

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND COUNTY GOVERNMENT:

Partners Who Work for Progress

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A decade after the Great Recession, Pennsylvania is today in a state of 'full employment,' suggesting that those who are willing and able to work are employed, regardless of whether or not they are underemployed or have stopped looking for work. Still, there is a ubiquitous call among employers for right-skilled workers that has resonated across virtually every industry sector. From hard skills that include technology training to soft skills that include workplace etiquette, employers across the commonwealth and nation indicate they could sustain and expand their operations, but for adequate numbers of skilled employees, including incumbent workers.

Enter the workforce development system. Best characterized as an interdependent web of multi-level government, community organizations, businesses, educators and training providers, and beyond, the workforce development system helps to prepare, partner, and place workers in sustainable career pathways. Unquestionably, workforce strength is a vital indicator of community and economic health. It is important for local leaders, including county commissioners, to understand how the workforce development system helps to fuel local economies. Collaborations between county government and workforce development can yield results that would be difficult—if not impossible, prohibitively expensive, or inefficient—to launch and sustain alone.

While there is a great deal local elected officials should know about their legal duties under federal and state workforce laws and policies, it is equally important to recognize how collaborative opportunities between county government officials and workforce development partners can make impactful differences. This article will explore both duties and opportunities to partner for progress.

WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT

Enacted in 2014 by Congress with overwhelming bipartisan support, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) leverages federally funded workforce programs to serve the greatest number of people, including individuals with disabilities and those with other barriers to employment. Under WIOA, the workforce development system is deliberately coordinated, integrated, and regionalized to facilitate service delivery that aims to provide seamless access for jobseekers and employers. Pennsylvania's approach to WIOA implementation is outlined in the Pennsylvania WIOA Combined State Plan. WIOA enables the commonwealth to align workforce priorities across multiple partners, training providers, employers, and others to ensure a skilled workforce.

The Pennsylvania Workforce Development Board (PA WDB) consists of gubernatorial-appointed, employer-driven members who serve in an advisory capacity relative to programs and policies under WIOA, as well as implementation of the governor's workforce strategy. Under WIOA, local elected officials are tasked with appointing members to the local workforce development board in their area.

