a conversationalist or just didn’t have the skills, the employer is not at fault for that. So it’s nothing they can do, it’s more about figuring out how to help people get these soft skills before they get to the point where they’re on the phone and they can’t communicate correctly.”

Job Seekers' Educational Goals

Multiple participants expressed interest in certificate programs, while others commented on the little to no increase in pay for higher degrees or additional training/certifications. One participant was earning \$12 an hour working in a group home for a social service agency, and noted "the person that I was working with had a bachelor's degree. She was going for a master's. She was only making \$1.50 more now than me. So there is something wrong with that. Because you can spend thousands of dollars going to get a college education and don't make anything. I told her I had hands-on experience. She's got the book smarts, and you're only making \$1.50 more than me an hour. That's not right. But they emphasize going to college, she says, making all this money. But you don't." Related, another participant expressed that 30 years ago a high school degree "was enough," and now a bachelor's degree did not seem like enough to land a "good" job because so many others also had a bachelor's degree. One participant who earned a bachelor's degree indicated she was not planning on getting her master's anytime soon unless there was an opportunity for her to take something where she could make more money, "but it doesn't seem like in the last four years there's been anything that could increase pay. But if there was a class about, you know, dealing with co-workers or certain things I would take it."

One participant commented on a mismatch between what education was available and her interests, sharing when she applied for unemployment insurance/social assistance and went to meet with the required career counselor, shared she wanted to learn culinary arts, but the assistance agency [community college] no longer offered any culinary classes, and suggested she try nursing, which she was not interested in pursuing.

Multiple participants mentioned free certificates or classes that were being offered during the pandemic, and some had participated in the classes offered. However, others noted that because of the pandemic, their ability to afford classes (for the ones that required payment), or find time to attend with other childcare and caregiving duties, and lack of in person training options, limited their ability to participate. Multiple participants expressed interest in various computer courses, and Spanish courses. One person noted, "learning how to work the computer so I can say, you know, with a resume or an application, 'yes I know how to do this, yes I know how to do that and have a background in that.' I don't think I have what employers would be looking for"

Lack of work experience and/or lack of formal education also arose as a topic of conversation where job seekers saw a gap. Shared one participant, "a lot of people haven't graduated, a lot of people, young people, don't even finish high school and they figured, well, listen, I can go straight from 10th grade and go straight to the job. And then when they get to the job, they don't have a clue what's going on. When instead of them trying to stick it out in school and finish out their education and then maybe coming into the job market to see whether they can have a better understanding of what's going on. They don't do that, you know?" Another person shared that people may not keep certain jobs because of a lack of accountability, education, knowledge, and training.

One job seeker expressed the catch-22 of needing more experience and/or education to meet job requirements in early career stages, "certain experiences that you must have before your actual experiences. [They need] to have resources that can lead you, give you more help in [getting] those requirements and certifications," they shared.

Participants exhibited interest in on-the-job training in comparison to traditional educational avenues. "I just joined [employment agency] and they have free certificate programs and I was just looking at those online. I would have to be employed and stay with [employment agency]. The rate is not that great right now. It's only \$14 an hour. And you know in New Jersey we have free community college for households that earn under \$65,000 which definitely I would qualify for but I'm not a good learner because of my ADHD. That's a major challenge for me. So on the job training would work for me," explained one participant.

Job Seeker Recommendations for Employers

Improving the Quality of Jobs

“You got to at least pay a person \$15. \$14, \$15, \$16 - something like that, to where they at least want to come to work. And don't try to work a person to death, all night long. Eight hours. People want to work eight hours and go home. Nobody want to work 10, 11, 12, 13 hours, no. Because then you wear a person out. I've worked 10 hours, a job, 10 hours a day... and trust me, it's tiresome on the body.”

Job “quality” means many things - schedule flexibility, consistent hours, pay, benefits, part time vs. full time work, work environment. Participants were critical of jobs that devalued their work as individuals and were dismissive of their goals to achieve living standards. Participants were immensely dissatisfied with the pay they and others received, or were being offered, for their work. In offering recommendations to employers, one person noted, “make sure that you are paying well. Don't nobody want to work for \$11. You can't feed your children off \$11. \$11 an hour, that's ridiculous.”

Others commented,

“Because there's not a lot of full time jobs, employers know that, so they can low-ball the salaries for those employees. I have friends in different industries and there's constant change over at any job, any full time job you hear about because it's almost criminal to the point of how you're being low paid and employers can get away with that because there's little to no competition for that.”

“As far as employers not keeping their employees, a lot of it boils down to money. Employers do not want to pay. The standard industry says here's what you should or could be paying your people in order to maintain good workers [but] they don't want to do that. I say they want to get away with paying as cheap as they can. You know, I only got paid \$8.35 when I left. And I said to the employer, to the boss, I said, look, you know, you're getting off easy with me because I can't ask for a raise.”

One participant shared that employees who know they cannot get a promotion or pay raise will leave their jobs. One participant chronicled a job interview for a full time position where midway through the interview the employer said they were changing the position to be part time without benefits, “it was almost like a ploy, because people are so desperate for work right now that you get them in promising it's going to be \$15 at least, and then you'll be lucky if it's \$15,” the job seeker shared.

Another person shared the precarity of work arrangements, particularly with contract, hourly, or temporary work - “because even if I was to take a job through a temp service, they can keep me for a week. I lose all my unemployment chances because I took a job for a temp service. And they don't give you unemployment if you don't have like - unemployment doesn't work that way. So I'm put in a situation where if I take that temp service, I will have no income.”

Other participants expressed employees who were mistreated by their employers, inconsistent work locations or schedules, and not having breaks during work hours. “I think the hours, depending on the hours that they're offering and I also think I know for [healthcare company], not so much my position but for other positions, they have their employees travel from one location to another and a lot of people don't like that. Because they're being hired for one location and then eventually they're going to four locations in one day. I think employees want some sort of stability,” one participant commented.

Employer Communications, Feedback and Flexibility

“[Employers should] provide a status check or just even letting you know if you got the job or not. That’s something that I’ve heard from other interviewees. Just like, they apply, they spent hours on applying for a job and they don’t hear back. So did they get the job or not? Or did they even get the application or even look at it?”

Almost all participants explicitly commented on the struggles posed by application submission requirements and employer communications in the job application and interview processes. The length and repetitiveness of information required on job applications proved to be a barrier for job seekers we spoke with. Participants discussed the online applications for large companies taking hours, and requiring manual input of information that was already uploaded through a resume. As one participant described, “this is an application that could have taken five minutes and is now taking me 30 minutes, not because I’m not providing you with any new information, but because I’m literally providing you with my resume. I think that’s a frustrating aspect and probably could be done a little bit better for certain companies.” As noted earlier, lack of access to reliable internet and technology was a barrier for people attempting to complete online applications. Job scams and online bots were also mentioned.

“My intellect and my knowledge is not based off of a questionnaire. How about you just have a conversation with me and give me something to show you? No, they make you go through all these questions like a 20 minute thing. And like I worked in banking for eight years prior, like, I know how to do customer service, but then they rate you on Indeed. And I’m not going to keep doing the damn test over and over again. You got me. That’s crazy. If you don’t like what my answers are because you’re not giving me the opportunity. It’s not face-to-face anymore. So it ruins your chance. They take you off of how you answer things and somebody could read the question, not the way that it was intended. So having a verbal conversation versus having somebody fill out a yes or no, I agree or disagree, you know, where does that get you in?”

Participants expressed frustration in filling out job applications and participating in interviews, and then not hearing back from employers for weeks at a time, and the lack of “common courtesy” of communication from employers. Shared one person, “my big thing was that I wasn’t getting responses from a lot of companies. And I guess they don’t owe us a response. You know, it’s like I don’t know how I expected one, but. I feel like if they would just be more like, maybe even send out like a group email to everybody who applied like, ‘hey , you didn’t get it,’ that would be OK and it would make me feel, kind of better just knowing that you considered me and I didn’t get it, then just thinking like my application got lost somewhere.”

Multiple people noted how the absence of responsiveness from employers affected their ability to continue their job search and pursue other opportunities. While some participants desired explicit feedback for improvement, most participants expressed the desire for any type of response and the status of their application. This period left many job seekers in limbo. “Please don’t bring us along for like weeks, where we’re like wondering if we got the job or not. Just letting us know as soon as possible, just like have more of your workers looking through resumes and looking through applications so that you can quickly see who you want and who you don’t want, because when that takes long, then that’s also prolonging us from knowing whether we got the job or not.” Participants called for more timely communication from employers, offering ideas for ways employers could do phone interviews to talk with applicants, provide constructive criticism, or create application processes that are both flexible and informative. Another shared, “I had to be the one to extract that information from them when they could have just sent me an email or a phone call saying ‘we’re going in a different direction’ because I’m like waiting all this time. Meanwhile, I’m unemployed. So the longer I’m waiting to hear

from these employers, I'm still unemployed. So the faster I find out when I'm not employed for one of these employers, the better it is for me so that I can continue my search and move on for another job."

The lack of in person interaction was also noted, "all I can think of is them reading your resumes online. I think what the hindrance is sometimes, it's not like it used to be where you go to the place and you fill out an application and you meet the people. I think that's a hindrance because they don't know you and they're looking at 10 resumes. They know any of these people and like I said, with my skills or lack of, I don't see a lot of hope there," one participant said.

When it came to interviews, job seekers expressed themselves as better in person and wanted employers to be flexible in hiring, give them a chance, and/or provide feedback. One participant recommended that employers make a page for interview questions, "interview prep 101," and "how to make a business call." Another shared, "I know the first step to getting the job is to make a resume. And a lot of people with their resume, they don't get past that point. So if you maybe bring the person in and talk to them rather than, you know, just looking at what's on paper, you may find something different or you may see something rather than just reading it off. So bring them to their next step before you make your decision."

On the other hand, a few participants expressed disdain with too many interviews, "I mean, how many interviews do you want to go through to get a job that's not paying you all that much money?" The participant shared she had multiple rounds of interviews for a minimum wage job and had less interviews to get higher paying jobs.

Employer Advertisement and Outreach

"I would say old fashioned, hitting the sidewalk and talking to people in the community. Getting the information out there, sending a flyer to every household in the state. I would send a flyer to every mailbox, something in English and Spanish."

Employers were recommended to come to people where they are - physically, through job fairs, paper flyers, at community centers, and virtually, through social media (Facebook, Instagram) and texting. "I think advertising, you know, reaching out to businesses, looking for jobs and then advertising through the community for people that are looking to see and like on social media, because I feel like that's where there's a lot of people are looking," one job seeker commented. Involvement with the community was paramount, as one participant discussed "putting it out there and making sure that people know about job fairs, usually by the time I hear one or see a flyer, it's kind of like the day already passed. I think if it was announced with more time, more people would show up. Or make them more often because I notice that it's kind of like very spread out from maybe four or five months in between. I think that would help if it was a little more consistent."

Participants explained that sometimes just posting a job online is not enough, particularly for people who do not have access to technology or reliable internet. Individualized supports are helpful, and program counselors were encouraged to reach out to individuals through a phone call or Zoom and provide personal assistance. One participant emphasized the need for employers to come where people are as many people do not know how to look for jobs.

Related was the call for ways to physically apply to jobs, such as through job fairs. One participant recommended "like don't just say, 'oh well you have to go to the website and apply,' like maybe say that they can hand in a physical application where they, you know, written out. Tell them they can come to the office, like offer more ways for them to apply." Engaging with job seekers in person and having conversations is easier, multiple participants agreed.

