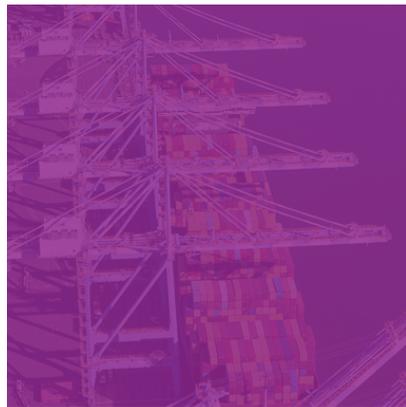




# OPPORTUNITY OCCUPATIONS AND WORKFORCE RECOVERY

in the Central Puget Sound Region



Puget Sound Regional Council



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## Laying the Foundation for an Equitable Recovery

The central Puget Sound region over the past decade has experienced a period of sustained economic growth that has cemented it as a national and global leader across a wide array of industries. Forecasts by the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) detailed in its [\*VISION 2050: A Plan for the Central Puget Sound Region\*](#) show that the region is poised to add nearly 1.2 million jobs by 2050 to a labor force of approximately 3.4 million. The region's key industries such as Aerospace, Information & Communication Technology, Maritime, Military & Defense, Life Sciences & Global Health, Clean Technology, Tourism, and Transportation & Logistics and globally known companies such as Amazon, Boeing, Microsoft, and Starbucks make for an incredibly diverse economy that can provide residents a high-quality of life and family-sustaining wages.

However, with all the promise the region has in terms of economic growth, the past two years and the impacts of COVID-19 have shown that growth and opportunity for all Puget Sound residents has not been equally available. The pandemic caused an unprecedented increase in unemployment for the region as public health measures sought to slow the spread of the virus by reducing in-person economic activity.

People of color in the central Puget Sound region are more likely to be infected with COVID-19 and have been less likely to accrue the benefits of the dramatic, pre-COVID-19 economic expansion in the region. These realities are a function of generational systemic racism in the region. These same forces also limited economic opportunity for people of color in the region and have resulted in their disproportionate representation in low-wage occupations. Many of these occupations, such as those in the Retail, Transportation, Hospitality, and Food and Dining industries, are the same ones that have seen large job losses during the pandemic.

The disproportionate representation in low-wage jobs for people of color presents an incredible challenge that leaders in the region must address if they want to ensure that future economic growth and opportunity is available to all residents. Moreover, the goals laid out in *VISION 2050* must also ensure that the job growth seen in recent years is more geographically dispersed beyond the few concentrated urban areas.

There are two primary factors that motivate the Regional Workforce Recovery Planning Project: (1) a growing economy in need of skilled workers for in-demand and family sustaining occupations and (2) the need for workforce and economic development services to support economic mobility for groups historically discriminated against. This report outlines how the central Puget Sound region can address both of these needs.

### Critical Need for a Regional Approach to Skill Development

The growth in the central Puget Sound region, both economically and in population, includes increased employment opportunities, rising wages, and an influx of new residents. The region is comprised of numerous communities that are diverse in their geography, demographics, and local economies. There are substantial opportunities for workforce development and economic development in the region, and this project underscores the critical role that PSRC and its partners can play in advancing these opportunities.

A regional approach to workforce development and economic development is critical given the nature of the 21st century economy. Rapid transformations in technologies, corporate structures, and the skills required to advance are not confined by municipal borders. The four counties in the

region – King, Kitsap, Pierce, and Snohomish– are connected through their economies, transportation networks, and their very populations. Any approach to workforce development and economic development that is not specifically focused on region-wide strategies will struggle to fully leverage the capacity of the regional workforce and the skill-building infrastructure that exists to help prepare workers for in-demand, high-wage jobs. Region-wide strategies ensure efficient use of federal, state, and local resources to best meet the needs of both workers and employers.

This project had an explicit regional focus, identifying “opportunity occupations” in key industries that provide opportunities for workers to find immediate employment and strong wages. These are growing industries across the region where there is an acute need for skilled labor. By looking collectively across the four counties in the region, we highlight both the workforce needs within these industries and underscore where opportunities exist for high-wage employment. The regional perspective helps clarify the ways in which existing employment and training programs across the region can prepare individuals for these occupations. Taking a regional perspective also underscores opportunities to increase access to occupations for underrepresented groups who have not accrued the benefits of the current economic expansion the region has experienced.