PENNSYLVANIA WORKFORCE SYSTEM GOALS

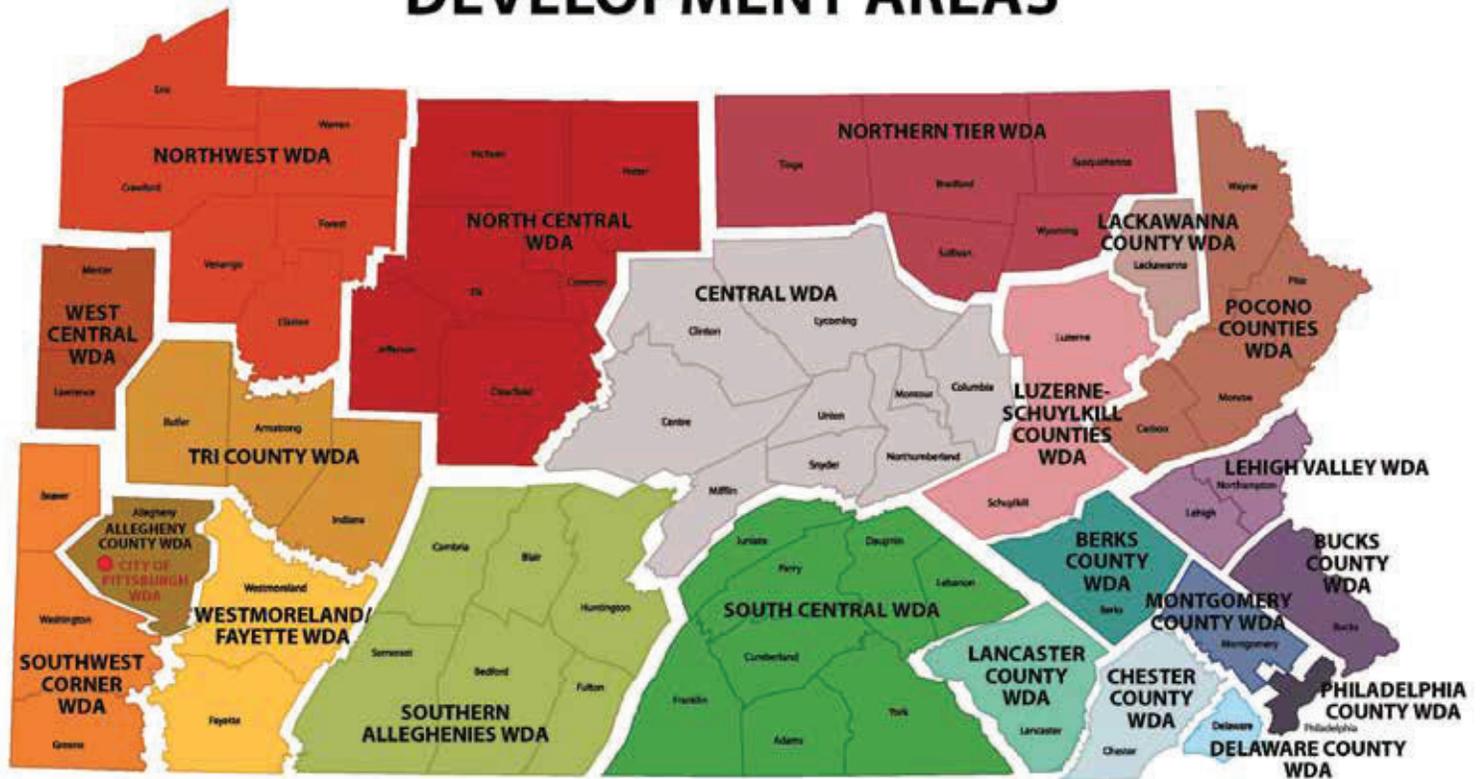
As expressed in the Pennsylvania WIOA Combined State Plan, the workforce development system has five key goals:

- 1) Establish career pathways as the primary model for skills, credentials, and degree attainment, and provide all Pennsylvanians with an opportunity to obtain a good job. There is an emphasis on servicing individuals with barriers to employment.
- 2) Expand public-private investment in the state's pipeline of workers and in incumbent workers for targeted industry sectors.
- 3) Increase opportunities for youth to participate in work-based learning through summer employment, pre-apprenticeships, apprenticeships, internships, and other similar experiences.
- 4) Engage employers through partnerships; increase public-private investment in critical skills; and support employer practices that create jobs that pay.
- 5) Strengthen data sharing across state agencies and workforce development partners to better understand education and employment outcomes, and rely on data to improve and target efforts.

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PENNSYLVANIA WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AREAS



WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AREAS

Pennsylvania’s workforce development system is divided into 23 countywide or regional Local Workforce Development Areas (LWDA). Each LWDA has a Workforce Development Board (WDB), with the exception of the City of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, which share one WDB. Local WDBs develop workforce policies and regional strategies. They provide oversight and coordination of workforce services provided in their region and the overall operation of the storefront delivery of these services—the state’s 57 PA CareerLink® centers—which service all 67 counties in Pennsylvania.

Appointment of the local workforce development board by the chief local elected official(s) occurs after a local workforce area has been designated. There must be one local workforce development board for each local workforce development area in Pennsylvania.

The commonwealth must designate local workforce development areas to be awarded federal WIOA funds. The local government unit is the grant recipient for the formula funds awarded to local workforce development areas and is liable for the proper use of the funds.

The WIOA Title I Adult, Dislocated Worker and Youth Program funds are awarded by formula to each local workforce development area. WIOA enables business-driven workforce boards and local elected officials to readily respond to changing needs of local communities. WIOA provides flexibility, allowing local decision makers to be nimble in implementing the right strategy at the right time to satisfy the demands in their respective local economies. Importantly, WIOA recognizes the significant role employers play in any workforce strategy.

In Pennsylvania, PA CareerLink® centers are what WIOA refers to as “one-stop” centers and what the US Department of Labor refers to as American Job Centers®. They are “workforce central” hubs of activities and services.