On the Job Training & Opportunities for Growth

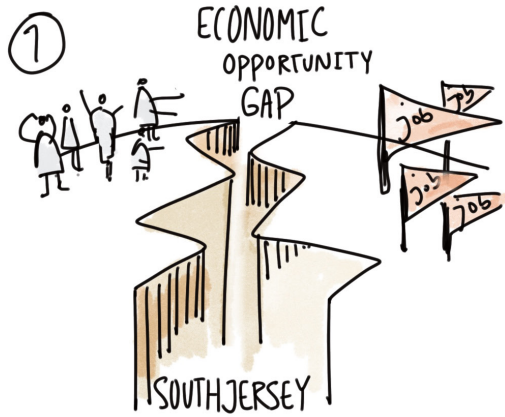
“So definitely like having something that makes you stand out amongst the crowd and I guess just having proper credentials for whatever job that you like. But it’s annoying because, like, a lot of jobs require you to have experience. But the only way you’re going to get that experience is if somebody takes a chance on you and lets you work or whatever. So it’s kind of like a chicken and egg situation, which is kind of frustrating.”

Job seekers highly valued opportunities that advertised on the job training and appreciated roles that provided training and career development. Multiple participants shared how they were drawn to jobs that do not always require certain experience or that directly advertised “job training available,” noting that much learning, even for those who have specific certifications or degrees, comes from onsite job training. One person recommended, “like for your dental assistant jobs, like medical assistants. If they had like on the job training or like training through the job, it would help people looking for a job but also help the employers because they don’t have to solely rely on people who already have this certification or something from outside that they can already like. They say like, ‘hey, like I’ll hire you. We’ll train you as well.’” Another shared, “so, if they feel as though this person is who you want to be hired, you tell them straight up what you want from them. And you also tell them, if they can’t drive a forklift or whatever, we are willing to train you for this position. Like I said, ain’t everybody know how to use equipment, everybody don’t know how to use a computer, everybody needs to be trained. Even the older people that you hire, come in, and they be baffled. Trust me, they don’t understand nothing. These companies put these people at these workstations in these places and expect them to already know. No, they don’t already know.”

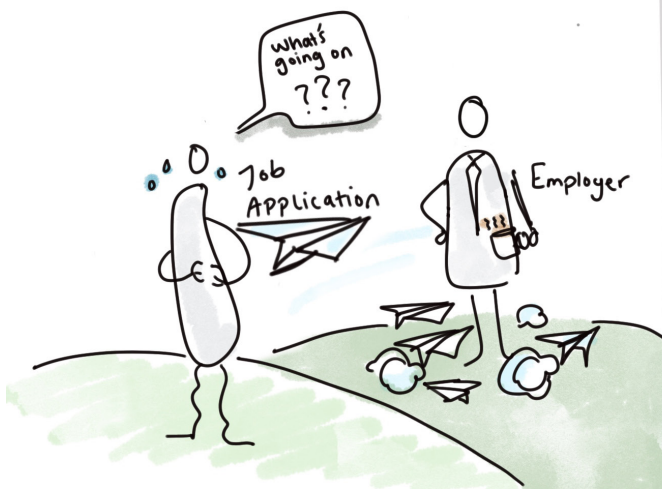
Participants discussed how past experiences left them unsure of their role’s specific tasks and/or responsibilities, and that employers should offer comprehensive onboarding programs. Participants also recommended more onsite training and cross training for employees to learn the skills needed on the job, and discussed how cross training would enable companies to expand hiring beyond those who have the specific skills needed for the role at the outset of a position. Once in jobs, participants yearned for open communication and flexibility in roles they were learning. Shared one participant, “I think when there’s that breakdown of communication, it just makes it harder to have a more lasting and fulfilling career somewhere because you don’t have a line of communication. You don’t have someone that you can say, these are my goals here. Or in a situation I’ve had was, ‘hey, I’d really love to learn this, you know, it would make my job easier. It would allow me to do my job better’, and it was like, ‘no, we don’t want you to learn that.’”

All in all, job seekers desired opportunities - in available jobs, in hiring, for training, for communication, and for growth and development.

JOB SEEKER INTERVIEWS



③ LACK of RESPONSIVENESS from EMPLOYERS



⑤ WHAT TO DO NOW?



VISUAL: LiliRazi



FOCUS GROUPS WITH SOUTHERN NEW JERSEY AND CITY OF CAMDEN EMPLOYERS

COVID-19, Employer Experience, and the Southern New Jersey and Camden Landscape

COVID-19

“The people who are non-essential and worked for 20-30 years and got laid off because of the pandemic. It’s just sad.”

The economic upheaval of COVID-19 rang clear in conversations with employers. A 2020 Federal Reserve System survey of nonprofit organizations, financial institutions, government agencies and other community organizations serving people in low- to moderate income households found that 59% of respondents indicated COVID-19 was a significant disruption to the economic conditions of the communities they serve and expected recovery to be difficult. Almost 40 percent of respondents cited income loss, job loss and unemployment as the top impacts of COVID-19 on the people and communities they serve (Federal Reserve System, 2020).

Multiple employers we spoke with discussed having to let go employees during this time because of shifts in operations, decreases in revenues, and increases in expenses. One participant shared that a small percent of their company tested positive for COVID-19 but that did not impact overall employment at the company afterwards. Work environments also shifted - many companies who prior to the pandemic did not permit any telecommuting transferred employees home and discussed moving towards more flexible work arrangements and maintaining some virtual services moving forward. Outdated technology systems forced some companies to rethink operations and upgrade equipment more suitable for virtual work. Some employers we spoke with primarily employ essential workers and COVID-19 shifted their service delivery. For example, the transition to provide psychiatric services through telehealth. Other employers discussed the challenges of obtaining PPE and the sanitation, masking, and social distancing requirements for employees at their manufacturing and/or distribution plants. The safety concerns and lack of PPE was especially evident in the healthcare industry. COVID-19 mitigation became the primary focus of many employers during this time. Noted one participant, working in the pandemic has been about “managing it – managing through the temperature checking, safety measures has been a struggle.”

An education employer mentioned, “Schools were shut down. Lots of parents need childcare. When they were open, it was half days two days a week. They don’t have substitutes. They only have two subs for the entire district. There are staff members in and out due to quarantine. The economic impact of this on their families is tremendous.”

Multiple employers also commented on how small businesses key to the backbones of local communities were hit hard by the pandemic. This included electricians, plumbers, and businesses that deliver or supply speciality items. “We need to focus on the small businesses. Especially ones that do novelty items or things that aren’t a necessity. COVID-19 really made them struggle,” shared one participant.

Employers recognized the loss/lack of jobs during this time, acknowledged employee’s hesitancy about working during this time, and challenges in applying for work during the pandemic. This upheaval was particularly true in the healthcare, transportation, service and hospitality sectors. Shared one participant, “the recruiting was difficult. In patient care roles – we even saw the fear there [of COVID-19]. People started and they left the next day. In certain positions, they were making just as much money as not

working in certain positions, so that was a struggle as well.” Employers from coastal communities in Atlantic, Cape May, and Ocean counties commented that some of the seasonal boardwalk businesses couldn’t open for summer 2020 because they could not properly staff and open safely. In 2020 the Atlantic City Metropolitan Area recorded the third largest employment decline (15.8 percent and 21,100 jobs lost) among all U.S. metropolitan areas due to the pandemic (The South Jersey Economic Review, 2021). The employment in Atlantic City’s hospitality, tourism and gaming industries decreased by 34.4 percent (14,300 jobs lost), which accounted for two thirds of all jobs lost in the region.

Other employers commented on shifting work requirements during this time, with one hospital employer noting, “normally we would not hire new folks with associates degrees who aim to be nurses– but now to staff our mega site we are giving that option to individuals with nurses with an associates and limited experience - we had to furlough a lot of staff the first wave because we didn’t have PPE in the bulk we needed, and we did not want anyone to come to an unsafe area – now we have what we need.”

Another shared,

“There is apprehension about the job because of the type of work that needs to be done (cleaning the busses, interacting with riders, etc...) It’s been difficult to fill jobs. Many jobs require CDLs (commercial drivers license), and lots of candidates can’t attain these right now. Our background check provider has slowed down significantly as well. We don’t meet candidates face to face anymore. I might be able to use the vaccine as a marketing tool soon. Overall, it has been a challenge. Many people are even saying that they are afraid to work and would rather stay on unemployment. We have to go through a lot of applicants before we find someone willing to take the job.”

Safety precautions around the pandemic also shifted how employers sought and attracted workers. Noted one hospital employer, “one of the things we were focused on, we care about quality and safety – we did it better than other area locations – we’ve have seen an uptick in clinical staff coming to us [at hospital] because of clinical safety – unfortunately that means that we’re getting a lot of long term care facilities’ employees because they weren’t having the same safety protocol adherence.” Many organizations moved interviews from in-person to virtual to varying degrees of success. Employers discussed the challenges of hiring and training employees virtually, and the overall detriment to communication. State agency closures also impacted employers’ ability to process applications and hiring forms, such as background checks and licenses for hires.

In thinking about changes to the workforce moving forward, many employers discussed the continuation of remote work and teleservices. “Remote is the way of the future – we are new in Camden, we have tax credits and incentives, we’re 100 percent remote right now, the expectation is, there will be time in the office – we are still very much working through what does that look like? We are going to have to offer flexibility in order to remain in the market, we are trying to find out what other companies in Camden do. We’re very upfront with candidates, but the reality is, if they have an opportunity to work 100 percent remote, we’re potentially losing them,” one participant shared.

Unemployment Insurance and Return to Work During COVID-19

“Being in real estate, property management, a lot of our employees are essential workers and have been working throughout. Where we’ve had difficulty is recruiting for entry level roles. When the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) was in full action with the supplemental unemployment insurance, it made it difficult to identify and close candidates on opportunities – because they were making about the same with the

supplemental unemployment payments so it was very difficult for us for several months to get folks to come on board.”

“When you say people aren’t returning because of stimulus packages... they can’t make the same money. They have these outstanding bills – but they don’t have the education. I know somebody at the [conference center] who makes \$75,000 a year, with no high school education. So how does this work if most businesses are asking for a bachelor’s degree—so you say okay well then I will stay on unemployment.”

Mirroring recent conversations around worker incentives and hiring as the pandemic in the U.S. continues, employers expressed varying degrees of frustration, acceptance, and support of unemployment insurance during this time. One employer shared, “when I ask candidates why they don’t want to continue with the application process, it’s because they are making more money on unemployment. That’s another challenge that we are up against.” Employers recognized that prospective employees were expressing apprehension about safety and pointing to wage disparities. “There isn’t that incentive – why go back and put myself at risk if I am making the same [money] at home?” said one participant. Another employer suggested targeting the isolated worker population that is not receiving unemployment insurance to pivot to open or new roles.

One employer who works with county social services noted that they continue to receive continual work opportunities from employers during the pandemic and serve as the conduit for unemployment insurance benefits and a job resource. They noted the regulations around federal and state declarations of public health emergencies, and how unemployment insurance/ public benefit clients are exempt from work activities during this time; which also affects the county’s training and education facility closures and limited or online offerings. “And many of our clients have technology issues, like internet access... but beyond that, it’s equipment, it’s that somebody might have equipment, but it doesn’t meet the newer software they need to engage in learning and training. So there are barriers. We do reach out, and people can voluntarily reach out in activities, but we’re not getting many people. It’s hard to engage in a training activity remotely when you’re trying to help your kids learn at home,” explained one employer.

