

REVIEW OF WORKFORCE DEPARTMENT

Chairman Toman and members of the Task Force, I'm Katie Ralston Howe, Deputy Commissioner and Workforce Development Division Director for the North Dakota Department of Commerce. Over the last five years, our team has completely transformed the way we serve the state. We've expanded and diversified our portfolio, becoming a resource for other states that are inspired by the innovative programs we're offering. I appreciate the opportunity to tell you about the strategies our division is leading to support the growth, retention, and skill development of our workforce.

Today I'll be sharing a collaborative effort we're leading to unify the state's workforce system, refine programs, and enhance data tracking, followed by an overview of the workforce programs we manage within our agency.

I typically like to start my presentations by sharing the workforce landscape. Currently, we have an unemployment rate of 2.6% - one of the lowest in the nation—and a labor force participation rate of 69.4% - one of the highest in the nation. In July, we had 424,757 workers participating in the workforce and 12,601 jobs posted. We all might have different reactions to these numbers—some may be surprised... or not surprised, while others may be frustrated or discouraged. If you're like me, you're optimistic.

In 2020 and 2021, our workforce participation dropped due to economic shifts caused by the pandemic and changes in our oil and gas industry, causing total employment to fall to 395,000. Now, according to the 2024 annual labor market report released by Job Service, our total average employment last year was 424,030 workers. It's important to keep in mind that a 1% increase in our workforce is about 4,000 workers, so an increase of 30,000 workers over the last four years is no small feat.

We're also seeing this growth reflected in our population, earning North Dakota the #1 ranking for net migration last year. Several employers have shared that talent pools are becoming stronger, they're filling their vacancies faster, and some have even said they're "full staffed." Don't get me wrong, we still have more jobs available than people to fill them, but we are making progress.

I would never claim that this growth is the result of one program or one agency's work - it is the result of collective efforts across all agencies in the state's workforce system and leadership at the local level.

WORKFORCE ECOSYSTEM STUDY

Commerce's role within the state's workforce ecosystem is to lead the development and implementation of the state's talent strategy. We work to bring agency partners together, engage the private sector to understand their needs, collect program information and resources for a dashboard on our website, and drive the state's workforce strategy in partnership with the Workforce Development Council.

As we look to the future, we know that our workforce system must evolve and adapt to face disruptions – both internal and external, known and unknown –in order to meet future challenges and continue driving the growth of a skilled workforce. This is why Commerce conducted a comprehensive assessment to gain a snapshot of the current state of the landscape and to understand how the current workforce ecosystem programs and services operate.

The outputs of this project are designed to provide recommendations that create efficiencies and improve collaboration across the ecosystem, and that engage stakeholders in developing goals and priorities that support a resilient, future-focused workforce development strategy.

Our project started with stakeholder engagement, which included a series of interviews, focus groups, and a statewide employer survey. In addition to 247 businesses representing more than 30 industries, state agency and tribal leaders, community-based organizations, K-12, postsecondary, and career and technical education all participated in this process.

One of the key deliverables that we wanted to get from this project was a map of our workforce system, so we could better understand how our customers (i.e., jobseekers, workers, employers) navigate the system and identify what we're doing well and where we can improve.

What we learned is that we have more than 80 workforce development programs across more than nine agencies, with no clear, single-entry point. We have a large menu of options to meet the needs of those we serve; however, a large menu can be overwhelming.

Seven core themes emerged through our study.

- Limited access to funding and staffing is limiting program growth and service deliver.
- The limited ability to share data and knowledge across programs impacts on the customer experience.
- The structure is relationally-driven with many strong partnerships, but access is based on “who you know.”
- The patchwork of programs and services would benefit from a more unified leadership vision to drive outcomes.
- There is a growing need for wraparound services in communities to reduce barriers to employment.
- The state has a breadth of programs, but access is more limited in rural and highly rural areas.
- There is misalignment between labor market needs and the skills of available workers.

We then developed 13 recommendations based on these findings, and categorized them into four buckets:

- **Strategic vision:** Provide clear vision for ecosystem steering, determine what goals to prioritize, and define roles and responsibilities for programs and partners. Define strategic vision for better alignment across programs, the ability to understand program needs, and set funding priorities that align with overall goals.
- **Customer focus:** Streamline entry points to programs and services within the ecosystem and/or work to encourage “warm handoffs” between programs. Develop a strategy for assessing customer needs and engaging with customers to understand gaps in programming.
- **Awareness and engagement:** Enhance and build relationships across programs and regions to better engage with communities and partners across the

ecosystem. Develop strategies for socializing programs to employers, jobseekers, and students. Share programs successes to encourage collaboration and celebrate accomplishments.