WIOA lists programs and funding streams that must participate in the one-stop or PA CareerLink® system. These programs are referred to as required partners. Other organizations may be included in the PA CareerLink®, as well. All additional partners must be approved by the chief local elected official(s) and local workforce development board. All PA CareerLink® partners must enter into a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the local workforce board

regarding the delivery of services through the one-stop, and how they will support their fair-share cost of maintaining one-stop infrastructure. Local workforce development boards must expand beyond oversight of the PA CareerLink® centers to convene partners that prepare and match skilled workers to in-demand jobs. Services and training focus on individuals who have the greatest barriers to employment.

LOCAL WORKFORCE GOVERNANCE

Local workforce development governance begins with the chief elected official(s). Chief local elected officials, together with their local workforce development boards, are charged with making policy decisions for their respective geographic workforce development area to address the workforce needs of local citizens and employers. In a workforce development area consisting of one unit of local government, the chief local elected official will either be the mayor or chair of the county commission, depending on the nature and type of governmental unit. In a local area that includes more than one unit of local government, it will be those elected officials designated under a contract or an agreement entered into between those units of government to form a consortium of governments which, by law, is financially liable for the workforce funds that are allocated to a local workforce development area. The chief elected official is also responsible for appointing local workforce development board members, approving the board's budget, and serving as the local grant recipient. To assist in the administration of grant funds, the chief elected official(s) may designate an entity to serve as a fiscal agent; however, such designation does not relieve the chief elected official of the liability of any misuse of grant funds.

Workforce development boards are organized differently around the country and even within Pennsylvania; some are not-for-profit corporations, while others operate under the umbrella of a local governmental unit. Staff that supports the local workforce development board may be employed directly by the board, by a governmental unit in the workforce development area, by a council of governments, or an alternative entity, such as a regional planning commission under contract with the board or governmental unit.

STATE-ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHIEF LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIALS

The Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry has oversight of local workforce programs, and directs chief local elected officials to ensure that local workforce development boards:

- 1) elect a private-sector business representative as the local board chair;
- 2) procure an operator for the PA CareerLink® system in the local area;
- 3) promote PA CareerLink® programs and activities;
- 4) assist the state in developing the statewide employment statistics system under the Wagner-Peyser Act;
- 5) coordinate with economic development strategies and establish employer linkages with workforce development activities;
- 6) execute regional and local planning responsibilities, as required by WIOA and L&I; and
- 7) conduct transparent business by making information about the activities of the local workforce development board available to the public.

As the fiscal agent, the local elected official draws down WIOA funds, reports on expenditures to the state, and provides for an annual audit in accordance with the federal Office of Management and Budget.

BEYOND WIOA— PARTNERS FOR PROGRESS

Beyond the 'must-do' stipulations of federal and state laws, regulations, and policies, workforce development leaders and county commissioners/executives have found a wide variety of occasions to marshal their collective energy, ingenuity, and resources to improve local quality of life and expand economic opportunity. Across Pennsylvania, these collaborations have launched new and expanded existing businesses, trained and placed people in good-paying jobs, and increased local revenues to support the infrastructure and services residents demand. A glimpse of initiatives that have been launched across the state shows how.

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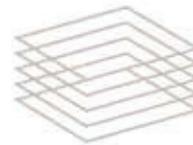
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NORTH CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA

North Central Pennsylvania's six-county local workforce development area (including Cameron, Clearfield, Elk, Jefferson, McKean, and Potter Counties) is serviced by Workforce Solutions for North Central Pennsylvania (the local workforce development board), and seven PA CareerLink® centers. Workforce Solutions for North Central Pennsylvania and the Manufacturing Education and Employment Advancement Network, Inc. (MEEA) teamed to develop a strategic roadmap with a focus on attracting and retaining people to live and work in the region. Predicated on leveraging the region's assets and transforming them into opportunities, the year-long strategic planning process included region-wide stakeholder collaboration and actionable input.