### **PSRC Regional Workforce Recovery Planning: Project Overview**

In June 2021, PSRC selected MEF Associates (MEF) and its subcontractor, Forland Wheeler Consulting (FWC), to execute the Regional Workforce Recovery Planning Project. The primary goal of the project is to support an equitable economic recovery in the region by identifying targeted occupations in high-demand regional industries and develop resources and outreach strategies to connect workers in the central Puget Sound region with employment and training programs aligned to the identified high-wage, in-demand occupations. To execute the vision and goals for the project, MEF and FWC completed the following activities:

- **Regional Industry and Occupational Analysis:** MEF and FWC analyzed Washington State industry and occupational projection data to identify industry sectors that provide the greatest opportunity for individuals in the central Puget Sound region to support their families and play a role in a more diverse regional economy. The project team identified four high-demand industries in the central Puget Sound region: 1) Information, 2) Manufacturing, 3) Healthcare, and 4) Construction. Within each of these industries, the project team identified specific occupations that provide the greatest opportunities for family-supporting careers. We call the identified occupations “opportunity occupations” throughout the remainder of this report.
- **Stakeholder Engagement Interviews:** MEF conducted 17 conversations with regional stakeholders across industry, community and technical colleges, community-based organizations, workforce development councils, and labor unions. The conversations focused on identifying key trends driving workforce demand in the region, what occupations stakeholders saw as being in highest demand across the region, and identifying the challenges, barriers, and opportunities in creating access and equitable representation in higher paying occupations. The conversations also explored the extent to which the regional education and training infrastructure has sufficient capacity to meet the demand for workers in each identified industry. The project team used insights from these conversations to inform the development of regional strategies for building a more diverse talent pipeline.

- Occupational Profiles and Outreach Strategies to Increase Awareness of Opportunity Occupations:** MEF and FWC developed occupational profiles that describe the job characteristics and outlook for each opportunity occupation as well as education, training, and skills required to pursue them. We also developed outreach strategies that can help increase awareness of these opportunity occupations across the region to connect workers, jobseekers, and students to these higher-wage, in-demand occupations. These strategies aim to equalize access to information about opportunity occupations and training opportunities for marginalized communities and for individuals who are underrepresented in opportunity occupations.

Throughout the project, MEF and FWC provided the PSRC Economic Development District (EDD) Board updates on the project status and progress. This final report represents the culmination of project activities, summarizing the aforementioned work and describing a path the central Puget Sound region can take to build a more diverse talent pipeline.

In this report we describe approaches to equitably meet growing occupational demand in the region that will provide stakeholders clear descriptions of workforce development opportunities. This final report is accompanied by occupational profiles for the 12 occupations identified in the four industries.

## Opportunity Occupations in the Central Puget Sound Region

The project team developed criteria to identify high-growth industries and occupations that could support an equitable recovery for workers in the region. We focused on identifying industry sectors and occupations that provide the greatest opportunity for individuals to support their families and play a role in a more diverse regional economy.

### Approach and Criteria for Focusing on Regional Industries and Occupations

We identified promising industry sectors through analysis of labor market information (LMI) and conversations with employer stakeholder groups. We then identified specific occupations that provide the greatest opportunities for family-supporting careers. This imperative, work that provides family-supporting wages, drove the rationale for the criteria we used to identify the selected industries and occupations of focus for this project.

Table 1 provides the criteria used to select the industries and opportunity occupations for the project. The first industry criterion of industries having at least 100,000 employees in the region within a NAICS industry sector (i.e., two-digit NAICS code) stems from the need to ensure the selected industries have a meaningful presence in the regional economy and have readily available job opportunities for groups underrepresented in the regional labor market.