- **Information tracking and sharing:** Identify success metrics across programs that align with North Dakota's workforce strategic vision and track success to support objective program decisions and assess program efficacy over time. Develop a strategy for data sharing to enhance program efficiency and improve customer service.

WORKFORCE SUBCABINET

Earlier this year, we learned that Governor Armstrong planned to create a handful of subcabinets, one of which would be focused on workforce. Recognizing that, in order to develop a more comprehensive and effective strategy for addressing our workforce needs, we needed to first establish a more unified foundation for our workforce system, the Governor's Office adopted the implementation of our study's recommendations as the initial focus of the workforce subcabinet. The subcabinet has been meeting biweekly since June and has already started working on these recommendations, in order to have measurable results as an ecosystem prior to the next legislative session.

Later this fall, the subcabinet will evaluate the programs and services being managed by our agencies to eliminate duplication, identify which data is most relevant to telling the state's story about our workforce strategy, and to ensure future investments are aligned with the state's vision and shared goals.

Within the next 12 months, our goals include building a landing page to ease entry and simplify navigation of the workforce ecosystem, establish shared goals and measures of success, and build a dashboard to support data tracking across the ecosystem.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

It's important to note that nearly all of the programs I'm going to discuss have been recommended or endorsed by the Workforce Development Council (WDC), whose mission is to advise the governor and public concerning the nature and extent of

workforce needs in the state and make recommendations to address those needs while maximizing available resources and eliminating unnecessary duplication of effort.

The Council's membership is prescribed in federal law, which mandates that 51% of our members represent the private sector. In North Dakota, nearly every major industry is represented on the board, in addition to labor, education, local and state elected officials, and representatives from agencies within the state's workforce system. Our work focuses on five key themes: earlier and more diverse career exploration, addressing the technical skills gap, removing barriers to employment, recruitment and retention, and occupational licensure reform.

OPERATION INTERN

For years, our division has been known for Operation Intern, which was first established in 2007, and continues to grow in demand. Operation Intern provides wage match dollars to companies that are creating valuable work-based learning experiences through internships and apprenticeships. This program is in such high demand that we had to close our 2024 and 2025 application window in just one day as our funds for the biennium had been spoken for. Last year, we implemented a tracking system for companies who attempt to apply after we've run out of funding for the program year and place them on a waitlist. If we were able to fund every business on the 2024 waitlist, we would more than double the number of businesses benefitting from the program for that year.

- 2025-2027 Biennial funding: \$3M
- Number of businesses participating
 - 2025 PY: 70 companies; 26 are new to the program
 - \$1.29M under award
 - 2023-2025 biennial total: 124
 - 2023 PY: 62
 - 2024 PY: 62
- Number of interns served
 - 2025 PY: 258
 - 2023-2025 biennial total: 442
 - 2023 PY: 218

- 2024 PY: 224

TECHNICAL SKILLS TRAINING GRANT

The Technical Skills Training grant (TSTG) was first developed in 2020 in response to the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This program aims to offset the cost to program providers and employers in their effort to support the development of highly trained skilled workers to meet the demands of our labor market.

TSTG has three tracks, each focused on developing or expanding a highly skilled workforce:

- Track A reflects the initial intent of this grant program and is designed for new and expanding accelerated, non-degree training programs that prepare trainees for new jobs. Applicants in this track are eligible for up to \$200,000.
- Track B is designed for companies wishing to provide internal upskilling opportunities for their existing staff to promote movement and advancement throughout the organization, create more comprehensive onboarding and new worker training programs, or to provide safety training for employees. Applicants in this track may be eligible for up to \$100,000.
- Track C is designed to support workforce automation enhancement including, but not limited to, training and/or upskilling existing employees related to the implementation of automated equipment and technology; or to add new or enhanced automation strategies, not to include the actual purchase of automation equipment. Applicants in this track may be eligible for up to \$200,000 for training and or upskilling existing workers; or up to \$100,000 for a feasibility study to be completed related to automation.
- All tracks require a 1:1 match.

Since its inception, the Technical Skills Training Grant has supported the launch and expansion of programs in health care, energy, transportation and logistics, artificial intelligence, welding, UAS, automation, and more. Last biennium alone, we obligated \$1,791,092 to 37 training programs that are upskilling and reskilling workers across the state. Throughout the lifetime of this grant, we have supported 77 training programs with a total capacity of over 1,800 trainees. It's important to note that most of the

programs we've supported are sustainable and will continue to prepare workers for entrance and movement within the workforce for years to come, thus creating more pathways to employment in our state.