Unique Aspects of the Southern New Jersey Economic Landscape

The nuances between west Southern New Jersey (Camden, Gloucester, Burlington), the most Southern New Jersey counties (Salem and Cumberland), and the coastal counties (Atlantic, Cape May, Ocean) were evident in the challenges and successes discussed by employers. As noted before, the three top industries across all regions in Southern New Jersey are health care and social assistance, retail trade (sales and customer service), and accommodation/hospitality and food services, including tourism (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Employers discussed the prevalence of the tourism, hospitality and accommodation sectors in the coastal counties, with efforts to emphasize new aviation and technology investments. The counties in the western part of the region emphasized engineering and corporate offices. Salem and Cumberland County employers discussed manufacturing and agricultural opportunities. Across all counties and in the City of Camden, opportunities in advanced manufacturing, construction, food production, healthcare/health sciences, retail, service (including personal care service), trades and utilities, and warehousing and supply chain arose in discussion.

Others discussed shifting industries. “We don’t have any one thing that we are known for, and especially since the glass factory has closed, it used to be all manufacturing and that’s what’s gone. There was an anchor and now I feel like there is no anchor. We have [distribution company]. They are there on the same site, and people scramble to get those jobs, and if you can get in there you are golden, but they just don’t hire that many people. And now there is supposed to be a new project coming in to do wind turbines, but there won’t be that many jobs. There is no commitment, manufacturing and assembly

jobs are high tech now. It's not like it used to be," one employer shared. Added another, "we also have smaller companies that provide jobs for that workforce but it's not enough."

Multiple business stakeholders mentioned Southern New Jersey's efforts to diversify industries, specifically mentioning technology, alternative energies, skilled trades, and health sciences and the need for state support behind these developments and investments. "We are looking to diversify the economy, get kids into science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), and want to bring about a generational shift in thinking around education," shared one participant.

The unique economic landscape of Southern New Jersey has seen industries fade, populations shift, and new development opportunities arise. Within diversifying industries, employers discussed the career transitions that may present themselves to job seekers and businesses moving to the area (Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, 2019). "But people are reluctant to explore new career pathways," and do not want to settle for lower pay rates than prior roles when pivoting careers, explained one employer.

Another shared,

“When you talked to people then about considering a new pathway or career- they were reluctant to do that. It was a generational experience, they had been in that occupation for 25-30 years, they were not going to change it. One of the things we see in this area, the number of people who have a successful career without a high school education is unusual here. With the [local labor union] over them, they have benefits, and retirement pensions, they have ability to be successful without pursuing the education. I just saw a document from a lady today, she was earning \$75,000- 80,000 a year with a high school diploma. When she tries to go back into the labor market to find opportunities, she is going to try to find something similar and will find it a hard time.”

These alternative career paths may have accelerated due to the pandemic. One employer who works in construction retail explained how their growth in sales has enabled them to hire former restaurant workers. "If things still keep going the way that they are, the restaurant community will continue to shrink or go under, and those workers are looking to move into the trades because there is more stability there, this is a direct result of COVID-19. When things started to open up, the volume of sales just wasn't there to keep them in a job," they noted.

Employers also mentioned some industries that while critical, do not employ many residents. "Our commercial industry, the Port of Cape May, is the second largest on the east coast – the reality is fish comes and it's pushed out. There is no processing that happens in Cape May and sometimes it goes to Cumberland County and it's still in our region. But that fact is right, the industry doesn't employ a lot of people, but the economic impact is huge. Atlantic County has a huge economic impact as well, these are things that because they are not employing a lot of people, they're not critical to this workforce discussion, we don't want to lose them. We still want to protect them, and they don't get the attention of Trenton." One participant commented that the region has so many assets that are often completely overlooked and unknown about.

Employers mentioned ways to attract companies and the labor force, some using the quality of living in the region as a selling point, and others directly recruiting from Philadelphia and New York City. Another person said "geographically we are challenged. Government sector jobs are in Washington DC and most of those people will head towards DC. It's either gotta be a remote opportunity or they're going to have a hard time relocating. It's just not too far away, so why would I leave for an opportunity. On the other side of that, is New York City – you're either in North Jersey, and tap into a Philly market and can hop back and forth. You can't really do the same thing in DC—that's made it interesting for us to be able to draw that type of talent."

Transportation

Employers we spoke with recognized transportation as a barrier for both overall economic growth and job seekers efforts to secure employment. For businesses in the City of Camden, one employer noted that at times filling roles in the City was harder because employees did not want to commute there. “When we got the economic development [grant]– employees that lived in Philadelphia loved it because they could just take the train, but employees that lived in the northern Southern New Jersey area– they didn’t like it.” Another commented that for those coming in and out of a Moorestown (in Burlington County) company location, there is no public transit easily accessible to the site and a lot of people have to drive themselves.

Another shared,

“One of the issues we have had, because we are not just in Camden, there are roles [within this healthcare company] you need to travel to. You need to get to Burlington County to one of our [healthcare company] sites. And we have a waitlist for the [healthcare company] in Camden because they only want to work in Camden, there’s no openings in that area, and they want to walk to work. And some don’t have transportation, and some do. We partner with organizations in Camden well, and I don’t know if there’s ones we can do more with, with the expansion of that ability for those that are wanting to and able to go out of Camden. We are always and will advocate for Camden.”

One employer mentioned “people don’t want to pay the bridge toll to commute from Philadelphia, I know it’s \$5 but when it’s a teacher salary, it’s \$100 a month – we have provided a transportation stipend, but people are like ‘I don’t want to drive that far.’” In Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem counties the lack of transportation remains a significant barrier for both employers and employees. “We are close to Philly and Delaware, and there are jobs to be had, but there is a transportation issue,” shared one employer.

In the coastal communities, one employer noted that the majority of Ocean County residents leave the county for work, “even in the pre-COVID-19 days” and that the one train line available has limited service, and you have to drive to the train station.

“Transportation is a big issue, especially in Cape May because many service providers have to drive down there. And with so many service providers from Atlantic County, getting them to drive there is a barrier. They offer mileage reimbursement and initiatives like that, but people still don’t want to go. They just need to hire people that live down there. Maybe there is the option of bundling services too.”

Due to transportation limitations, multiple employers said they focus on county residence when hiring. Changes to work policies with telecommuting options may shift some of these resources, but transportation and distance to work remain a significant issue across the region. A few participants noted offering ride-sharing cards for employees through grant money and one suggested, “transportation is a huge issue – gotta make sure they can get there [to the job]...give them a great starting salary and packages to Uber/Lyft to get back and forth, until they make enough paychecks to be able to get a car.”

Cost of Living

“In recruiting, the issue of affordable housing comes again. Sometimes it could be a candidate that is looking to move into an area, and they’re looking for housing—they’ve had a five-bedroom home in Ohio or West Virginia, and they look at something comparable [here], and

it's \$1 million dollars. It puts us in a disadvantaged state. The term affordable housing is ambiguous- it's affordable depending on the community that surrounds it. Affordable to you is not necessarily affordable to me. It's not something that is ever really talked about when we are having these decisions.”

As discussed with job seekers, the cost of living in New Jersey was also mentioned as a barrier for companies to attract and compensate employees. One employer mentioned the real estate economy booming in their area, particularly due to a rise of telecommuting residents. “They don't need a job, they already have a job – their needs are going to be around hospitality, retail. They are looking for ways to spend that disposable income – that will suggest the continued increased demand on the hospital side.” Other employers mentioned some employees who are obtaining [remote] jobs but don't have a viable work environment - one employer is coordinating efforts to open a local co-working space.

Employers who worked in the seasonal tourism industry discussed its uniqueness with regards to compensation and cost, explaining that it is difficult to bring in people to work over the summer and is not sustainable because of the price of real estate. There are efforts to balance out the economy and making housing more affordable so people can work there year round and have that job that can sustain them. Compensation also is a challenge, where the pay scale is not always not competitive. “A lot of people are looking to be hired in a year round, mid-level position, like in a marketing position or an administrative role. They're not finding salaries at a level they can sustain their household. A marketing manager being \$35,000 or \$40,000, where those positions should be \$60,000,” shared one business representative.

Recruitment & Hiring

“I hear about the job search on both ends – the employer looking to fill a position and the employee looking for a job. I hear on both sides, the frustration – the employers getting applicants from Timbuktu, and the employee is not giving a response. We have got to narrow this field. Most employers, their needs are different. They want a good relationship. You're depending on a good referral; their time is precious. They want a system in place that will bring them good candidates. The interview process and time it takes, there is a lot of valuable time spending in that, in hiring, and the time in training them. You want to get the best candidate in the best position in the best time. You're putting everything out on the line, and it's maybe the most efficient, but is maybe not the most valuable. We need to narrow this funnel.”

Employers relied heavily on online recruitment methods and shifted many recruitment strategies to virtual means during the course of the pandemic. Common website platforms included Indeed, GlassDoor, Monster, Snagajob, Craigslist, LinkedIn, and various social media. Shared one employer, “[we] have a company Facebook page - we started to engage more with candidates on social media, we would like to expand on Instagram. You have to know your audience.” Diversified advertising has enabled employers to increase the number of people interested in their company and expand their social network and recruiting reach.

Employers expressed varying degrees of difficulty or ease in attracting prospective employees. Shared one participant, “some employers don't even need to go out and look, because they have a stockpile of resumes.” The shifting economy and regulations during the pandemic has made hiring and recruitment inconsistent and unpredictable at times. As one employer shared, they “don't believe the unemployment rate in Cape May, because staffing is so desperate. If you breathe, you get a job. In Ocean County, not sure what the challenge is. They are lucky if they get 10 applicants in a week over there.” Another shared that it is much easier to get into their industry (construction) due to a massive growth in sales, and they

had to double up on staff to accommodate the increase in business. “It is much easier to get a foot in the door now than any other time. Used to be seasonal to full time, now we are offering full benefits to part time workers, and we bring people on full time almost immediately.” Another shared that as the unemployment rate comes down, it has become more difficult to find the talent that they need.

Many employers mentioned trying to recruit locally, and that depending on roles to fill, they aim to attract people to the area from outside the region. One employer who conducts national searches for employees to come to southern New Jersey noted, “it was a struggle to try to attract people to the area, our salaries were not competitive to other areas across the county.” Another employer has a staff person assigned to each county for recruitment, and conducts statewide searches. “We don’t have to have push recruitment except for specialty clinical positions—we do recruit regionally and in the contiguous states – we use Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook. We don’t do newspaper ads even though some managers want us to. We do use a sourcing company because my staff is small and mighty. We try to recruit locally, because if you need to commute you’re going to go to Philly or North Jersey. We try to sell this area and the amenities, and say why people would want to drive here as opposed to out,” they shared.

Multiple employers discussed in-person recruiting events and job fairs (including some virtual job fairs during COVID-19). Word-of-mouth recruitment and referrals remain a large factor in hiring, including referrals from local organizations, such as YMCAs, One-Stop Career Centers, and the New Jersey Reentry Corporation. “Job fairs and connections with the community and word of mouth. People don’t know about the resources that are available to them,” said one employer.

“We hear that all the time, oh you need to know somebody, it’s impossible to work. In reality we have five full-timers who are recruiters. We would love to talk to each person. It is just not possible, we try to have different events to put ourselves out there, thinking about how to better serve certain communities. We need to learn that. So [at an event] you could sign up and have 15 minutes with a recruiter. We started a First Friday. It went extremely well the first two times, but then the candidates coming in were frustrated...didn’t come in with a resume, not dressed, and [healthcare company] didn’t hand them a job. And after the first one or two things, and they didn’t dress, and they didn’t get a job, they were done with us. There has to be a better understanding of meeting the needs of the community.”

