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Employer Insight Collaborative Highlights Workforce Priorities in Bourbon County

Fort Scott, Kansas — April 24, 2026 — The Healthy Bourbon County Action Team recently convened two **Employer Insight Collaborative sessions** on February 17 and February 19 to better understand workforce challenges facing employers in Bourbon County.

The sessions brought together **44 employers and workforce partners** representing sectors including healthcare, manufacturing, hospitality, banking, education, professional services, retail, municipal government, and community organizations. The discussions were hosted by the Healthy Bourbon County Action Team in partnership with the City of Fort Scott, Kansas WorkforceONE, Fort Scott Community College, USD 234, and Rural Community Partners.

The collaborative conversations were supported through **Pathways to a Healthy Kansas**, a Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas initiative that supports community-driven solutions to improve health and economic opportunity.

The goal of the Employer Insight Collaborative was to provide a space for employers and community partners to openly discuss workforce challenges and identify practical strategies to strengthen the local workforce.

Key Workforce Insights

Despite representing a wide range of industries, employers reported remarkably consistent challenges.

The **hardest-to-fill positions** include leadership and management roles, information technology positions, skilled trades, healthcare and helping professions, and technical occupations.

Employers also identified common **skill gaps among applicants and employees**, including:

- Reliability and attendance
- Professionalism and workplace expectations
- Communication skills, including customer interaction and written communication
- Initiative and problem-solving

- Teamwork and critical thinking
- Leadership and management capacity

Employers emphasized that while technical skills can often be taught on the job, foundational workplace behaviors such as communication, dependability, and professionalism are the greatest challenges.

Opportunities for Improvement

Participants also discussed opportunities for employers, educators, and community organizations to better coordinate efforts that prepare individuals for the workforce.

Employers identified the need for stronger onboarding practices, mentorship opportunities, and leadership development within organizations. Educators emphasized the importance of strengthening connections between students and employers, expanding real-world learning opportunities, and reinforcing communication and workplace readiness skills.

Community organizations highlighted the importance of improving awareness of workforce resources and creating stronger connections between education, employers, and support services.

Next Steps

Following the sessions, partners identified several immediate next steps to build on the discussion:

- Increase visibility of workforce resources through a coordinated weekly social media series
- Share outcomes publicly and continue employer engagement
- Strengthen collaboration with Fort Scott Community College through employer-focused Lunch & Learn sessions
- Explore next steps related to the Work Ready Communities initiative
- Coordinate training opportunities with Pittsburg State University's Kelce Center for Business & Talent Development
- Pursue pilot programs and funding opportunities that support workforce solutions

Participants expressed strong interest in continuing the conversation and expanding engagement with additional employers, educators, and community partners.

“While industries may differ, the workforce challenges employers are experiencing are remarkably similar,” said Jody Love, President and CEO of the Healthy Bourbon County Action Team. “By bringing employers and community partners together, we can focus on practical solutions that support both our businesses and our workforce.”

About Pathways to a Healthy Kansas

Pathways to a Healthy Kansas is the largest community grant initiative ever funded by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas. The Pathways program provides community coalitions with the tools and resources needed to remove barriers and engage their communities in ways that improve active living, healthy eating, behavioral health and commercial tobacco prevention. The grant funding for each community includes a coordination grant along with the opportunity to apply for non-competitive implementation and achievements grants. For more information, visit bcbsks.com/pathways.

About Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas

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