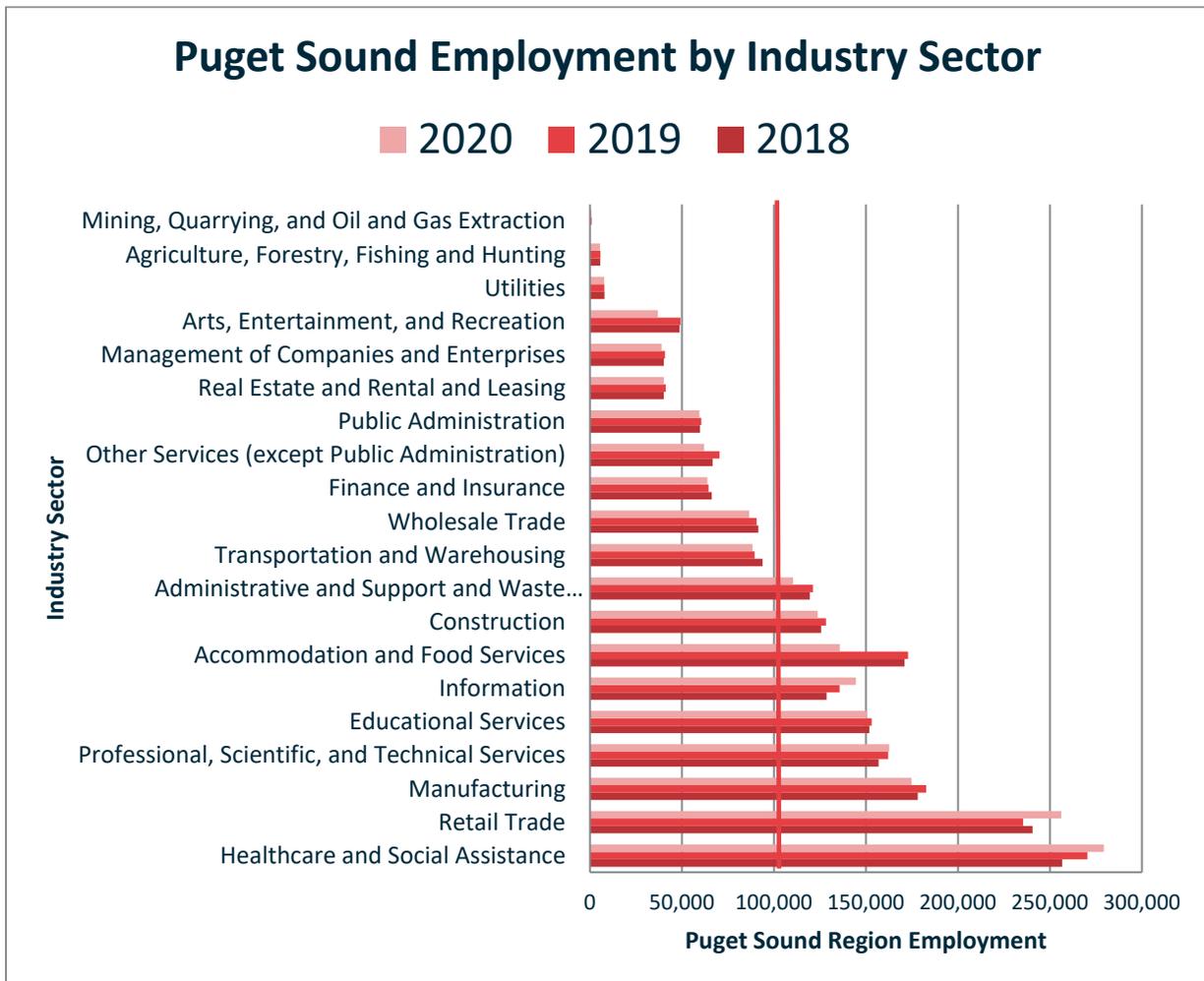
**Table 1: Methodology to Identify Industries and Opportunity Occupations**

Level	Criteria
Industries	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Current employment: At least 100,000 employment across the region</li> <li>Strong wages: Average wages at least 65% of overall average for each county</li> <li>Projected employment growth: Positive growth over long term</li> </ol>

	4. Appearance in top job postings: Occupations associated with the industry sector appear in the top-25 job postings for at least one county
<b>Occupations</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Five-year projections: Stable or growing</li> <li>2. Wages: At or above the estimated living wage for a family of four with both parents working, \$50,731</li> <li>3. Education level: No more than Bachelor's degree</li> <li>4. Current employment: Top 2 or 3 of employment associated with the industry</li> </ol>

Figure 1 shows the employment numbers for 2018, 2019, and 2020 for key industry sectors, with nine consistently exceeding employment of 100,000.

**Figure 1: Puget Sound Regional Employment by Industry (2018-2020)**



Source: [U.S. Census Bureau, QWI Explorer](#); King, Kitsap, Pierce, Snohomish counties

The second criterion we used to identify industries was strong wages because we want to ensure the industries selected provide opportunities for workers to earn wages that can support themselves and their families across the region. We identified industries with average wages across the industry sector in each county in the region that are *at least* 65 percent of the average wages for all industries for that county.

The third criterion is whether the industry sectors are projected to grow over the long term. Focusing industries that are projected to grow ensures individual and regional investments in education and training to enter occupations within each industry over several years will match the available opportunities when training is completed.

The final criterion is whether specific occupations associated with the four industry sectors of focus show up in the top-25 job postings from Burning Glass, a private job market analytics company,<sup>1</sup> for at least one county in the region. Using the criterion that there are readily available occupations through job postings in each industry ensures the selection of industries is consistent with the current labor demand for the selected industries of focus.

Based on the above-described criteria, we identified four key industry sectors: 1) **Healthcare** 2) **Information**; 3) **Manufacturing**; and 4) **Construction**.

## Moving from Industries to Occupations

The project team identified occupations within each industry we identified, applying the criteria for opportunity occupations described in Table 1. This approach focused on data in four domains:

- **Stable or Growing Occupational Demand:** The first criterion used identified occupations in each of the four identified industries with stable or growing occupational demand over the next five years.
- **Living Wages:** The most important criterion for identifying occupations of focus was whether they met the threshold to support a family of four with two working adults. According to [MIT's Living Wage Calculator](#), in King County, each working adult would need to earn at least \$50,731 a year to support their family. This equates to an average hourly wage of \$24.39 if assuming full-time employment.<sup>2</sup>

### Making the Link Between Industry and Occupation

There is no simple translation from industry sectors to specific occupations. Though industry sectors are based on the primary function of a firm, a specific occupation is defined by the primary function of an individual in a given job.