TRIBAL COLLEGE GRANT

The Tribal College Grant (TCG) program was established during the 2013 Legislative Session to provide funding to the five tribally controlled community colleges for workforce training and entrepreneurial assistance. This support is provided through:

- Development of curriculum.
- Purchase of equipment and technology.
- Faculty training.
- Student recruitment.
- Facility renovation to develop, expand, or redesign a program

Since the program started, 1,164 students have participated in training programs supported by this grant, with 298 confirmed job placements.

REGIONAL WORKFORCE IMPACT PROGRAM

In April 2022, we launched the Regional Workforce Impact Program (RWIP), using \$15 million in ARPA funds and received \$12.5 million to sustain this program in the 2023-2025 biennium. The goal of the RWIP is to empower locally led solutions to workforce challenges, recognizing that workforce needs vary by region, so a one-size-fits-all approach is unrealistic and does not adequately address challenges in all parts of the state.

To ensure equitable access to these grant dollars, a portion of funding is reserved for each of the eight planning regions, based on population. Applicants are required to provide a 25% match.

We've seen tremendous success with this program. To date, we have awarded \$27M to 113 projects statewide, with more than \$13M in local match invested. Last biennium, there were 129 applications for the \$12.5M we had available, and we were able to award

48 projects, which ranged from skilled workforce training, career exploration, expansion of career and technical education offerings, talent attraction, childcare, and more. Within childcare alone, we've supported 58 facilities which have used their grants to expand capacity, adding a total of 2,700 new childcare slots statewide. In addition to increasing the number of families they're serving, these childcare centers are also growing their own workforce and have added 278 new workers to date.

The RWIP model has been effective; however, we plan to make changes in this biennium. Our goal with the \$5M we received is to strengthen industry partnerships to ensure we're meeting the greatest workforce needs within each of the eight planning regions.

TALENT ATTRACTION

Find the Good Life in North Dakota (FTGL)

In 2023, Commerce received dedicated funding for the first time to implement a talent attraction strategy. We were appropriated \$12 million to build Find the Good Life (FTGL), a comprehensive talent attraction initiative that utilizes a software system which allows us to collect information from job seekers, connect them with communities that offer the quality of life they're looking for, and employers in their field. Through this system, we are able to track their progress as they explore opportunities in North Dakota until the point at which they accept a job here and call ND home. Although many states have marketing campaigns to attract people, North Dakota is the first state to take this hands-on, innovative approach to help individuals and families actually make the move.

Currently, we have more than 5,912 jobseekers in our pipeline, with 3,300 engaged in the candidate marketplace, where they can connect directly with employers. Although not all jobseekers engage enough to be tracked, we know that individuals and families from all 50 states and 25 countries are considering a move to North Dakota. We're aware of 98 jobseekers who have made the move to ND. This number does not include spouses and children, nor does it include the number of people who relocated to ND without utilizing the relocation help desk services. Our confirmed movers haven't just moved to larger cities, they've also moved to communities like Bottineau, Towner, Cooperstown, Killdeer, Beulah, Hebron, and Park River. They've filled jobs in healthcare,

hospitality, human resources, accounting, IT, education, retail, manufacturing, skilled trades, and much more.

It's important to keep in mind that we don't just measure the impact of these movers by the number of jobs they're filling... holistically, we track growth by total employment and population numbers. We also measure the economic impact of a worker. These new residents are renting or buying homes, they're shopping in our stores, and they're contributing to North Dakota's economy every day. When calculating disposable income, mortgage payment, and income tax, the average mover has an economic impact of ~\$25,000 per year. This number does not take into account the industry they're in, which would drive this dollar amount up in many cases.

