



REDI College Access Scholarship Recipients/Students working on REDI College Access activity (Source: REDI)

Southwest Tennessee Regional Initiative

★ Best Practices Case Study

REDI—Regional Economic Development Initiative Southwest Tennessee Region

The Regional Economic Development Initiative, or REDI, was established by the Southwest Tennessee Development District (SWTDD) in 2010 to create a public/private partnership in 11 counties in the Southwest Tennessee Region. In their collaborative to create REDI, regional leaders are looking beyond county lines to create a unique vision for Southwest Tennessee that is distinctive and progressive. Member counties include Chester, Crockett, Decatur, Gibson, Hardeman, Hardin, Haywood, Henderson, Lauderdale, McNairy, and Tipton. REDI has received funds from their 11 member counties, as well as the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, USDA/Rural Development, and the Tennessee Regions' Roundtable.

The REDI program has four areas of concentration: Education/Workforce Development, Technology, Entrepreneurship, and Capacity Building. Since its inception, SWTDD leaders have created and successfully launched its first two REDI program initiatives that improve human capital and address workforce development and education:

REDI College Access Program

The nature of today's globalized economy has impacted job opportunities and prospects for today's workers. In the past, one could rely on a low-skill manufacturing job to earn a living and support a family. However, in today's workforce, jobs often

require at least some post-secondary education or technical training, and many require additional certification. The future of successful economic development for this region of West Tennessee is linked to transforming the educational culture and improving access to higher education for both youth and adults. "To stay competitive in a 21st century economy, it is imperative that we create a more seamless path between high school, postsecondary, and the workforce. Today's students must be prepared to be tomorrow's workers," said Governor Haslam. "The states that provide the strongest pool of talented workers with the most relevant skill sets are the states that will grow jobs and attract businesses."

REDI's College Access program was created to meet the needs of youth and adults wanting to pursue post-secondary education. Many students in rural communities are first-generation college students and are unfamiliar with how to navigate the process of attending some type of post-secondary education. REDI helps students with the entire college exploration, application, and enrollment process.

The REDI College Access Program, designed after the Ayers Foundation program, was created to change the educational culture of the region, and foster the link between education, workforce, and economic development. It was created to fill the gap in services for the post-secondary education process. The College Access Program is the cornerstone of REDI, and focuses on increasing educational attainment levels and improving workforce skill levels in rural West Tennessee. REDI has a College Mentor Corps, which is housed in the 19 area high

schools. These mentors provide one-on-one and group assistance to seniors on all things related to post-



secondary educational attainment. For some students, mentors may simply help in filling out the FAFSA, and for others it may start with exploring potential careers and moving forward from that point. Mentors work with students to explore career paths, the best school or fit for them, and assist students and their family with the financial aid process. REDI also employs Transition Coaches, who work at the two area Community Colleges. These coaches work with students as they graduate from high school and transition to college. They help with scheduling, provide academic assistance when needed, listen, help problem solve, and provide support for the students. Phase II for the College Access Program is a local, “Last Dollar” scholarship that communities raise funds for that provides any qualified student financial assistance to attend a community college, technical program, or other qualified university for two years. REDI focuses on first-generation, economically disadvantaged students, but resources are available to any student interested in post-secondary educational pursuits.

Working closely with 19 high schools in the 11-county area, REDI’s College Access Program helped over 3,000 seniors in the last two years acquire financial aid totaling \$15 million dollars for post-secondary education. The retention rate of REDI college students at the local community colleges has been between 75 and 80 percent (compared with a non-REDI rate of 50 percent).

The future of economic development for this region is directly linked to transforming the educational culture and improving access to higher education for both youth and adults. This creative approach to community and economic development earned REDI the 2012 Innovator Award from the Southern Growth Policy Board and a NADO Innovation Award for four consecutive years.

REDI Digital Factory

Job creation is difficult in many communities, but when it is a rural community seeking to create more jobs, the odds seem stacked against them. Rural communities face a variety of unique challenges which can include no Internet access, infrastructure issues, poor educational attainment levels, and not having an adequately skilled or trained workforce. Overcoming these obstacles is extremely important for recruiting business and industry to a community, with a strong emphasis on having an educated and skilled workforce. Unfortunately,

KEY FACTS: Southwest Tennessee Region

Population: 307,963 (2010 Census)

Project Description: rural economic development, human capital development, workforce development

Partners: Tennessee Dept. of Workforce Development, Tennessee Dept. of Economic and Community Development, DRA, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture/Rural Dev., Chester Co., Crockett Co., Decatur Co., Gibson Co., Hardeman Co., Hardin Co., Haywood Co., Henderson Co., Lauderdale Co., McNairy Co., Tipton Co.

for many communities these are not challenges that can be overcome quickly and hinder job creation for the area. The new knowledge-based economy emphasizes that knowledge and education, often referred to as “human capital,” can be treated as a business product or as a productive asset. This knowledge-based economy provides the opportunity to train and educate workers in rural communities and provides technology-based employment opportunities that are normally not available. REDI is working to impact the regional economy and local job creation through training and technology through its Digital Factory program.

A Digital Factory is a co-working center that provides office space, shared broadband connection, and training/work rooms to connect candidates and remote employers. In the Digital Factories, candidates receive online training that results in a job placement upon successful completion of the program. The concept focuses on the online economy and features a social business model. The three-week training program is free to participants. After successful completion of the three-week Customer Service-focused training classes, testing, and certifications, participants are put to work. The online employer offers participants the flexibility to work shifts best suited to their schedules. The Digital Factory is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, and successful candidates can work as little or as often as they choose. Many use this as a supplemental income, while others work full time. The employers have various lines of work available and provide a workable solution for anyone looking for a job.

REDI’s first Digital Factory was opened in June 2011 in Parsons, Tennessee, and has created 95 jobs in this rural area. REDI successfully launched its second Digital Factory this year in Ripley, Tennessee. Three training classes have been completed at this new location providing 17 new jobs for the city thus far. Plans are in place to create a Digital Factory in the nine remaining REDI counties over the coming years.