Employers recognize that while they have jobs to fill, they must connect with the community to build a candidate pool, “We need to just build relationships with various organizations to identify a community. We have built a partnership with Gateway Action Partnership in Cumberland and in Bridgeton (Cumberland County) to identify people who may want to enter this industry.”

Another shared,

“I think in some of the places, like manufacturing, where people are clamoring to get into – they have a stockpile [of resumes] or people they can interview for those jobs, it runs the gamut. It would be a word of mouth thing around here and for employers that are doing online searches. We try to get people through our job board. I pass a small industrial park, and they always have signs out – “We’re hiring.” There are multiple ways people are trying to recruit. And when I see those signs I say go out there and get them on our job board.”

While some employers have their own recruitment database where they keep all resumes and can pull from when positions open up, some employers mentioned using automatic resume reviewers or outsourcing to temporary staffing services to staff their hiring and recruitment teams, particularly for hourly or nonexempt roles. One employer mentioned the challenge posed by these algorithms that

conduct resume reviews, “to place young people [we have trained] – our young people will get filtered out from automated systems. We try to have dedicated pathways, so our young people can go right through to HR (human resources). When they get to real people they are successful and get hired. When they get to a job portal or a screener system it’s an automatic throw out, especially for young brown and black people.”

Another shared, “I think hiring managers look for the perfect candidate. As a recruiter, I see myself advocating for candidates, so I represent my hiring manager but I also advocate for my candidates – if I present them in a poor manner, then I misrepresent them. I need to represent and advocate for candidates that meet requirements – we need to understand the candidate pool – the talent pool in Camden – you need to understand what that talent pool provides. Educate businesses around unconscious bias or how job descriptions work. Are we screening for job descriptions or talent? Understanding culturally what the area is and how to connect with that.” Another recruitment manager offered, “I think that humility is important in the job search. Is this really what I have done? Be honest with yourself – I get turned off when people are too hard to sell themselves. Job seekers who come through with authenticity resonate most with me.”

Employers expressed challenges in keeping up with the influx of resumes and potential candidates, and conversations around how to most appropriately, fairly, and effectively screen and select candidates arose.

“Part of our strategy is to challenge hiring managers, that we are more descriptive not prescriptive on the posting. I need to do the audit; I have a feeling we are really being prescriptive. It is the right thing to do and will broaden our talent pool.”

Some employers did note efforts to focus on hiring women and people of color, and also chronicled examples where employers exhibited racism and bias (particularly ageism) in the employment realm. One employer shared, “with companies that don’t have diversity but are trying to have more it comes down to just asking, and usually you can suss out the problem with communication vs. just saying or hearing ‘they’re not doing their job.’ For example, we checked in with one person and they had concerns about one of our young people. And once the young person got the feedback, he improved. But we learned he never got any feedback from his supervisor. The supervisor was uncomfortable giving feedback to a black man - so he wasn’t getting any feedback from the supervisor.” Another hiring manager noted that many white applicants were not prepared to speak on race questions when asked in interviews. Another participant emphasized the need for more educational opportunities for people of color, which could also increase the availability of bilingual applicants they receive, which is crucial to serving many of their Spanish-speaking clients.

Open Positions and Skills Employers Are Looking For

“There are a lot of job opportunities but the challenges are childcare and transportation, being out of employment for a while and lack of soft skills. Lack of understanding to formulate resumes and applying to jobs. Lack of financial literacy and job preparation in high school.”

The employers we spoke with represented the public, private, nonprofit, and government sectors. Many of the open positions they hire for spanned occupations and experience/educational levels. “We recruit for a wide variety of positions – everything from housekeepers to accountants, property managers, compliance specialists, development officers – you name it, we hire for it,” shared one employer. Another shared they hire from entry-level medical field jobs all the way to MDs (doctors).

Essential workers in food manufacturing, including warehouse roles and staff for pharmaceutical clients are being hired. Positions in engineering, advanced manufacturing jobs, medical coding jobs, staff

positions at high level call centers, quality assurance analysts, junior web developers, data analysts, geographic information systems technicians, and legal, communications, and operations roles were all specifically mentioned by the employers we spoke with.

Regarding filling jobs, one employer noted, “there is not much difficulty filling South Jersey roles. There are radar systems and cyber-area skills – those tend to be difficult jobs to fill. Other than that we normally fill our jobs.” Social service employers mentioned open case manager positions and that the most challenging worker population to fill is licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs), licensed marriage and family therapists (LMFTs), and nurses (RNs). In other industries, the hardest positions to fill are in the skilled trades (electricians, plumbing, heating ventilation and air cooling- HVAC), and particularly machine operators - automotive technicians, diesel mechanics, and railcar movers. Healthcare sector employers mentioned hiring for a variety of positions as well - including lab technicians and specialty nurses. COVID-19 impacted hiring, as one employer noted, “that is hitting us with trying to hire medical assistants, pharmacists, coupled with high demand for respiratory therapists where there are shortages. We have many issues. We hire everything from dining workers through clinical practitioners. We have competition with [convenience store company].”

Job and Skill Mismatch

“For all the jobs that require college degrees at the corporate level, we are inundated and get a lot of overqualified candidates. For CDL drivers, we would offer large sign on bonuses because we were so desperate. Now that has changed because our rates are good. We still offer a pension, we have to break through a stigma about joining a union and earning less up front.”

While some open positions require no particular skills and hired people without experience, other positions discussed by employers require minimum skills or required a highly specialized skill set. One employer commented that across the Southern New Jersey region, the vast majority of people are skilled in customer service, hospitality and service, with a minor bulk in the medical and transportation fields. One employer said finding specialty in demand talent with critical skills is the biggest challenge.

There appeared to be a lack of overlap in some industries/occupations and the skillsets of prospective employees in locations across the region. Noted one employer, “we do give priority to Camden applicants, but they have to have the skill sets.”

A general trend in skills being more technology driven - such as understanding codes, computers, using Microsoft Office Suite, and writing professional emails emerged. One employer commented, “they know the word Excel, but they don’t even know what it is. Don’t understand the basics at all. And other individuals from across the bridge, they do have it.” Another suggested the best investment of training dollars needs to be invested in soft skills workshops, training on digital logistics, technical background, health sciences, and computer skills. Training for these skills is often taken on by employers who hire for attitude and train for skills, “a lot of times our managers are willing to upskill people who are looking for opportunity and have a positive attitude,” one employer commented.

Challenges between the existing industries and ability to hire workers at company locations became evident in areas across the region and in the City of Camden. Shared one employer, “we usually run 300-500 openings – the areas we have that are hard to fill, are always hard to fill. These are respiratory technicians, lab technicians. And that goes back to the transportation question – there are programs, but students here are in South Jersey and the programs are in Central or North Jersey.” For larger national or multinational organizations, some mismatch may be that the bulk of company positions are hired outside of Southern New Jersey, or the roles available in the region’s hiring area do not align with the skills currently available locally. One employer commented on this, “at [electric services company],

there is a nuclear plant, and those are very good paying jobs, but most jobs are highly skilled, like engineers, those types of jobs. So not all the people who work there live in this county because they are high paying high skill jobs.”

A pattern of easily filling higher-level positions emerged, with more challenges for filling lower level positions. Shared one employer, “this conversation is important. More of that would be good. The market is saturated for some talent, particularly higher educated positions. They need to move to jobs where the vacancies are. In management, there is basically no room for new talent. Advice to job seekers: identify the gaps of the marketplace and go for that.”

One City of Camden employer noted that its corporate headquarters positions require college degrees. “We very rarely hire someone out of entry level, we just don’t have a ton of entry level in Camden. We recognize that and we’re looking for ways to address that while being in Camden,” they shared. Another Camden employer noted that the bulk of what they hire for, hourly roles in warehouse leadership, CDL drivers, and transportation leadership is not in Southern New Jersey, and the Camden headquarters hires in accounting, finances, engineering, and senior executive leadership roles. Representatives from the utility and trades, as well as the specialty healthcare fields, noted that many employees are at retirement age, and they currently don’t have the influx of hires to match the retirement numbers (Richards, 2021).

Need for Soft Skills

“I think it’s hard to impress on people, is that you don’t not go to work when you don’t want to go, or that it’s optional. You need work ethic, that people are depending on you, that what happens when you’re not there? We can coach through the technical stuff, or a math class, etc., We can get you tutors – it’s the other stuff. Do you have a plan B when your kids get sick? It’s that alternate planning, and understanding that sometimes you don’t get to do everything you want to do because you still have a responsibility – and it’s not specific to any group – but I do think we run across it more and I am not sure why.”

By far, soft skills (of job seekers) emerged as a prominent theme discussed by employers. Some considered soft skills to be work ethic or professionalism, with a need for employees to be continuous learners and possess willingness to step into opportunities. Shared one employer, “you can come without real experience, as long as you have willingness to work, as long as you show up, don’t call out, you can move up.” Others characterized soft skills as listening, empathy, customer service, and communicating clearly and non-violently.

Employers had differing views on the preparedness of job seekers versus the role of employers to help teach and guide soft skill development. One employer’s view, “soft skills are the customer service skills, the skills you can’t really teach. Some of the other skills can be taught with the exception of those that require licenses and such.” Another employer shared that they can teach skills but they cannot teach how to get up every day [for work] or how to interact [with people]. On the other hand, another employer offered, “people can get a job but they need to keep a job. What does a good employee look like? We try to teach that. Many of the skills that used to be taught, aren’t always taught. So it’s up to the schools and employers to teach that.”

Many employers also noted the transferability of soft skills across various occupations and roles.

“Soft skills – it’s interesting, there are always hospitality programs for front desk jobs, and so much of that is transferable. If you’re front desk at a hospital, or it’s the same supervisory roles if you were front desk at a hotel. We haven’t had programs [to connect]. Sure, if you’re at a hospital front desk you need to know insurance terminology, and compassion. You need all

the same skills. So I've been working to seed those [transfer] programs, where you can come in as a customer service person, you need patience, communication skills, and be able to handle difficult situations.”

“Soft skills are a big deal – we are looking to see where they are. They might not have a high school diploma, they might have a high school diploma but no other skills. Doing career and academic assessments, even if they don't have an idea, we still like to do that – because I want the conversations to start. People may not know what is out there for them. If they are a good fit for training or education we are going to pursue those paths. That technical training piece – certifications and training, that stuff is easy.”

A subtheme of positive behavior reinforcement and modeling life skills also emerged. “Organizations are underprepared to be teachers/big brother big sister/mentor all at once. It's an uphill battle to get people to fully contribute every day,” commented one employer. Another said some prospective employees have not had a mentor or know what “good” looks like. Specifically in the City of Camden, one employer noted, “people who tend to be successful, tend to leave Camden. There are not as many role models here...that little bit of hope gives them the opportunity to flourish.”

Barriers to Employment

Employers discussed barriers across education level, experience level, drug testing and criminal history, and state regulations that impede hiring and training efforts. The barriers and disqualifiers discussed certainly varied by industry, and some industries and employers exhibited more flexibility than others in waiving specific requirements or being more or less stringent about “disqualifiers” for certain positions.

Education Level and/or Certifications

Employers in the social service and educational fields highlighted strict educational requirements and certifications needed to hire employees. “Over the last several years, fewer and fewer people apply, especially for support staff ... many of the positions require higher education, which is harder to find. People don't tend to have experience, a lot of the applicants are coming right from classrooms which really isn't the same,” said one hiring manager. Another employer emphasized the importance of community college, and that not everyone needs to go to a four year university.