Leading a national talent attraction initiative isn't for the faint of heart. We have a lot of eyes and heavy scrutiny on a program that's just getting started, and we face a lot of challenges... many of which are outside of our control. Here are a few of the big ones:

- First: Lack of awareness. It's hard to convince someone they should move to a place they don't know anything about. More than 80% of the jobseekers in our pipeline have never been to North Dakota. Knowing this gives us the opportunity to cater our messaging in a way that helps them learn about what we have to offer.
- Next are high relocation costs. Although desire to move to North Dakota is high, with 64% of our leads stating they'd like to move within 6 months, the ability to do so is limited as it can be very expensive to move across the country. According to a recent Forbes article, the average cost for a cross country move for a single mover is \$4,600, but that can climb up to \$15,000 depending on family size and distance. These numbers are actually lower than what we've heard from many of the movers we've supported through FTGL, with a few stating their relocation costs were more than \$20,000.
 - The other dynamic connected to the financial ability to make a big move is the time it takes. It takes time to find a job, especially if a mover is in a dual income family and a spouse or significant other also needs to secure employment before they can relocate, some movers need to sell a house,

nearly all need to find a new home and potentially daycare, and then they need to coordinate a cross country move. Needless to say, a lot of stars need to align. In fact, the average timeline for the movers we have supported from the time they entered our pipeline to the time they arrived in North Dakota was 241 days last year. Currently, movers are averaging 220 days.

- Employer perceptions and willingness to consider out-of-state candidates has been another challenge. Some employers are leery when they see out-of-state addresses on resumes and question the legitimacy of the applicant. I'm here to tell you that they're serious about ND and they're serious about your companies! North Dakota offers the quality of life that many jobseekers and families are looking for. We have small communities with access to a lot of 'big city' amenities, great schools, safe neighborhoods, and countless opportunities to get out and enjoy the outdoors year-round.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is that we need communities that are prepared to support growth. With limited availability of affordable housing and childcare, a critical need for more healthcare workers, teachers, law enforcement, and skilled trades professionals, we are simply not able to support the kind of growth we need to fill our jobs and grow our economy.

My intention is not to cast a "doom and gloom" outlook, because I really do believe in the work that we're doing and I'm proud of the results we're seeing. No one is going to solve these problems on their own and there is no silver bullet or quick fix. Addressing these issues takes leadership and collaboration from both the public and private sectors at the local and state level. Fortunately, we have carryover authority for funds we were not able to spend last biennium, so we can deploy new strategies to attract and retain workers. There's value in maintaining the pipeline we've established and the candidate marketplace as it helps us understand who is interested in exploring opportunities in ND and it provides a way for us to engage potential movers. We are looking forward to collaborating with communities to facilitate fly-ins for jobseekers that are the most likely to relocate and work alongside industry partners to support their recruitment efforts.

- Job seekers in the pipeline (8/8/2025)

- Total: 4,441
- All 50 states represented
 - Top five states: Florida, California, Texas, Arizona, Minnesota
- Number of countries: 25
- Number of resumes: 1,796
- Top 5 industries: Healthcare, Business Management & Admin, Retail & Food Services, Manufacturing and Skilled Trades
- Candidate Marketplace: 3,318 candidates and 87 employers registered to access candidates directly
- Community champion contacts: 1,506
- New North Dakotans supported through the Relocation Help Desk
 - Total: 98 (excludes partners/children)
 - Where they came from: 29 different states
 - Top 5 States: Arizona, California, Colorado, Minnesota, Texas, Washington
 - Cities they moved to: 19 different communities

It's important to keep in mind that these numbers are small fraction of the number of jobseekers we're impacting through this initiative. Our marketing efforts are reaching new audiences and generating increased awareness about North Dakota.

- Advertising: \$3.6M invested 06/2022-06/2025 netted over 235M impressions.
- Responses: Paid digital generated more than 863K users and paid social generated nearly 282K users.
- Engaged with Help Desk: 5,828 leads
- Entered Candidate Marketplace: 3,219 leads

Not all jobseekers are entering the pipeline, and among those who do, not all are engaging enough to be trackable. We know that according to the US Census, North Dakota ranks #1 in net migration and we're seeing this reflected in our workforce. Labor market information shows that our total employment is growing and was up approximately 2% over last year. This is a continuation of the growth we saw in 2023 and 2022.

TALENT ATTRACTION

Relocation Opportunity for Outstanding Talent (ROOT)

We know that many employers do what they can to help new hires make their way to our state and now we have a new grant program to reduce the burden. The Relocation Opportunity for Outstanding Talent (ROOT) grant offers employers a dollar for dollar match up to \$5,000 per employee, so they can help offset relocation costs for out-of-state workers to move to ND. Relocation assistance can be used for airfare, moving vehicles, securing rental housing, transfer of licensure, exams or other costs related to relocation and requirements to fill the role for which they have been hired. This program launched in March, and we've already awarded \$531,000 to support the relocation of 136 workers.

GLOBAL TALENT OFFICE

The Global Talent Office was created by the 68th Legislative Assembly through SB 2142, and before I tell you what we do, I'm going to tell you what we don't do.