County commissioners were integral to the strategic plan's development, including five-term Potter County Commissioner Susan Kefover. "In rural areas such as ours, it is especially important to have as many stakeholders at the table as possible. We are seeing changes in the workforce, especially as Baby Boomers retire and Millennials have different expectations about their education and training, as well as a workplace culture that accommodates their lifestyles. Local government, education, and workforce development leadership is critical to keeping our young people here in the region to work," Kefover said.

Kefover believes it is important that county commissioners go beyond their oversight of WIOA funds to understand how all the partners in the PA CareerLink® centers can service a broad population base. "Commissioners and workforce development leaders can and have sparked unparalleled collaboration, because we have relationships that bring partners to the table, including businesspeople," she added. "The workforce development board is very engaged in this region, which is not always easy, since it is very rural."

NORTHWEST PENNSYLVANIA

Creative collaboration in another rural workforce development area has resulted in increasingly accessible PA CareerLink® services for people who may struggle with transportation issues. Transportation is often a barrier to training and employment for individuals, particularly where public transportation is not available or easily accessible. As a result, NWPA Job Connect, the local

workforce development board serving a six-county region (Clarion, Crawford, Erie, Forest, Venango, and Warren Counties) has literally mobilized a response.

The mobile hub services clients of all types through static access points, workshop locations, and partnerships with community-based organizations and employers, including county libraries. "The key to our success is the establishment of relationships," said Janet Anderson of Partners for Performance, the administrative agency to the NW PA Workforce Development Board (NW PA WDB).

"We have done some truly incredible things here to make mobile delivery of services happen and to engage county commissioners in the identification of places where we can serve WIOA program-eligible clients. This includes locations such as county jails, health and human services departments, and county libraries. The response from the public has been overwhelmingly positive," Anderson added.

County officials are pleased with this 'take-it-to-the-people' service delivery strategy. "Ultimately, the goal is to have more people filling open positions locally and continuing to develop skills to achieve family-sustaining wages," said Crawford County Commissioner John Amato. First-term Venango County Commissioner Albert 'Chip' Abramovic agreed. "Libraries are very welcoming environments and there is no stigma associated with going there to look for work. Workforce development folks are getting services to residents in more creative ways and venues than ever before," he noted.

"We also worked with local government in Erie to identify at-risk youth to participate in youth work experiences. In Erie, for instance, we worked with the county's Summer JAM (Jobs And More) program. This is a collaborative effort to recruit and employ disconnected youth aged 16-21 years for the summer. The program provides job readiness training, career exploration, and employment opportunities," Anderson also noted. Erie County Executive Kathy Dahlkemper, a champion and advocate of workforce programs, is especially passionate about the county's 'Ice House Program,' an entrepreneurial leadership development program that helps participants approach business challenges in new and creative ways. "County government has integrated this into our own workforce; it has helped to breathe new, creative approaches to problem solving," she said.

WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

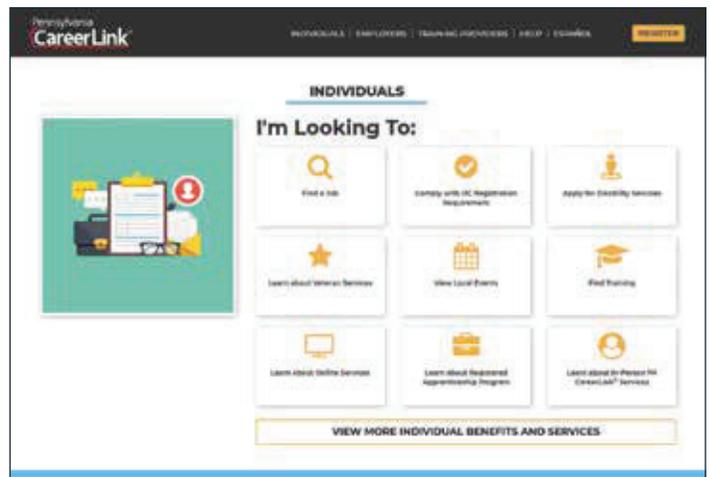
In western Pennsylvania, a joint partnership between Partner4Work (the local workforce development board), the City of Pittsburgh, and Allegheny County has resulted in fruitful employment, training, and placement initiatives that have helped people at all stages of life and along a variety of career pathways. Among them is a youth summer employment program that has served nearly 2,000 young people over its four-year history. "This partnership has enabled us to create and sustain a summer work opportunity for youth participants, which is something the chief partners see as a priority – the workforce development board, the county executive, and the mayor," said Partner4Work CEO Earl Buford.