For example, a firm that's primary business is software publication, will likely employ individuals in jobs that would not seem related to software publication, such as marketing staff publicizing new products or accounting staff managing firm finances. However, the vast majority of the firm's employees will likely be in occupations more commonly associated with software publication, such as software developers. Specific examples include the Healthcare sector's employment of Human Resource Specialists and the Manufacturing sector's employment of Computer and Information Systems Managers.

<sup>1</sup> As compiled and published by the [Washington State Employment Security Department](#).

<sup>2</sup> We used the living wage for King County since occupational wage data is available for the Seattle area but not for individual counties.

- **Education Level:** The third criterion is whether the occupations require education and training up to, but not above, a Bachelor’s degree.<sup>3</sup>
- **Current Employment:** The final criterion for identifying occupations of focus was the number of workers employed in the region in the occupation. Specifically, the top two to three occupations by employment, of those meeting the first three criteria. This criterion is important because it ensures a focus on occupations individuals can access immediately with appropriate training and skills.

### Opportunity Occupations Identified in the Central Puget Sound Region

Table 2 shows occupations in the four key industries using the above criteria along with input from regional stakeholders in each industry. Emphasis on these occupations can focus the attention of regional stakeholders seeking to increase employment and training opportunities to meet the growing labor demands in the region.

As part of the stakeholder engagement interviews, the project team consulted with stakeholders on whether the initial set of occupations identified matched the demand they were seeing in the region for workers in their respective industries. The project team heard from stakeholders there was great demand for Substance Abuse, Behavioral Disorder, and Mental Health Counselors in the Healthcare industry, and high demand for Carpenters and Construction Laborers in the Construction industry. Based on this information, we included these occupations despite not meeting all the occupational criteria related to required education and projected growth rates.

**Table 2: Identified Opportunity Occupations**

Industry	Occupations	Puget Sound Employment	Average Annual Wages (Seattle)	Projected Annual Growth Rate	Typical Education
Healthcare	Registered Nurses	36,419	\$97,050	0.6%	Postsecondary degree
	Medical Assistants	9,841	\$50,831	0.8%	Postsecondary non-degree
	Substance Abuse, Behavioral Disorder, and Mental Health Counselors	5,511	\$55,902	0.0%	Master’s degree
Manufacturing	Buyers and Purchasing Agents	13,110	\$82,788	0.6%	Bachelor’s degree
	Sales Managers	7,219	\$149,658	1.5%	Bachelor’s degree
	Logisticians	5,714	\$92,962	1.7%	Bachelor’s degree
Information	Software Developers and Software Quality	90,514	\$143,789	3.8%	Bachelor’s degree

<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Department of Labor’s [O\\*NET OnLine](#) provides extensive information by occupations based on a national survey of employers.

Industry	Occupations	Puget Sound Employment	Average Annual Wages (Seattle)	Projected Annual Growth Rate	Typical Education
	Assurance Analysts and Testers				
	Web Developers and Digital Interface Designers	17,379	\$140,871	3.7%	Bachelor's degree
	Computer User Support Specialists	13,527	\$65,533	1.3%	Some college, no degree
Construction	Construction Managers	10,322	\$116,425	0.4%	Bachelor's degree
	Carpenters	26,678	\$70,599	-1.3%	High school diploma/GED
	Construction Laborer	28,768	\$57,573	-0.2%	High school diploma/GED

Source: Washington State Employment Security Department, [Employment Projections](#) and [Occupational Employment Statistics](#); U.S. Department of Labor, [O\\*NET OnLine](#)

**Workforce Demand and Availability of Education and Training Programs**

The project team also sought information and perspectives from stakeholders about the key trends driving demand for workers in each industry and what could be done to further bolster the availability of education and training programs to help workers enter the selected occupations. Below we summarize the key trends and observations we heard from stakeholders in each industry.

**Healthcare:** Healthcare workers in the central Puget Sound region are experiencing high levels of stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and, as a result, all stakeholders described an acute labor shortage across all clinical and non-clinical occupations. Stakeholders indicated that many Healthcare workers are experiencing burnout from the workload created by the pandemic and are leaving the field. The acute and enduring nature of the pandemic is causing many Healthcare workers who are close to retirement to retire sooner than employers at the hospitals and community health centers anticipated, further exacerbating the shortage of workers. Additional factors, including the aging of the local population and the added stress caused by the pandemic, will further compound the demand for Healthcare workers. The increasing demand could further create challenges for the Healthcare industry.