Many contracting agencies working with employers require higher levels of license qualifications for roles (such as for masters of social work, licensed social workers, and licensed clinical social workers - MSW, LSW, LCSW) and these license certification requirements change over time. Employers also discussed that obtaining licenses or specific certifications can be a barrier due to training time, cost, and language for bilingual applicants. “They might not be able to devote the amount of time a more well off person could because they are trying to support their families while getting training,” one director commented. Moreover, for applicants that may be immigrants, authorization to work in the United States is required, and applicants' degrees (if received in another country) must be determined to be equivalent to United States college/university degrees.

Other employers noted they are “highly regulated, so in order to work, you have to have a certificate, including aides.” Another shared, “they need a degree or a professional engineering license as they get later on...and there are no real training programs.” One employer governed under the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (federal contractor) has requirements stating minimum years of experience and education and if a candidate does not meet one requirement or more, they are not deemed hireable. “I have met exceptionally qualified candidates, but they don't have the degree. They

don't have the degree, and because it would be unfair to move forward with that person because I have disqualified 10 people before them who didn't have that education," a hiring manager explained.

Other companies have more flexibility with educational/experience level requirements. Shared one employer, "we're trying to get more creative on how we can apply associate's degrees and have associate degree majors work on lower level tasks – that would help us manage labor costs."

Employers challenged themselves to be adaptable and accommodating, as highlighted by one participant, "a lot of our funders or grantors dictate x amount of years of experience to work with someone. So where I might have a candidate of good experience, if they don't have two years working with the youth population, my hands are tied. If they are a good candidate, I slide them into another position so they can meet the experience requirements."

With or without governing bodies stipulations on minimum requirements, employers recognized the ways restrictive hiring requirements and practices could not only limit the talent pool, but contribute to inequitable access to opportunities.

“There's a thought in HR (human resources), and I am sure it lives outside in HR, with the degree requirements—we should start challenging ourselves. Whether or not a degree is relevant to the success in the roles. At what point do we determine that that experience is enough. When we think about opportunities to people who don't have it, some people don't have the access to higher education, but they have the experience. There has to be an inflection point. I recognize that if you have x amount of experience, you don't need that requirement. It's an old school way of thinking that you need to have a degree.”

Background Checks (Drivers Licenses, Drug Testing and/or Criminal Histories)

“If there is a conviction in the background – that is the kind of stuff we have hard conversations around. And also certified nursing assistant (CNA) jobs for instance, it's low paying and shift work. CNAs are working 24 hours, so if you don't have child care, you might have it while you're on public assistance, do you have childcare, do you have people that can take care of your kids while you're working nights, weekends, etc? We do find out from some of these employers, what are they looking for, or we know we have employers who say, yeah, if they won't do a background check, we need to know what the conviction was and how long ago it was because maybe we can waive that and be flexible.”

The most common hiring disqualifiers mentioned by employers were criminal histories, failed drug tests, and unclean driving records and/or not having a drivers' license. Shared one employer, "a lot of our jobs require clean driving records since they do operate company vehicles. We do pre-background screenings. We are pretty lenient with what we will allow – certain charges, since we have folks going into homes with children and senior, certain charges or situations are disqualifiers."

Specific background check requirements and leniency with requirements greatly varied by industry and employer. Social service agencies and government-funded employers were more stringent on certain disqualifiers. One employer that administers public assistance and receives federal funding requires a federal background check and drug testing for all hires. Employers noted that a large number of applicants have been eliminated because of drug testing. These regulations may change as New Jersey drug policies shift, particularly with regards to marijuana policy (JD Supra, 2021). In the for-profit sectors, disqualifiers also varied. "There is a lot of confusion around marijuana laws, larger companies

will always go with the most stringent laws,” said one employer. Another shared that long as people have no violence and sexual offense history, they will employ them. One employer in technology noted that “there are no disqualifiers. Ankle monitor, criminal records, doesn’t matter. In technology companies, if they have experience and are professional. Tech employers are less concerned about those things.” Another manager shared, “with other things, what can we look at in something that happened 25-30 years ago, and if they’ve had a clean slate since then, we try to be as flexible as can...if there is a criminal history, we do a individualized assessment if we can hire depending if we can hire.”

State Regulation Burdens

“We are very unique here, and so many state programs have these little caveats. We have the need but we don’t always have the qualifications, and they [New Jersey Department of Labor] need to understand that.”

A pattern of obtrusive and at times unclear state or federal regulations arose. Employers expressed the need for supplemental funding for training and onboarding of new hires, challenges with meeting state requirements, and the rigidity of funding requirements. Employers suggested funneling money to different areas and that there currently is a disconnect between what’s appropriated through the legislature and what’s actually happening on the ground.

State grant workforce programs sometimes appeared arbitrary and are time consuming. One example provided was the statewide demand occupation list that is not regionally or locally focused – the state uses one analytical form for the whole state, “and because [our] county is different, we don’t fit into that mold.” A waiver for the demand occupation list [to obtain funds] requires two employers that identify a need, and one employer expressed they do not qualify because they only have one employer in their county. “It is those kind of policy decisions that seem to alienate South Jersey – they’re focused on North and Central Jersey, and it is frustrating,” the employer expressed.

Another participant espoused that New Jersey Department of Labor grants should focus not on the number of people trained but on the outcomes, “how many jobs were created and at what salary base were people hired?” That same employer suggested there be tight policing on used car loans, paycheck loans, and things that are contributing to the gravity of poverty experienced by thousands of residents. Another shared that more funding needs to go to the “folks that are just trying to get a break.”

Specific regulations also posed challenges for employers. New criminal check laws created grey areas for employers who had to rely on state or federal funders decisions on which criminal background were permissible for hires. Other employers discussed how licensing and certification requirements can become so narrowly defined it can be a challenge. For healthcare employers, the Health Care Professional Responsibility and Reporting Enhancement Act (Cullen form) provides an example. “The state nursing association changed the way they did it, and said it had to be filled out from entity to entity. I have a small group of recruiters, and they have to send out these [Cullen] forms to each place of work, and they all have to come back before giving an offer. They’ve added more and more – the rules and regulations around the form are very prohibiting, because of the amount of work is it to send it out and to get it back. It’s a state form [NJ only]. If I am hiring someone from a CVS pharmacy, CVS doesn’t care about a NJ specific form. And it’s a form that needs to be filled out from a nurse to any patient-facing person,” a hiring manager explained. Another educational employer in the City of Camden explained how the state of New Jersey requires all hires to have a minimum 3.0 college grade point average (GPA), which poses a hiring challenge. “It’s really difficult - having that college GPA doesn’t mean you’re going to be amazing for kids...there is some legislation in the state around the GPA requirement that is keeping teachers out of classrooms and to lower that requirement so I am hopeful that goes through.”

During the pandemic employers noted they could obtain some PPE funding, but some other administration funding had been lost. Another employer shared that because they switched to providing telehealth services instead of general health services, there were strict regulations that had to go through the governor for approval.

Tension in the Employment and Economic Landscape

Quality and Structure of Jobs

“Our businesses that are coming in, like warehousing, problem is they are \$12 an hour jobs, and for us, that is not enough to sustain people. It’s not a living wage, it’s great for college kids or summer job type things, or maybe somebody who doesn’t need that extra income to support a family. But even if two people [in a family] are working there for \$24 an hour, it’s not enough to sustain a family.”

Employers recognized the importance of job quality (i.e. wages, benefits, schedule), with some exhibiting more efforts than others to change existing structures in ways that could benefit both employers and employees. One employer stated that their business partners have been focusing too much on programs instead of the salary being offered. One shared, “we only value what we pay for. We’ve given people debt, not a living wage.” Another employer who offers educational benefits shared, “we try to go out into the community and let them know we pay for education – and when you have individuals that are living pay to paycheck, if the casinos are paying 50 to 75 cents more per dollar than what they could make at the hospital and going to school – they have to make those decisions.”

While wages vary greatly by industry and occupation, Southern New Jersey overall has lower wages than the state overall. As of 2018, the average annual salary in Southern New Jersey was \$58,448 while it was \$73,104 in New Jersey. However, prior to the pandemic, the region’s wages were growing at a faster pace than the state average. The average wage per job in Southern New Jersey grew by an annual average of 0.8 percent during the 2014-2018 period, compared to 0.6 percent annual change in New Jersey.

Another participant shared that providing a sustainable wage is always a struggle with employers as their county does not have that high paid economy. In response to conversations around a \$15 minimum wage or additional wage increases, one employer noted, “if a funder is not flexible for the federal or state government requirements and if a minimum wage increase is going to happen immediately or progressively, and our funding is stagnant, there will be an issue of being able to afford wages if a funder is not increasing the allotment of money they are giving us.” Another employer working in property development noted that existing operations using low-income housing tax credits work on very tight margins, and any increase in minimum wage would put those properties in a deficit.

Some employers in the social service field had to shift to a fee-for-service model, which impacts not only their ability to guarantee work for their staff, but impacts the quality of their service as their staff often turnover quickly and move onto jobs that can offer them benefits. “There is a high rate of burn-out. It would be great if we could compensate more,” one employer said.

Employers recognized the need to offer jobs that are accessible and attractive to potential candidates. “I think the talent will come here, it’s just a matter of the company offering the benefits and amenities, a challenging career,” one person shared.

Employer Recommendations & Looking Forward

“Who is going to be able to work a full-time job, go to school, and do the clinics when it’s an hour away?”

Whether discussing recommendations for training resources, educational opportunities, or available jobs, employers shared a consensus that people need to understand what resources are available, and that employers can help provide skills, resources, and ways to connect because residents do not always know or have someone in their circle to help them. Shared one participant, “focus recruiting from the employer to reaching out to the employee. Put pressure on the employer, they know what they need.” Another employer shared that for most people who have been out of the workforce, that exit usually stemmed from some life change – they lost a job or something else is happening in their personal/family life.

“For youth, it’s about meeting them where they are. If we can catch them when they’re younger, it’s helpful. Yeah, maybe what you’re doing right now doesn’t work out, but you have some ideas. Okay maybe you don’t like this, and know you don’t want to do that – trying to grab them when they’re young. There is a different motivation when you’re older and you have kids – but there are more stressors. And if you’re not motivated and you’re struggling or you don’t have confidence – think about how much harder it is to get into that mode of I have to do something different and it’s scary. There is an intimidation factor. Everyone going to school and getting training – when you’re in your 30s or 40s, it’s intimidating to go back to school. You’re going to be sitting in a room with 19 and 20 year olds, and that’s scary. And I don’t think people think about that. People say going to school is great. But there is a mental piece to that. You have to recognize that it’s not easy for people to pull up their bootstraps and walk into a room. Virtual is great for that though.”

Career Awareness and Local Partnerships

“I think our bigger issue is reaching people before... for us, it’s about youth, getting to our youth when they are young, helping them understand, why it’s important to finish school to have a next step when they finish high school. You’re not a college student, that’s fine, here are other opportunities that are available to you.”

A pattern of youth outreach and early education about career paths arose. Multiple employers discussed apprenticeship opportunities and partnerships with community-based organizations, local K-12 school districts, vocational and technical schools, community colleges, and other educational institutions. Employers also discussed early education about different types of careers and future planning, particularly alternatives to four-year universities. Employers encouraged themselves and other businesses to engage at the K-12 level - talking about career paths and sharing opportunities that do not require traditional post secondary education. As one employer shared, “start with 14-17 [year olds] to help them understand which directions they are best suited for and let them know where the jobs are in the state.” Another added, “there isn’t one specific thing. The bigger issue is reaching the youth and helping them understand that finishing school is important and to prepare for next steps. If you can catch them when they are younger, you can really make an impact.”