SOUTHWEST PENNSYLVANIA

In Southwest Corner Workforce Development Area's three-county footprint (Beaver, Greene, and Washington Counties), workforce development and county government team to assist another population cohort with barriers to employment— individuals transitioning out of incarceration. There, Washington County Commissioner Diana Vaughan teams with SW Corner Workforce Development Board's President Ami Gatts to provide job skills training to female inmates at re-entry conferences. Enabled through both cash and in-kind donations, some of which were provided by SW Corner WDB, the conference introduces female inmates to tools and skill they need to be productive working citizens.

"This includes information on how they can pay off court fines and fees, how to get medical benefits re-instated, and how to overcome barriers to housing," Commissioner Vaughan said, adding, "We worked with Ami Gatts and her team to provide soft skills training and to connect people to a variety of services through WIOA-funded programs. The workforce development system is a powerful advocate for these folks and attracts employers to re-entry conferences." SW Corner WDB is also among a team of advocates who are present at court meetings to demonstrate support to individuals transitioning out of incarceration. Complete with ceremonial celebration, "these court meetings make evident to the individual that there is a community of support surrounding them and ultimately, to help avoid recidivism," Gatts remarked.

Additionally, SW Corner WDB is working with all nine county commissioners across Washington, Beaver, and



The state's 57 PA CareerLink® centers service all 67 counties in Pennsylvania.

Greene Counties on a recently awarded state grant to combat the opioid crisis that affects all facets of life, including the workplace. "The opioid crisis has had so many unanticipated consequences. It's incredible that its reach into the workplace directly affects workplace productivity, absenteeism, and healthcare expenses," Gatts said. Of note, Gatts is a non-voting member of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania's Community and Economic Development Committee.

SOUTHERN ALLEGHENIES

The Southern Alleghenies Workforce Development Area, with a six-county geographic footprint (Blair, Bedford, Cambria, Fulton, Huntingdon, and Somerset Counties) is led by veteran workforce development professional Susan Whisler, Director of the Southern Alleghenies Workforce Development Board (SAWDB). The board operates under the Southern Alleghenies Planning & Development Commission. Marshalling the power of collaboration with county partners and Goodwill Industries, the SAWDB was recently awarded a \$203,863 Strategic Innovation grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry for a project dubbed 'Case Managed Reintegration: A Collaborative Approach.' Focused on the counties of Bedford, Blair, and Cambria, the project's goal is to provide intensive case management, workforce development, and wrap-around services to help ex-offenders reintegrate into the workforce. "Trained staff will work to remove or minimize social, economic, and workforce-related barriers

to increase each individual's opportunity for success in reentering the workforce," Whisler said.

"We are grateful for the efforts of Susan Whisler and her team at the Southern Alleghenies Workforce Board for alerting and including Blair County in this grant. They know our county well and understand our needs, continually striving to find ways to help us achieve our goals," added Blair County Commissioner Bruce Erb.

NORTHERN TIER OF PENNSYLVANIA

The Northern Tier Workforce Development Board (Northern Tier WDB) service area (Bradford, Susquehanna, Sullivan, Tioga, and Wyoming Counties) also has a history of productive partnership with county commissioners. Northern Tier WDB Deputy Director Frank Thompson and his team work consistently and strategically with commissioners through the Northern Tier Regional Planning and Development Commission's executive board. Commissioners help to prioritize projects and recommend partners, businesses, and customers.

Recent examples include the development of the Northern Tier WDB's Fit4Work program, which provides services to customers with extensive barriers, including those exiting the criminal justice system or those on the verge of entering the system. "Commissioners from the project's pilot counties assisted with providing contacts, giving legitimacy to our efforts, and supporting the initial start-up efforts as the workforce board began venturing into the county's judicial system. The program now works with the county jail, supervised bail, probation, and domestic relations," Thompson noted.