- We do not work directly with foreign-born jobseekers or assist with processing any part of an individual's Visa application or certification. In short, we do not work directly with any immigrants.
- We do not provide immigration or customs enforcement. This is a federal responsibility, and states are federally prohibited from acting in such capacity.
- We do not provide legal consultation.
- We do not certify employer jobs for Visa applications. Only the US Department of Labor can do this.

The Global Talent Office's main objectives:

1. Develop and implement a statewide strategy to support recruitment and retention.
2. Advise and make recommendations to the governor, legislative assembly, and state agencies.
3. Implement a program to support businesses pursuing or employing work-authorized immigrants and supporting communities to develop integration plans and activities. (This is the Global Talent Grant Program that's open right now.)
4. Educate employers on labor mobility and connect them to resources, recruitment pipelines, and best practices.

Once the bill took effect on August 1, 2023, we immediately got to work by posting an RFP to contract a vendor to perform the statewide study required in the bill, we reached out to other states that have similar offices and national organizations to learn best practices, and we were accepted into the competitive Skilled Immigrant Integration Program through World Education Services.

In December 2023, our partners at Dalberg Advisors and Labor Mobility Partnerships (LaMP) started engaging with North Dakota employers, community-based organizations, non-profits that serve immigrant communities, state agencies, colleges and universities, and more to identify the best way for our Office to serve the state. The final report, which shaped our strategies for activating the scope of work that was outlined in SB 2142, was published in May 2024. From there, we started engaging with national and international subject-matter experts to identify recruitment pipelines and programs that may be beneficial for ND employers, in addition to planning the inaugural Global Talent Summit, held last August. That event gave employers and community-based organizations opportunities to learn about visa programs and how to start the process, OPT pathways, recruiting work-authorized immigrants from other parts of the United States, and how to integrate foreign-born workers into their companies and communities. We continued offering learning opportunities throughout the last year, and saw many employers start to formalize recruitment strategies with the recruiters they met through our work in October of last year. Starting in December 2024, foreign-born workers began working in the state using E3 Visas, secondary migration, and OPT pathways.

Whether moving from across the country or the globe... a three-month turnaround is incredibly fast.

Throughout the last nine months, 35 workers have arrived in the state, and are addressing some of our highest workforce needs in healthcare, manufacturing, and hospitality in communities like Ellendale, Garrison, Wahpeton, Mandan, Crosby, Richardton, Harvey, and more. More than 20 employers are currently in the process of recruiting workers through the pipelines that have been identified by our office, with 49 more candidates waiting to be connected with employers.

We have also been administering the Global Talent Grant to support employers and community-based organizations that are either hiring or integrating of foreign-born workers. We've awarded 11 projects so far that support community integration and

cultural education; worksite language access; nonprofit website and material updates and enhancements to increase utilization of available programs and services including job preparedness and connection, English language learning, community navigation, and other integration support such as obtaining driver's licenses, citizenship test preparation, enrolling children in school, etc.

Our team has been proactive in engaging with subject matter experts in immigration law and international hiring, monitoring the federal landscape, evaluating new opportunities that may be beneficial for ND to pursue, while networking with other states to learn more about how they are supporting employers, communities, individuals and families through similar state offices.

Over the last two years, we've learned that what we're doing is a little different than what's happening in most states, where offices were developed in response to humanitarian needs of foreign-born individuals and families. In North Dakota, these needs are met by our partners in the Refugee Resettlement Office within DHHS. Our office was created to be a workforce solution—laser focused on helping employers and communities recruit, retain, and integrate foreign-born workers and their families into North Dakota.

Other states, federal partners, and national media outlets are now coming to us to learn about what we're doing and how we're doing it. From virtual meetings to national television and international publications and conferences, North Dakota is shaping the conversation on immigration as a workforce solution.

AMERICORPS

Our AmeriCorps program awards grants to non-profits, faith-based and community organizations, public agencies, and institutions of higher education for service-based programs throughout the state. Although AmeriCorps is focused on community service and education, our AmeriCorps members are building capacity for schools and non-profit organizations in 68 service locations around the state.

- **Grant Year 2022-2023:**
 - 6 Projects
 - 171 AmeriCorps members
 - Over 90,000 service hours
 - \$554,707 in education assistance awarded (Segal Education Award)
- **Grant Year 2023-2024:**

- 6 Projects
- 157 AmeriCorps members
- Over 90,000 service hours
- \$483,670 in education assistance awarded (Segal Education Award)

This concludes our overview of the workforce development division.