“You need to get into high schools and talk to kids about meaningful career paths. I can fill a higher level job easily, it’s the lower level jobs that are harder to fill. At [manufacturing company], there are kids that are ready to work, but have to wait a while before things like drug use and driving incidents fall off of their records. We have to rely on our high school education system to let kids know that college is not necessarily for everyone.”

Employers talked about providing mentorship, offering opportunities for people to continue education, and giving residents a fuller picture of jobs before students/future potential employees commit to a degree program. This career awareness could be developed through apprenticeship or internship programs. One employer suggested training for CAD (computer aided design) technicians in high school and vocational/technical schools. Another employer partners with Cathedral Kitchen in the City of Camden and has highschool students work with them through a co-op program.

Early education also couples with exposure to new ideas and career paths. Shared one hiring manager,

“If you think about this field, unless you know about it, you’re not going to know about it. We introduce biology to inner city kids who wouldn’t have access to it – so when they are in school they can think about it and we can build that pipeline. To bring the biology field to Camden and Philly, in addition to our learning partnership – so we can start to cultivate, “hey you don’t see this in your backyard,” but it exists, and you can have a career at something like the [science-related organization].”

“Somebody comes in and says “I want to be an LPN (licensed practical nurse),” and they think I can be a nurse, and then we find out, they pass out if they see blood, and that’s not a good match – so we need to know those things.”

One recruitment manager we spoke with has been talking about opportunities in local vocational-technical schools and has direct relationships with guidance counselors. The manager connects with youth to bring them into their organization [construction/construction retail] and makes job offers on young men and women’s 18th birthdays. One young man they worked with went from making \$13 to \$18 an hour, and had just received a promotion to make \$23 an hour. The next steps were to have him obtain a license and “move on to bigger things” at the company.

Some employers noted existing partnerships with local organizations and/or educational institutions, while others expressed the need for more partnerships to exist; however, the role or responsibility of who would lead or foster these conversations and partnerships was unclear - employers, government, K-12 school districts? While some programs, such as a peer-recovery specialist apprenticeship position funded through an NJ State Targeted Opioid Response Initiative (STORI) grant, are state or federally funded, other employers discussed their own company or organization-wide initiatives. Other organizations do not have the resources or bandwidth to support such programs on their own.

Community colleges are viewed as a great resource, particularly as a liaison between employers and students. One employer partners with Rowan College at Burlington County in a fundamentals in the energy industry course to help provide opportunities in the utilities industry. Shared the employer, “so they may not have degrees but will have great foundational knowledge to help [utilities company].” Another company is working with Camden County College on a program in the electrical trades and in environmental science. The pandemic may also reallocate funds and workforce-related resources - Atlantic Cape Community College was offering free enrollment into training programs to those who were unemployed or lost hours due to the pandemic (Press of Atlantic City, 2020). Available training programs include retail, customer services and hospitality, culinary arts and cooking.

One employer is part of a Coalition of New Jersey CEOs coming together to support those with challenge to access - to provide opportunities through education, resources, training, and career development. The employer is the only coalition member in the region, and is focusing on a relationship with Camden City School District to support pathway programs with high school seniors and juniors to provide exposure to career opportunities. Recommendations for employers to become more willing to take on apprentices were discussed, as apprenticeships provide both real world experience and education. One employer shared how a mechanic they worked with was able to increase earnings from \$15 to \$30 an hour through an apprenticeship.

Employers also discussed “returnships” and mentioned the New Jersey Reentry Corporation and a partnership with the Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia that retrains women reentering the workforce in three tracks of entrepreneurship, information technology- type customer service, and healthcare. Employers mentioned that while partnerships are valuable, if they don’t have open job positions that line up with the training/ partnerships, they cannot fully support the initiatives.

Career Paths and Growth Opportunities

“I am interested to figure out how we tell the story here of the opportunities if they come in entry level and pursue education and different licenses and certifications and growth – and grow up the ranks – we’re trying to partner with the high schools at this point and tell of our opportunities.”

The short and long term tradeoffs of certain jobs are apparent as employers discussed career ladders and pathway programs in their companies. Many employers noted they have training programs within their organizations and like to promote from within. Employers also discussed the challenge of hiring, training, and then having employees leave after short periods of time. One shared, “about 40-50 percent of positions are filled internally – if people leave after 2-3 years, what’s the investment? Why would I put all my time into you when you’re going to be out the door?” Similar to some higher education positions being easier to fill, one employer shared that career path positions are harder to fill than management positions. One shared,

“I think we have a mixture of that, we have spent a lot of time in our development piece, our goal is yes, we would like to move you through the organization. Maybe you’re not a fit in talent – and you want to work as a forklift operator and you want to be a director. We have those career paths and we are seeing what their skills are. And there are employees that are in that work and they are happy as an individual contributor. We work with employees to see where they want to go in their career. We have our president of transportation, he started in the warehouse and he got promoted to supervisor, and manager, and now he’s a president of our whole transportation division.”

A few larger employers mentioned having mentors on the job and/or their onboarding programs including things like situational safety, shadowing programs between departments, and annual trainings. Smaller organizations, like one non-profit, noted that staff are able to climb the ladder faster and take on leadership roles because they have the space to be innovative.

Career pathways were promoted by employers, but not always made known to or recognized by prospective employees. “I ask in my interviews, where do you see yourself in x years. And if they don’t know, I have a larger conversation with them about pathways they could go into,” expressed one hiring manager. Pathway programs mentioned included the GenerationT initiative into the skilled trades and a New Jersey Council of Community Colleges pathway program that supports target industries in New Jersey, and has

on and off ramps for residents that are underemployed, such as someone starting out or someone with a degree that maybe wants a career change (New Jersey Council of Community Colleges, 2020).

“Model is at the union you start off at a lower level job and there is extensive training depending on where you want to go from there. There are senior directors that started off cleaning busses. You really grow with this organization, it takes time, but you can get there. We try to drive that point to our applicants. Most people don’t understand that they need to start at a lower level though if they want to work with [transportation company].”

Partnerships and Talent Pipeline

“Partnerships have been focused on skill building. Matching to opportunities is where the pitfall is.”

A clear theme of the need for moving people directly from training/education into jobs emerged from discussions with employers. Employers expressed the need to put the certifications and/or training to use, and a succession plan to have jobs for people that complete trainings, particularly as some educational avenues do not always lead to potential jobs in the market. Throughout the course of conversations, employers discussed multiple partnerships and organizations they collaborate with to recruit, hire, train, and develop applicants/candidates; but, often commented on the unclear avenues to match trainees to positions, lack of appropriate education available, or on the overburdensome requirements that applicants needed to fulfill to move into certain roles. One employer commented,

“How we use local partnerships – it needs to be better planning and with organizations. All work is not being done in a manner that would always drive results. It’s an opportunity for us to educate [ourselves] as a group. How do we help build skills in folks that want it? How do we connect?”

Another shared,

“We work with [company] for our lab, with the community college, it’s a partnership. Talk with them our needs, what kind of licenses, what kind of schooling we need, and try to build those pipelines. On paramedical programs for example. So it’s been very helpful, the schools do want to help. But it’s unfortunate, some of our absolute necessary jobs there just aren’t schools locally that handle that. And sometimes it’s expensive. It’s a long time and it takes a lot of money.”

Employers noted their past focus on training, and less emphasis on job opportunities. One employer noted their placement rate post training was 50 percent three months out, and fell to 20 percent after a few more months. Efforts to serve as matching agencies and to identify the outcomes of training (versus how much was spent on training) were chronicled.

“Part of that is not making the connection to what the employers’ needs are. I would want to know what the open positions are, what the skills that are needed for those positions, and identify the population of dislocated worker and target them for developing those skills if

they have demonstrated interest. And have a referral employer pipeline so we can be a primary source for those job opportunities so they don't have to worry how long will it take it fill these positions. So I can tell her we are training these people now. It's about relationships and understanding those needs and addressing the needs of the employers.”

Another shared,

“We're trying to move away from occupational training. There is not much of an obligation to place people in jobs once they finish training. So to move to a referral situation so they can be matched with employers, and to set up people to learn while they earn, an opportunity to offset some of the wages during the training period.”

One employer commented how they recently piloted medical assistance training – and would like to expand that offering while also including a pipeline to where they can find prescreened and prequalified candidates that meet their needs. Another shared, “we should be workforce development focused and our focus needs to be on the relationship with the employer.” Employers discussed shifting to on-the-job training opportunities (OJTs), incumbent worker benefits, and other referral systems so there is a guaranteed job after learning, particularly through opportunities where people can be paid while they learn in those programs (with some payments being funded through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, WIOA, dollars). “That seems to be a key, how we can implement those services and programs using the money we have. It lends to developing and enhancing those relationships so that we can help meet their needs. Where I can meet performance requirements, they can meet staffing needs—let's have a conversation about what your needs are,” one employer commented. Employers also expressed the value of providing opportunities for employees to see if they like a job while also getting paid, which is a rarity; nonetheless, one employer cautioned against training without a clear, sustainable pathway. One participant commented, “when the first group of casinos closed – they put aside all this money to help people train people to help people without a job. If I am making \$75,000 why would I get a certificate from school to make \$35,000 or \$40,000 dollars?”

One social service agency does not have the funds to afford full-time staff and was paying \$500 to train each of their new staff, training them well, and then the staff would be scooped up by another agency. The social service agency recognized they could serve as a two-year stepping stone organization where then staff move on from, but they cannot fulfill a developmental role if they are not supported by other organizations or are not provided funds to support that training and development pipeline. Other organizations also expressed resource limitations,

“It's not enough to give people an entry level job – you have to give people an education and an actual career- but so many of the school programs, and this area, if you're not gonna be a doctor or nurse – they're [the school programs] are not here as much as they used to be, because it wasn't worth it for some schools to keep those expensive clinic programs going.”

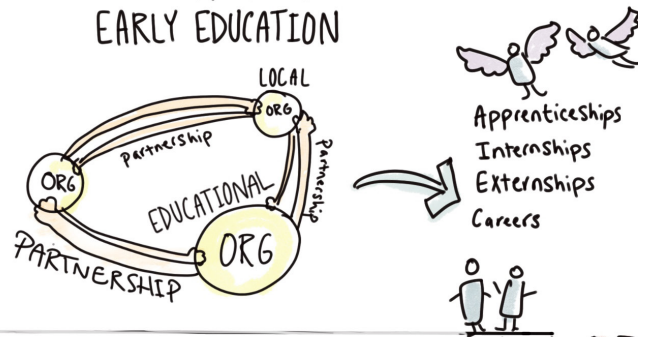
One employer who operates in the workforce training space shared they go to employers and see what their need is, and then train folks to get specific certificates. They often see residents with certificates that couldn't find employers – or they earned a certificate but didn't get any other skills. “So the tech companies are telling us exactly what they want and how many positions they have, and then we train the folks exactly for that and then put them right in those roles.” Employers discussed balancing candidates that have certifications versus real world experience (externships or internships) and how to gauge which programs mesh with practical experience.