Stakeholders identified that the current supply pipeline preparing and training workers in the Healthcare industry is not sufficient to meet employers’ hiring needs. Several stakeholders identified that licensing requirements for nurses requiring in-person clinical training and the availability of instructors to train workers in a clinical setting creates a bottleneck in the region to fulfill the labor demand needs of employers. Stakeholders also indicated that inconsistent degree requirements and preferences of some employers for Bachelor’s degrees are other factors contributing to a shortage of nurses in the region.

Stakeholders generally indicated that there were not enough training slots at the community colleges and four-year universities to meet the level of demand the Healthcare industry is facing with its workforce shortages. For nursing, this is driven in part by the lack of available slots to complete

clinical training requirements. Similarly, the degree requirements needed for Healthcare workers to provide this training in a clinical setting typically require a graduate degree. There are simply not enough qualified existing workers to train new potential workers once they are ready for their clinical training.

**Manufacturing:** Stakeholders indicated that the regional Manufacturing industry is seeing an increased presence of Biotechnology and Maritime Manufacturing. The Manufacturing industry was experiencing labor shortages prior to the pandemic and the difficulty finding workers in the region cannot be attributed to just one reason. However, multiple stakeholders noted that limited childcare availability has contributed to labor shortages in the industry. Since most Manufacturing jobs are not available for telework, jobseekers with childcare responsibilities face added hurdles to obtaining Manufacturing jobs. Stakeholders also shared that a lack of a driver's license may deter or deny a jobseeker entry to employment. High school students with lower family incomes are particularly impacted as driver's education programs can cost hundreds of dollars. Without this credential, young jobseekers may be prevented from pursuing a career in Manufacturing.

**Information:** Stakeholder conversations indicated the industry is facing a shortage of workers across all types of occupations, especially in mid-level occupations that require some experience and education. They indicated an increased focus on cybersecurity in response to attacks and data breaches. In response, stakeholders indicated that employers are looking for workers across the region, state, and country to meet staffing needs. Furthermore, stakeholders reported that there is unmet demand for junior developers because companies are using technology infrastructures unique to their organization and aim to train junior developers in-house with firm-specific programs.

Industry stakeholders indicated that many employers say they are not focused on credential and degree requirements for their open positions and instead look to whether prospective workers can do the work with the skills they may have learned outside an institution of higher education. However, stakeholders noted that this rhetoric is not matched with the hiring practices many employers in the industry follow where they emphasize and seek to hire individuals with a Bachelor's degree and not those with credentials or a degree from a community or technical college. One stakeholder shared the experience of a student they were working with who was applying for an IT internship at one of the region's big technology firms. One of the first questions on the application was to select their college on the dropdown menu. No community colleges were listed on the dropdown tab. Because the student could not select their community college off the list, they could not get past the first phase of the application. This is an example of systemic barriers that bar community and technical college students from entering the industry.

The regional stakeholders we spoke with indicated that there are a large number of IT training programs at the community college level across the state. One of the challenges mentioned by a stakeholder for community and technical colleges that offer IT programs is that faculty must constantly evaluate if the new technology will remain viable in the industry or if it will be replaced by new skills, which requires dramatic retooling of existing curricula. This is largely a faculty-driven process, and there is no standard for the colleges across the state. This makes it difficult to develop any consistency in skill requirements when marketing candidates to IT employers.

**Construction:** The Construction industry is experiencing high demand in both residential and commercial Construction in the central Puget Sound region. Though the projections and analyses we conducted for this project could not fully account for shifts in the Construction industry during the pandemic, conversations with stakeholders underscored the dramatic increase in demand for construction labor.

The increase in construction has created a corresponding increase in the demand for workers across most, if not all, occupations in the Construction industry. Recent infrastructure investments at the national, state, and regional levels will boost demand for workers in the Construction industry. Stakeholders we spoke with indicated that they are projecting a shortage of workers for many occupations that will last for the next decade.

Stakeholders reported that many employers in the Construction industry require prior experience and place a heavy emphasis on personal connections and references when they are looking to hire individuals for their open positions. Stakeholders generally reported the available education and training programs (including apprenticeship programs) are not sufficient to meet the demand for workers the Construction industry is facing.

## Building a Diverse Talent Pipeline in Key Industries

PSRC, through this project and its broader work, is committed to supporting equitable access to opportunity occupations and higher wage jobs. Increasing the diversity of the talent pipeline supports the dual goals of advancing equity in employment opportunities and serving the workforce needs to support recovery of regional industries.

Conversations with key stakeholders in the region underscored the current challenges that underrepresented groups face in accessing opportunity occupations in each of the four identified industries along with steps that employers, employment and training programs, and elected officials can take to help to address these inequities. Below we describe feedback from stakeholders in the four industries on the challenges on opportunities for increasing the diversity of the talent pipeline. This is followed by a description of the roles key groups play in regional skill development efforts and how they can use the findings and resources from the final report to increase access to opportunity occupations for underrepresented groups. We conclude with a summary of recommendations key groups in the region should consider to increase access to opportunity occupations among underrepresented groups.