GRANT EFFICIENCY, & TRANSPARENCY

Chair Toman and members of the Task Force on Government Efficiency, I'm Chris Schilken, Commissioner of the North Dakota Department of Commerce.

In this biennium, our agency will administer 22 one-time funding grants, along with the ongoing grants included in our base budget and the carryover authority exemptions for grants from the 2023-25 biennium. Each grant has its own nuances depending on its intent, the audience served, and the deliverables we expect to achieve. We are increasing efficiency in our grants management by leveraging D365 to streamline the entire lifecycle of a grant—from application submission to disbursement and reporting when it makes sense to do so. Automated notifications alert program administrators immediately when new applications are received, reducing delays and manual follow-up. Built-in scoring modules with automatic average calculations also cut down on data entry and ensure greater consistency, allowing staff to devote more time to supporting grantees and advancing program outcomes.

We are improving transparency by centralizing grant information, which will help us reduce subjectivity, ensure fairness, and give both staff and leadership real-time access to application status, scoring, and funding decisions. By fostering openness and accountability, the process builds greater trust among all stakeholders. We are also sharing grant award information through the transparency page on our website.

Together, these changes not only increase efficiency and transparency but also deliver measurable results by reducing administrative burden, improving consistency in evaluations, and creating a more equitable and reliable process for applicants.

COMMERCE GRANT PROGRAM EXAMPLES

A few examples of grant programs for which we have already established or refined the process to enhance efficiency and transparency are:

Destination Development Grants Program

The North Dakota Department of Commerce Tourism and Marketing Division efficiently administered the \$25 million Destination Development Grant program, awarding funds to 14 projects across the state. The program received overwhelming interest, with 81 proposals from 42 communities requesting over \$151.5 million in funding.

Each application was rigorously reviewed and scored based on clear criteria, including:

- The project's potential to attract non-resident visitors
- Alignment with North Dakota's identity and defining themes
- Long-term impact and sustainability
- Feasibility for completion within the 2023–25 biennium

Strategic emphasis was also placed on enhancing winter sports and tribal tourism offerings.

Despite limited funding, the program successfully supported a diverse range of innovative projects—from cultural attractions and outdoor recreation to lodging and event spaces—ensuring geographic and thematic diversity. No applicant received full funding, allowing more projects to move forward. Several projects are completed and attracting new visitors and revenue for the community and the state of North Dakota.

These investments are already making a difference by enhancing quality of life, supporting workforce recruitment, and strengthening North Dakota's tourism economy through the development of unique, place-based experiences.

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG)

In order to achieve compliance and transparency, the Division of Community Services increased efficiency with the federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) review and approval by adding subject matter experts from state agencies. This

eliminated multiple reviews and enabled quicker turnaround for federal approvals. With the minimal amount of funds received, the division also moved to online meetings with one state fund which allowed for eligible communities to receive adequate funds to complete projects.

Innovate ND Program

The North Dakota Department of Commerce administers **Innovate ND**, a voucher-based reimbursement program delivered statewide through four Entrepreneur Centers: the North Dakota Women's Business Center (Bismarck), Jamestown Regional Entrepreneur Center (Jamestown), NDSU Research & Technology Park (Fargo), and UND Center for Innovation (Grand Forks). The program supports entrepreneurs in validating business concepts, conducting customer and market research, and refining business models using expert coaching.

Each application is rigorously reviewed and scored based on clear criteria, including:

- The venture's potential to scale and achieve Primary Sector Certification
- Alignment with North Dakota's entrepreneurial ecosystem and economic development priorities
- Long-term sustainability and growth potential
- Feasibility for completing structured phases within program timelines

Innovate ND offers up to **\$22,500 in reimbursable expenses** across two structured phases—\$7,500 in Phase 1 and \$15,000 in Phase 2—each lasting up to three months. Earlier iterations included four phases with up to \$32,500 in total funding, reflecting the program's evolution to increase accessibility and broaden eligibility beyond strictly technology ventures.

The program has helped launch approximately **70 startups** across the state. Innovate ND strengthens North Dakota's innovation ecosystem by turning early-stage ideas into scalable businesses, diversifying the economy, and equipping entrepreneurs with the tools, funding, and networks needed to succeed. By combining financial support with expert coaching and statewide collaboration, the program continues to fuel innovation and economic growth across the state.

Thank you again for the opportunity to tell you about what our team is doing to enhance efficiency and transparency with our grant programs. I'm happy to answer your questions.