In other projects, the commissioners across the five-county region have helped the workforce board and subcontractors in the recruitment of customers for both new and ongoing initiatives. "Identifying customers, especially those with barriers, can be particularly challenging in a rural area. We've had commissioners refer customers to our programs. Recently, we had assistance from commissioners in recruiting both businesses and individuals for the State and Local Internship Program (SLIP), which was a huge success," Thompson said, adding, "This opportunity gave youth and young adults on-the-job training experience in local businesses over summer months. We hope this is one way we can stem the brain drain from this region."

CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA

Meanwhile, in the nine-county Central Workforce Development Area (Centre, Clinton, Columbia, Lycoming, Mifflin, Montour, Northumberland, Snyder, and Union Counties), county commissioners are actively engaged in workforce development initiatives. As soon as Clinton County Commissioner Robert 'Pete' Smeltz learned of the State and Local Internship Program (SLIP) operated by the Central PA Workforce Development Corporation (CPWDC - the local workforce development board) this past summer, he worked to engage Clinton County businesses and the Clinton County Economic Development Partnership. The quick connection Commissioner Smeltz made between local companies and the CPWDC resulted in 11 SLIP interns in Clinton County among several different companies, many of which provided training in manufacturing industries that are clamoring for skilled workers.

Elsewhere in the CPWDC area footprint, Mifflin County Commissioner Stephen Dunkle and Columbia County Commissioner Chris Young presented to high school students at two different Camp STEAM (Science,

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Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) programs this past summer. As part of the camps, students learn about various STEAM concepts and tour local companies to see ideas put into action. As part of the training's leadership component, Commissioners Dunkle and Young spoke with students about their journeys and answered questions about local government.

SOUTH CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA

Serviced by SCPaWorks (the region's local workforce development board) across the eight-county South Central Workforce Development Area (Adams, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Juniata, Lebanon, Perry, and York), this region has expanded considerably in both population and the number of businesses in the past two decades. SCPaWorks CEO Jesse McCree indicated, "Our job in workforce development is to team with partners in local government and beyond to ensure skilled workers fuel the talent pipeline employers demand."

As the fastest growing county by population in the commonwealth, Cumberland County has partnered with workforce development in crafting curriculum in skilled trades at Cumberland Valley High School. "Employers' needs are changing, and young people entering the workforce have opportunities for good-paying jobs if they bring the necessary skills to match the jobs that are in demand, especially in the trades," commented Cumberland County Commission Chair Vince DiFilippo. "The four-year degree is certainly valuable in preparing people for careers, but there are many opportunities that require training certificates, on-the-job training, two-year degrees, and registered apprenticeships," he added. "Cumberland County is actively engaged and committed to connecting with the various partners in workforce development to enrich economic opportunity and provide meaningful, family-sustaining work for our residents."

SOUTHEAST PENNSYLVANIA

Chester County Commissioner Kathi Cozzone echoed this sentiment. "Partnerships between county government and the workforce development community are what help to ensure buy-in to ideas that put people to work," she said. Cozzone is credited with rolling out the Platform to Employment Program that focuses on reaching and engaging the long-term unemployed population. As a member of the single-county Chester County Workforce Development Area and Board, Cozzone says the Platform to Employment Program addresses financial stability and the emotional well-being of people who have been out of work for an extended period. "Chester County partners with United Way and the PA CareerLink®, along with partners in the business community and local organizations, to identify and engage these individuals," she said. "The unemployment rate doesn't reflect the totality of people who stopped looking for work or who are underemployed."

Chester County Workforce Development Board Director Pat Bokovitz believes that because the local workforce board is part of county government, key decision makers, such as Commissioner Cozzone and her colleagues, are intimately familiar with workforce development's assets and potential to serve many people and businesses. "Our commissioners know how to leverage relationships to advance initiatives decisively, quickly, and effectively," he commented. "Communities stand to benefit most when workforce development, county government, and other key partners collaborate. We are pleased to be partners who work for progress." 🍷

¹ For more on the workforce development system in Pennsylvania, please see *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: A Guide for Pennsylvania's Local Elected Officials* at <https://online.flippingbook.com/view/484182/>.