## Challenges and Opportunities for Increased Talent Pool Diversity in Key Industries

Conversations with key stakeholders in the region underscored both industry-specific and region wide challenges to increased access to opportunity occupations for underrepresented groups. These included issues with hiring practices, access to education and training, supports for working parents, and the role that formal and informal networking can play in access to opportunity occupations. Below we describe, by industry sector, feedback we received from key stakeholders.

### Access to Construction Occupations

Stakeholders we spoke with indicated that the Construction industry is falling short in ensuring equitable representation and opportunities for advancement into higher paying occupations. This includes opportunities for people of color, individuals of different gender identities, and individuals with disabilities.

Application practices and the content of job descriptions are potential deterrents for underrepresented groups. For example, some stakeholders referenced the prevalence of gendered language in job descriptions that implicitly conveys a preference for male applicants. Other stakeholders described how many employers continue to rely on “old fashioned” application

processes, such as dropping off a resume at specific dates and times in-person. This can create barriers for workers who are unable to print out documents or be available to drop off their application materials.

The requirement to have a driver's license is especially common in Construction. It can create barriers to entry given the costs, especially for younger workers, of obtaining a license. Similarly, this requirement is a barrier for those with suspended licenses, which disproportionately affect people of color.<sup>4</sup>

The nonstandard work hours, including early morning starts, may also reduce accessibility of Construction jobs for parents with caregiving responsibilities absent viable childcare arrangements.

Finally, the industry's reliance on referrals and networking to meet hiring needs results in lack of opportunity to higher paying occupations for underrepresented groups outside of these networks. By having few people of color in certain occupations in the industry, this makes it difficult for students of color or women to see themselves in the types of occupations available in the Construction industry.

Stakeholders identified several ongoing initiatives and programs to help increase representation in higher paying occupations in the Construction industry. This included the Construction industry's use of pre-apprenticeship programs and apprenticeships as opportunities for women and people of color to gain skills, experience, and entry to the industry. However, stakeholders indicated that there are not enough programs to meet the demand.

### **Access to Healthcare Occupations**

The Healthcare stakeholders we interviewed indicated that the Healthcare industry is paying more attention to and trying to provide access, pathways, and opportunities for certain groups, including people of color, individuals of different gender identities, and individuals with disabilities, to some of the higher paying and more stable occupations in the industry. However, there are several areas stakeholders identified that create barriers to the workforce better reflecting the region's population.

The cost of receiving a Healthcare degree in nursing and other occupations can be prohibitive to many individuals with low incomes. Stakeholders indicated that the preference of many major hospital employers for a baccalaureate nursing degree may reduce access for low-income individuals who cannot afford the more expensive or longer duration programs.

The prerequisites for entry to nursing programs also represent a barrier. These requirements are not consistent across community colleges and four-year institutions, creating challenges for students with low incomes seeking to transfer across institutions or apply to work at hospitals that require a specific set of skills and comprehensive training typically taught at higher-cost baccalaureate nursing programs. These industry-set barriers can exacerbate the inequity low-income and nursing students of color encounter in seeking to enter Healthcare training programs.

The relative lack of people of color in higher wage Healthcare positions may also serve as an ongoing deterrent to new entrants to the field. Offering opportunities for underrepresented groups to visit hospitals and meet workers from various fields could be a step to increase access.

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<sup>4</sup> Hirsch, J., & Jones, P. S. (2020). Driver's License Suspension for Unpaid Fines and Fees: The Movement for Reform. *U. Mich. JL Reform*, 54, 875.

## Access to Manufacturing Occupations

Stakeholders described Manufacturing in the region as a white male-dominated industry with higher barriers to entry for women and people of color. They described the particular challenge posed by lack of affordable childcare, emphasizing it as a key component of any strategy to boost representation in higher paying occupations in the Manufacturing industry. Stakeholders interviewed spoke to their own efforts to boost employment among women by providing stipends and access to childcare services when participating in training programs. They also described their use of “ambassador programs” that aim to reach people of color. The ambassadors are Manufacturing employees who identify with groups who have been historically underemployed by the industry. The ambassadors visit high school students to recruit younger employees and promote the industry’s change in becoming more diverse.

## Access to Information Occupations

The stakeholders we interviewed felt that the Information industry has not done enough to promote equitable access and opportunities to the industry itself and the higher paying occupations available. Stakeholders pointed to hiring practices described earlier that prioritize candidates with a Bachelor’s degree, as opposed to the specific technical skills required to do a certain job, as one example of the myriad of changes the industry must make to improve the diversity of its workforce.