EMPLOYER FOCUS GROUPS

① SOFT SKILLS



② CAREER AWARENESS & EARLY EDUCATION



③ MISMATCH BETWEEN JOBS AND SKILLS



④ DEVELOPING PATHWAYS TO CAREERS



⑤ CAREER ADVANCEMENT



⑥ BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

- DRUG TESTING
 - BACKGROUND CHECKS
 - EDUCATIONAL/ EXPERIENCE requirements
- more strict in government agencies because of POLICIES



“We look at programming we have for adult learners, what is the demand there. There are things that were available in the past that we need to resurrect, that is a constant conversation. It’s something that we are all very attuned to – we do have some employers – and IT employers – he’s very interested in getting some type of an IT training program here, because anyone that he is hiring, they have to go somewhere else to get training, they have decent paying jobs. If we get a class of 20 people, he is going to hire 3. What are we going to do with those other 17 people? Where do we match those people? Now they have this skill set, but don’t have transportation. It doesn’t knock that opportunity off the shelf, but it becomes part of the larger conversation.”

One commented, “our community college has a medical assistant program. We work with them; we know exactly what it is. If they have 30 people graduate, I am hiring 20 of them. So if you have a partner you can trust in, it is invaluable.” Another employer has a dedicated partnership staffer or account manager at local companies, and receives immediate feedback after placing the folks they trained into those companies.

Employers expressed many of their hiring and staffing needs, as well as their ability to offer training and/or jobs. The existing job and skill mismatch can be aligned with the needs and opportunities of employers to fill the gaps for both job seekers and employers. Partnerships can focus on breaking down silos, providing access, and filling these gaps.

BRIDGING THE GAP: CONNECTING JOB SEEKERS AND EMPLOYERS

Job seekers and employers shared a breadth of information and workforce experiences with us. While perceptions and experiences differed, many commonalities arose. Clear overlaps and patterns were identified, and avenues for steps to start bridging the gap between these two groups emerged.

All data collection and analysis for this project occurred during the pandemic, and the current economic and health landscape continues to shift daily. Job seekers and employers chronicled changes in business operations and job responsibilities, and shared the challenges related to financial limitation, technology access, balancing home and work life, and accessing resources. Even now, the monthly labor and employment statistics show an upward trend in unemployment decline, but the stories behind these numbers remain complex as employers and job seekers balance pay discussions, work/life/family considerations, and new directions. Heated debates around the continuation of unemployment insurance and other pandemic-related benefits ensue, and both job seekers and employers recognize the existing lack of sustainable/livable compensation offered by many companies, and the labor shortages presented as businesses resume operations (Shierholz & Bivens, 2021; Long, 2021; Callahan, 2021).

COVID-19 has been a time of great economic destruction and social upheaval, and prior infrastructures can be rebuilt to create opportunities around job availability, growth, and economic development that are equitable for all. Both groups of participants discussed how divestment after loss of industry or population shifts pre-pandemic, and the current pandemic and unemployment climate, have affected the region. Similarly, groups discussed how opportunities and investments into regions and cities/towns in Southern New Jersey can also spur an inflow of people and businesses to support economic growth (Porter, 1995). The experiences of people and nuanced knowledge of places within Southern New Jersey and the City of Camden are critical to informing the policies and funding that support workers and businesses.

Both groups expressed frustration in a lack of alignment of skills and jobs across the region. Individuals were often either over or under qualified and many job openings had restrictive requirements. Some of the skills, education and/or experience, or locations of job seekers desires and employers needs remain unmatched. This misalignment was particularly true in two main areas of job offerings. One - with the highest skilled jobs supporting the knowledge based economy. Employers noted that these jobs were easy to fill and that they did not offer many of these positions relative to other positions being offered (i.e. senior leadership roles, specialty doctors, accountants, etc.). The jobs that were harder to fill, and that employers had more open positions for, were lower-skill from the outset and/or career ladder positions. Job seekers remarked that many of these open positions that may be lower skill (such as in retail or manufacturing) offer unlivable wages. Thus, while there is a smaller market of highest skilled job seekers matching with high skill jobs (i.e. engineering) - there is a mismatch in the increasing focus on knowledge- based/higher skilled jobs but limited number of available jobs in these areas. Typically, what are known as “high-road” companies believe that high worker performance leads to the company’s success, so they invest in training and other support resources. “Low-road” companies may cut corners to lower costs (Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, 2019). However, U.S. companies are typically much more willing to invest in their professional and managerial employees than in training that advances low-wage workers; investments towards all skill areas would prove advantageous (Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, 2019).

The second area of misalignment in skills and jobs points to the rise in skilled and specialty trades and occupations (such as CAD technicians, medical assistants, respiratory therapists, quality control specialists, carpenters). Many employers discussed available, well paying jobs in healthcare, the health sciences, advanced manufacturing, and the trades; however, the pipeline to these middle-skill and career pathway jobs is not always made clear to job seekers and/or by employers. Both groups discussed resource and career awareness in these areas, and a continued push for and awareness of lower barriers to entry to these types of positions (some with no prior experience or skills necessary, some with certifications needed but on the job training to earn the certification provided). Promotion of these opportunities can create awareness around this gap - to have residents become interested in these positions and to have these positions filled.

Another layer to this misalignment is location. Across Southern New Jersey and the City of Camden - employers and businesses that have headquarters and/or various office locations often do not offer positions in those locations that align with the skill sets, interests, and experiences of job seekers in those areas. This challenge is related to job seekers looking and finding work outside of their county and/or local companies/organizations hiring people that do not live in that county to work those positions.

In conversations around moving people into open positions and filling gaps, job seekers and employers highlighted flexibility, and the removal of access barriers. Barriers to entry for job seekers included lack of transportation options and infrastructure across the region, inadequate or expensive childcare, lack of livable pay/wages, and specific education and/or certification requirements. From the job seeker perspective, many found job application and interview processes far too cumbersome and redundant. Job seekers desired increased communication from employers, flexibility in bringing residents into interviews, and not reducing applicants to resumes or automated online skill or experiential quizzes.

Employers also questioned their own hiring practices - noting that while what may be efficient for them to use an automated resume review service for example, this may simultaneously restrict access to qualified candidates who may be screened out from algorithms or dismissed for misconstrued responses or teachable skills. Many of the barriers to employment from the employer perspective - including things like background checks, drug testing, driving records/ licenses, and specific education and/or years of experience requirements - had nuances pertinent to certain industries. Employers from different industries discussed their willingness and ability to be flexible- to be more descriptive, and less prescriptive in their hiring practices.

Job seekers wanted responsiveness from employers throughout hiring, and employers expressed the time, energy and bandwidth challenges to engage in hiring. Overall, a gap in human resources and recruitment/ hiring infrastructure emerged. Time spent understanding community needs, promoting job opportunities within a community, sharing job search and interview preparation resources, being responsive and offering feedback are all essential developmental opportunities for both job seekers and employers - and ultimately may help increase the caliber of candidates and satisfaction of employees and employers.

Both groups acknowledged that while there are many workforce development and job-related resources available, and people actively accessing these resources, there are many residents still disconnected from what is available. Employers and/or local governments cannot assume that people “just know” where or how to access resources and information. Infrastructures can cater to the realities of a pandemic and post-pandemic world in ways that support all residents - entrepreneurs, working families, bilingual residents, undocumented individuals, and groups that have been historically marginalized. In ideas around where investment can be targeted - both groups discussed investment of resources and support services into the areas of career readiness and job search preparation (i.e. resume writing, interview tips). Employers and job seekers overwhelmingly called for soft skill development, and conversations around job preparedness, work ethic, communication skills, empathy, time management, and similar topics abound. Opinions on who or what entity is responsible for developing these skills varied - with some saying it is on the individual to “have motivation” or develop skills, others saying educational systems can teach it, and others noting that some people do not have support networks and it is up to employers to provide this training and development. As mentioned above as well, both groups also desired more clear and direct pathways from education and/or training to a job.

Related to flexibility in hiring and shifting of industries and job opportunities across the region through direct pipelines is the theme of opportunity occupations (Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, 2019). Southern New Jersey is diversifying industries into areas like technology and aviation; the City of Camden continues to expand its education and medical corridor; and, the entire region is expanding its creative class (knowledge workers in education, healthcare, law, arts, tech, science, and business) and speciality skills (in food production, advanced manufacturing, aviation, health sciences, trades and utilities). Job opportunities in these industries are shifting, and both employers and job seekers discussed the ways that job requirements and skills can be transferred to new or different occupations. For example, one person mentioned prior experience in customer service at a casino, and how these skills could easily transfer to a front desk hospital position or concierge at a nursing home. Another example from the data discussed restaurant workers moving into the construction and retail sales spaces. Acceptance of these transfers will not only help address jobs and skill mismatch (particularly among middle skill and career ladder positions) but also address challenges around location mismatch - where employers can find job seekers with the desired skills (even if those skills were developed in a different industry) and where job seekers can be confident in applying their skills to new roles/industries with appropriate support (Sasser Modestino & Forman, 2021). These methods may also be applicable to certain industries that have workers at retirement age, where the current influx of employees does not match the outflow of retirees (i.e. trades and nursing).

While creating access and increasing flexibility applies on a granular level with specific company hires and individual job seekers, it also arose on a broader level with local and state policies and regulations that affect workforce development and economic opportunity. Southern New Jersey and the City of Camden represent diverse populations, geographies, and economies. State and federal policies that use blanket labor data and/or stringent funding requirements for certain industries and employers are not always applicable to businesses and nonprofits in this region, and at times, can prove prohibitive to development efforts. Employers and job seekers dually commented on the transportation barriers throughout the region, the impediment of the high cost of living (in conjunction with unmatched wages/benefits), and the limited opportunities based on former industries fading, and not being replaced with new opportunities. The

region's infrastructure and combination of urban and rural, coastal and city, and wide range of skills and interests is an asset, an asset that can be matched with infrastructures that meet the needs of employers and individuals where they are. Both employers and job seekers wanted people to "take a chance" on them as individuals and on Southern New Jersey as an area for economic and business investment. These calls were peppered with statements around the diversity and opportunity across the region, and the willingness to capitalize on those assets and create opportunities remains essential.

RECOMMENDATIONS & LOOKING FORWARD

“You should always give them opportunities for growth, especially if you see them progressing in one position. You know what I mean? If you see them doing well in that position because you could always recommend that they move into another position and ask them, well you know, [Lucia], I see you doing great in this position, I want to know if you would like to move up and maybe do this position? And I mean especially if she's doing well in another position, you know, and if they want to, of course, that's wonderful. Always, always, want to see employees grow. Never want to dog them out into one position.”

The data gathered through this project provided insight into the disconnect between employers and job seekers across Southern New Jersey and in the City of Camden. Both groups' experiences and perceptions highlight specific concerns, suggest pathways for future initiatives, and together, frame a way forward. The information presented here can provide avenues for discussion about barriers and opportunities among regional educational institutions, public officials, workforce development organizations, and employers.

There is an economic opportunity gap in Southern New Jersey and the City of Camden. Job seekers and employers pointed out areas for improvement and discussed avenues to increase economic development, individual and company success, and power and autonomy in community. Opportunities can expand through growing industries (such as technology, alternative energies, health sciences) and committed, funded partnerships between public and private entities across the region. Simultaneously, opportunities for occupations and industries to shift will support job seekers moving into these jobs; increase alignment across skills, experience/education, and location; and expand reach in all eight counties.

“You talked about your hospitality program. Well if you have someone you have trained in the infirmaries in the prison system, and I never hear from them again...there is no follow through. I don't know how if we as employers can come together as employers to work on these programs [for those reentering the workforce]. I think we would address a lot of labor challenges if we came together – those have to happen on a local level, not a state level.”