In addition to suggesting that the industry change its hiring practices to welcome workers from various educational institutions, stakeholders spoke about improving racial and gender representation in the industry. People of color, women, and gender expansive people are largely underrepresented in the industry. Offering education and training programs for women of color and LGBTQIA+ people specifically is a step toward opening employment opportunities for these historically underrepresented groups in IT and enhancing the racial and gender diversity in the industry.

## Regional Stakeholder Roles in Skill Development and Increasing Access to Opportunity Occupations

PSRC plays a unique role in the region given the local government entities and elected officials that comprise its membership and its leadership in developing and coordinating policies around regional economic development and planning. Through its own communication, convening, and dissemination efforts, PSRC can support the efforts of its regional partners to increase awareness of education and training programs and financial supports as a way of connecting workers, jobseekers, and students with opportunity occupations. These efforts will underscore the imperative to map employment and training services to opportunity occupations and to increase access to information about these occupations among marginalized and underrepresented communities. Using the findings from this report and the accompanying occupational profiles, PSRC can work with regional stakeholders by emphasizing the following related to regional skill development efforts:

- A **regional approach** is critical to successful and sustained workforce and economic development, and there is demand for workers across the region in opportunity occupations that provide strong wages.
- The **prevalence of opportunity occupations** in the Healthcare, Information, Construction, and Manufacturing industries in the region provide opportunities for workers

with appropriate training and skills to find immediate employment in a career with strong wages.

- **Demand often outpaces supply** of workers in these opportunity occupations and numerous education and training programs exist across the region that can prepare individuals for these careers.
- Some **groups are underrepresented in these occupations**, and targeted outreach to communities of color, women, and other underrepresented groups can improve equitable access to these opportunity occupations.

In addition to the role PSRC can serve in increasing awareness of the opportunity occupations, we identified key groups involved in regional skill building efforts that can use information from this project to support their efforts to develop a diverse, skilled workforce across the region. Targeted outreach to these audiences by PSRC, and in turn, key workforce development and economic development groups communicating and emphasizing similar messaging on the need to increase access to opportunity occupations, can increase the salience of regional skill needs and available jobs. Table 3 describes the roles each group serves in regional skill efforts to increase access to opportunity occupations.

**Table 3. Regional Skill Building Stakeholders for Increasing Access to Opportunity Occupations**

Audience	Description
<b>Workforce development councils (WDCs)</b>	WDCs gather and disseminate labor market information and enhance quality of education and training programs to support business, industry, and workers to increase economic opportunity for their region.
<b>Community and Technical Colleges Centers of Excellence (COEs)</b>	COEs connect business, industry, jobseekers, and educational programs to develop and support a skilled workforce that can meet the demand of the region. COEs provide training and career opportunities to jobseekers.
<b>CTC academic/career counselors</b>	Academic and career counselors at CTCs inform students about professional opportunities and advise them on their educational trajectory.
<b>Non-CTC training programs<sup>5</sup></b>	Non-CTC programs refer to independently run training programs that exist across the region. These programs typically train or provide resources to potential students interested in a particular industry or occupation.
<b>Industry representatives</b>	Industry representatives refer to individual employers and groups that represent interests of businesses typically in a particular industry including trade associations or chambers of commerce. Industry representatives benefit from a healthy supply of workers who can support the labor needs of businesses.
<b>Labor representatives</b>	Labor representatives refer to groups that represent worker or jobseeker interests including unions or other professional associations. They often represent workers in a particular industry and many maintain a specific membership. Professional associations can also represent workers from particular demographic groups such as people of color or women. Labor groups and associations support workers and jobseekers, often disseminating information about employment and training opportunities. They are also critical stakeholders for conducting targeted outreach to specific groups.
<b>Community-based organizations (CBOs)<sup>6</sup></b>	CBOs refer to organizations that connect members of their community to various types of resources. CBOs that connect jobseekers and workers with employment and training opportunities can disseminate labor market information and training resources directly to jobseekers in the community. They can often reach individuals who might be disconnected from other formal employment and training systems.
<b>Current students</b>	Current students refer to students between high school and college who might be thinking about career opportunities and planning. Increasing access to labor market information to students can assist them in

<sup>5</sup> For example, see [Ada Developer's Academy](#) or [Core Plus](#).

<sup>6</sup> For example, see [El Centro de la Raza](#), [TRAC Associates](#), [YWCA Seattle-King-Snohomish](#), or [Pioneer Human Services](#).

	developing education plans that prepare them for employment in high-demand occupations with strong wages.
<b>State and local education agencies<sup>7</sup></b>	State and local education agencies are responsible for educating students to prepare them for future careers. Labor market information can inform the types of programs they provide to students. They also have extensive networks and disseminate information widely to various groups who work with students and future jobseekers.
<b>Education-related nonprofit organizations<sup>8</sup></b>	Education-related nonprofits often support programs to increase equal access to educational and career opportunities. They can disseminate information directly to students served by their programs and within their networks.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, see the [Office of the Superintendent for Public Instruction](#), the [Washington Student Achievement Council](#), the [State Board of Education](#), local schools and districts.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see [Community Center for Education Results](#) or [Washington STEM](#).

## Recommendations to Increase Access to Opportunity Occupations among Underrepresented Groups

Across the region there are actions employers, industry groups, organized labor, employment and training providers, workforce development councils, and local and state elected officials can take to increase access to the opportunity occupations identified for underrepresented groups. Summarized below are recommendations for key groups in the region to increase access to opportunity occupations.

### Employers, Industry Groups, and Organized Labor

Employers, professional associations, and organized labor can act as the gatekeepers for access to opportunity occupations. The decisions they make about how to vet potential hires and who can access apprenticeship and other work-based training programs have long-term implications for the composition of the labor force and the level of access traditionally underrepresented groups have to high wage jobs.

***Prioritize Skill-Based Hiring Instead of Degree Requirements:*** Biases in hiring practices toward degree requirements and formal training experience over knowledge and skill proficiency reduces opportunities for underrepresented groups. Hiring practices that prioritize the specific skills required for the position would expand talent pools and the corresponding opportunities for underrepresented groups. Additionally, increasing licensing reciprocity for individuals licensed in other states for occupations such as nursing could help meet the demand for workers in the short-term.

In some industries, Construction in particular, personal connections and references figure prominently in hiring decisions, which perpetuate existing inequalities in the workforce. A focus on required skills can also help mitigate potential biases in hiring practices that are overly reliant on these informal relationships.

***Increase the Availability of Work-Based Learning Programs:*** Increasing the availability of work-based training programs such as apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships can increase the diversity of the talent pool in opportunity occupations. Typically developed in conjunction with employers, training and workforce development programs, and often organized labor, these programs provide on-ramps to opportunity occupations. They provide technical instruction specifically aligned with the required skills for a given occupation along with on-the-job learning and structured mentorship opportunities. Moreover, work-based learning allows individuals to earn a wage concurrent with added skill acquisition.

### Employment and Training Providers and Workforce Development Councils

Supporting access to skill-building opportunities is a critical step in increasing the diversity of the talent pipeline and opportunities for underrepresented groups.

***Develop Pathways for Underrepresented Groups to Increase Access and Completion of Pre-Requisite Courses:*** Pre-requisites and so-called gatekeeper classes can decrease access to training programs that build skills that align with the demands in opportunity occupations.<sup>9</sup> Building

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<sup>9</sup> These classes may include remedial or development courses in math and English that are requirements to enter community college degree and certification programs.

pathways for underrepresented populations to access these classes and limiting barriers to entry can support more opportunity for advancement for these populations. Similarly, offering classes at schedules that are convenient for working parents and providing financial support to reduce training costs can increase equity in access to training programs.

***Reduce Costs Associated with Obtaining Safety Certifications and Drivers' Licenses:*** The ability to obtain a driver's licenses and Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) safety certifications can present a barrier in accessing opportunity occupations for some individuals with low incomes. Employment and training providers and workforce development councils should work to reduce the cost of drivers' education classes along with the costs associated with learning how to drive and obtaining a license, a requirement for many jobs. Similarly, employment and training providers and workforce development councils should work to increase access to free or subsidized safety training can make it easier for potential workers to satisfy application requirements.

### **Local and State Elected Officials**

Policymakers across different levels of government can play a critical role in supporting increased access to employment opportunities for underrepresented groups. Elected officials can design policies, use their prominence to increase the awareness both of opportunity occupations, and the importance of increasing access to underrepresented and historically marginalized groups. There are several policy changes that could support increased access to opportunity occupations.

***Increase the Affordability and Availability of Childcare for Workers:*** Local and state elected officials should understand the role that childcare plays in supporting improved employment outcomes. Local and state officials should continue to work to increase both affordability and the availability of childcare that can accommodate parents with nontraditional work schedules.

***Improve Access to Financial Supports to Support Education and Training for Workers:*** Also, important is the availability of scholarships and financial supports to help workers with low incomes complete employment and training programs. Local and state elected officials should work to make it easier for students and jobs seekers to access tuition assistance, stipends for books, tools, and other learning materials, and access to added financial support to offset potential lost wages associated with attending training programs.

***Raise Awareness of Opportunity Occupations in the Central Puget Sound Region:*** Along with material supports, local elected officials are also in a unique position to raise awareness both of the opportunities that opportunity occupations present and the inequities that exist in access to these occupations. In their roles as community leaders, elected officials can amplify messaging by employers, organized labor, and employment and training programs about the need to increase access and opportunity for underrepresented groups.