Movement towards closing this opportunity gap can also be supported by flexibility in recruitment, hiring, and training practices, and investing in human resources infrastructures that provide the space to engage in these processes in ways that are effective and fair to all. Providing career pathways, development opportunities, and direct access to resources can help shrink a disconnect between employers and job seekers. Expanding employment access by removing or diminishing barriers to employment in areas of transportation, childcare, equitable wages and benefits, and certain regulations (such as flexibility in background checks), or strict job requirements (such as minimum education or experience) will increase the diversity and number of applicants that contribute to the workforce. Exposure to soft skill

development and early education, coupled with career awareness and job pipelines, can strengthen individual wellbeing and local communities so all residents can participate in the ladder of opportunity.

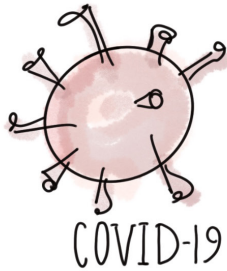
“I think there should also be some education – those that are released from prison, those that are disenfranchised – there needs to be more emphasis on those programs. But then just connecting those people to the New Jersey Department of Labor. If we’re not part of the solution, we are part of the problem. We need to figure out how to get them back in the workforce without fear. By the time we get to them there are new drug charges, they are left out of the conversation.”

Everyone who is willing to work should have access to a job pathway. Accessibility includes affordable child care, transportation, and housing options. We all share experiences of paying bills, raising children, and spending time with family - addressing any gaps between employees and employers to support these common goals can strengthen existing infrastructures and grow communities. Training and career pathways must be built to connect the residents who are out of work with employers who at times struggle to fill positions. Direct funding streams and government aid can support employers implementing support services, hiring flexibility, and training programs. Available jobs should offer livable wages and/or wage subsidies, stable work hours, and direct or portable benefits. Employees and workers across all industries should have access to basic protections (i.e. related to overtime protections, anti-discrimination policies, unemployment and workers compensation) and opportunities for training (either on the job training or pipeline programs) and skill, particularly soft skill, development (Katz, Poo & Waxman, 2018).

Local and regional collaboration is essential to close the gaps in capacity, foster sustainable partnerships, and help create access to opportunity. Place-based programs and policies can spur growth in neighborhoods that currently have access to fewer opportunities, focusing on revitalization and growing these communities into opportunity-rich neighborhoods. Key to these processes are resident voice and empowerment- job seekers, local employers, and community organizations are the most acutely aware of the challenges presented to them and best equipped to provide actionable ideas for economic mobility (Urban Institute, 2018).

Our economy is constantly evolving, and that evolution calls for adaptability in policy, practice, and place. Individual job seekers and every large company and small business brings a unique dream and dedication to the region. By understanding labor force trends, exploring nuanced policies and equitable resources, and directly engaging with job seekers, Southern New Jersey labor force investments can generate a virtuous cycle, benefitting the frontline worker, the employer, and the entire region. Employers, community organizations, policymakers, and residents can work to address barriers to opportunities and together collectively improve outcomes for all.

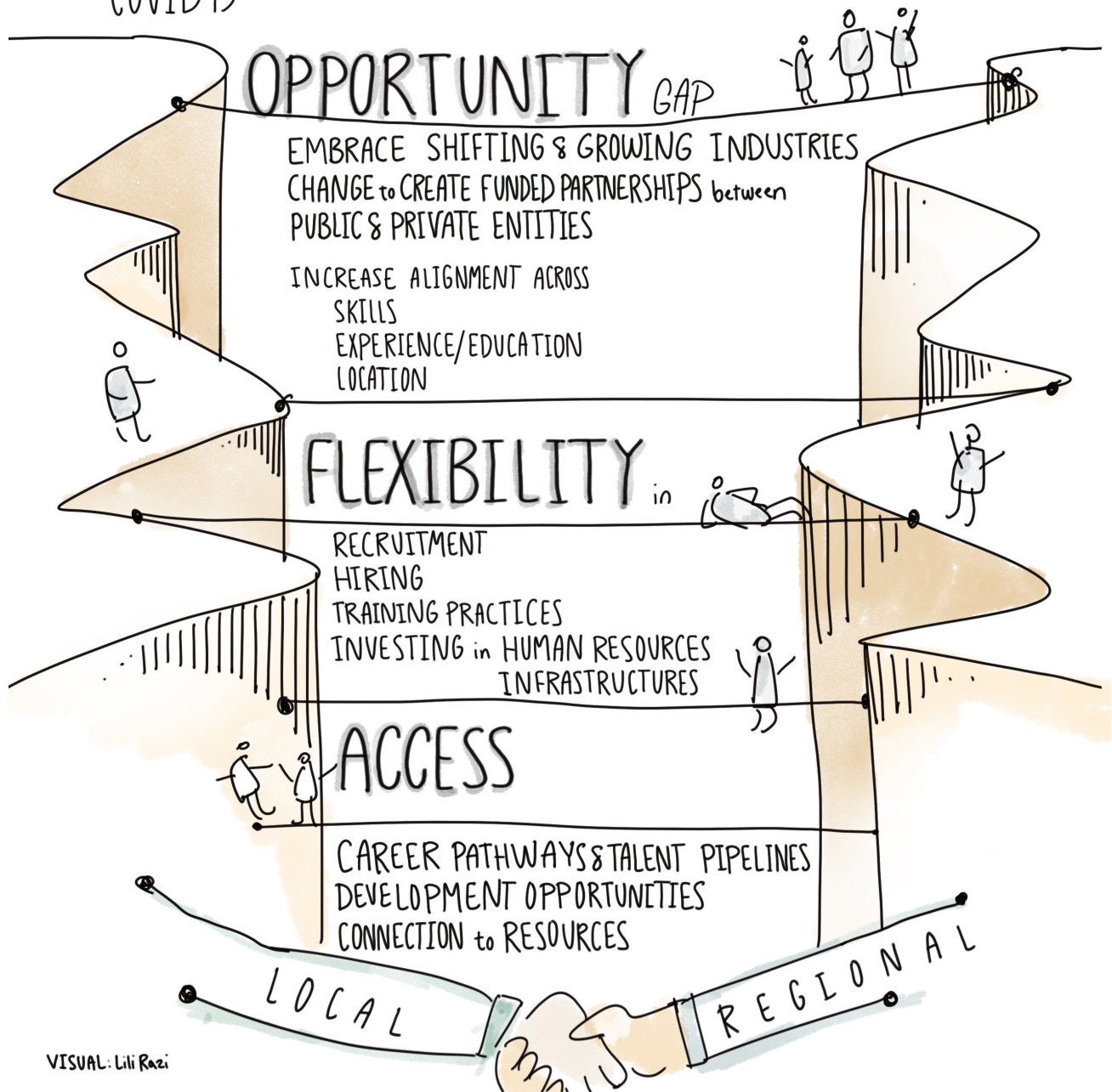
RECOMMENDATIONS & LOOKING FORWARD



COVID-19

JOB SEARCH
HIRING PROCESS

TECHNOLOGY ACCESS
IN PERSON COMMUNICATION



VISUAL: Lili Razi

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About the Rutgers Rowan Joint Board of Governors

The Rowan University / Rutgers – Camden Board of Governors was created by the *New Jersey Medical and Health Sciences Education Restructuring Act* which took effect on August 22, 2012. The Board’s mission reflects an extension of Camden’s significant “eds and meds” presence and is expected to leverage the educational and research assets to support growth in the region’s health care capacity. The Board has three overarching objectives.

First, from an education perspective, the Board’s mission is to facilitate the development of curricula and programs at Rowan University and Rutgers University – Camden in the area of health sciences and build partnerships between these two institutions and other educational entities. The law gives the Board a clear mandate to establish or expand any schools, programs or departments in the areas of health sciences proposed either by the board of trustees of Rowan University or the board of directors of Rutgers University – Camden. The Board will determine policies, administration and development of health sciences curricula at these two institutions while building partnerships with others.

Second, from an economic development perspective, the Board’s mission is broad. The Restructuring Act contemplates a role for the Board in assisting Camden in its growth arc, specifically within the health space or in areas where there is a health nexus. Experts view economic and social determinants, including physical and social infrastructure in a community, to have an impact on its health outcomes. These determinants include, but are not limited to, housing, employment, education, utilities and public safety. To that end, health related influencers and activities not only provide the right economic development focal point for the Board to pursue, but also a framework for the breadth and scope of efforts it can undertake.

Finally, from a civic engagement perspective, the Board has many pathways to engage the community as it pertains to health related issues. Clearly, the educational and economic development initiatives to be advanced by the Board will have a net positive effect on the community. However, there is a clear and present opportunity beyond those two objectives to build accountable and healthy communities. The Board will work with the universities and colleges, the city government and various entities to advance community based programs and projects that will have an appreciable impact on Camden and the region.

The Board will carry out its mission by engaging and partnering with public and private institutions to develop programs and projects that will effectuate a vibrant and sustainable community and health sciences corridor anchored by Rutgers University – Camden, Cooper Medical School of Rowan University, Cooper University Health Care, Cooper – MD Anderson Cancer Center, Coriell Institute for Medical Research, and Camden County College.

Learn more at <https://rurcbog.com/>

About Camden Community Partnership

Camden Community Partnership (CCP) was founded in 1984 as a private, non-profit corporation dedicated to planning and implementing high-quality urban redevelopment projects to revitalize the City of Camden. Our initial focus was concentrated on the redevelopment of Camden's downtown waterfront area. Serving as the planner, promoter, and master developer, more than \$600 million of private and public investment was realized at the Camden Waterfront, successfully putting into place the building blocks for a vibrant, mixed-use waterfront community, which is anchored by family entertainment venues, office buildings & residential lofts.

Our initial success along the waterfront set the stage for future partnerships and over \$2.5 billion in additional investment in the city. We've since expanded our mission to act as the umbrella organization to bring stakeholders together and implement a holistic approach to revitalizing Camden. As the city continues to rise, we are focused on restoring our neighborhoods and improving the lives of our residents, both are key to the city's ongoing success. Community leaders, residents, employers, educators, and nonprofit organizations are all actively engaged in ensuring the economic growth and security of residents now and in the future.

A residents-first approach is at the core of what we do and focuses on housing, public safety, infrastructure, education, neighborhood initiatives, park and green space development, and to facilitate the creation of employment opportunities. Strategic investments in these areas act as a catalyst for future growth and bring a renewed sense of pride in the city as a vibrant place to live, work and play.

The movement we're a part of in Camden is greater than the sum of its parts. It is a true community spirit that allows CCP to continue to assist with propelling Camden forward to its renaissance. We invite you to join us to continue working together for a new Camden—a Camden Rising!

Learn more at <https://camdencommunitypartnership.com/>

About the Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs

The Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs (WRI) is a research center at Rutgers University-Camden that collaborates with community and university partners to conduct evaluations of programs and services, leverage data for action, and support the development of community-based initiatives. Using social science research methods ranging from data-motivated storytelling to complex statistical analysis, and guided by core values of curiosity and collaboration, the WRI specializes in transforming fractured data into actionable information. The WRI supports Rutgers' mission of research, teaching and service by connecting the multidisciplinary expertise of faculty to regional problems, developing research and professional skills in students, and linking the resources of higher education to communities in southern New Jersey.

Learn more at rand.camden.rutgers.edu

About the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

The John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University is a university-based organization devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center, located within the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policy making and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder. As captured in its slogan, “Solutions at Work,” the Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and government officials can use to strengthen their workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The center’s work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches workers’ skills and knowledge with the evolving demands of employers. The center’s projects are grounded in a core set of research priorities:

- Career and Technical Education
- Data Collection and Analysis
- Disability Employment
- Job Seekers in Transition
- Program Evaluation
- Trend Analysis

Learn more at heldrich.rutgers.edu

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