

# Building Bridges

An Employer's Guide  
to Community  
Engagement in Detroit

# Overview

This playbook, powered by LISC Detroit in partnership with regional workforce development and economic development organizations, guides new and prospective employers in Detroit as they establish operations and seek to build lasting connections with the local workforce and community. Too often, businesses arrive in a region focused on immediate hiring needs without the benefit of early, intentional engagement with community-based organizations (CBOs).

The result is missed opportunities, employers struggling to find the talent they need, and residents being left out of pathways to stable, high-quality jobs. This playbook is designed to close that gap. It provides a roadmap for employers to understand the local landscape, connect with trusted partners, and align their hiring and workforce practices with the needs of Detroiters. By doing so, businesses not only strengthen their bottom line but also contribute to a more equitable and sustainable regional economy.

## The Business Case for Engagement

Detroit has a rich and diverse talent pool, but employers often face challenges navigating the city's complex workforce ecosystem. Community organizations are ready and eager to help employers meet hiring and retention goals. Still, they are not always engaged early enough in the process to maximize their impact.

The playbook was created to bridge these worlds, providing clarity, practical steps, and proven approaches that ensure employers can tap into local talent, meet their employment goals, and benefit from incentives tied to community engagement.

## Is this Playbook for You?

While all employers can benefit from stronger community engagement, this model is particularly designed for new and expanding employers entering the Detroit region, especially those bringing a significant number of jobs, requiring specialized training, or seeking to meet community benefit commitments. These employers often work with Detroit Regional Partnership (DRP) during site selection and incentives negotiations and stand to gain the most from early collaboration with Community Based Organizations (CBOs) such as MiSide and SER Metro Detroit (SER). At its core, the playbook offers a model for becoming an “employer of choice” in Detroit: One that is trusted, inclusive, and invested in the success of both its workforce and the community.



## Meet Your Local Partners

This initiative is a collaboration between Detroit Regional Partnership, MiSide, SER, and LISC Detroit. Together, these partners bring expertise in employer attraction, workforce development, and community engagement. They share a commitment to inclusive economic growth and shared prosperity.



The 11-county Detroit region's business attraction and economic development organization, responsible for attracting employers to the region and supporting them throughout their site selection and investment process.



A national community development intermediary with a strong Detroit presence, advancing inclusive economic development and investments that strengthen neighborhoods.



SER is a leading Detroit-based workforce agency connecting residents and employers through in-demand training, career opportunities, comprehensive wraparound supports, and tailored employer services.



MiSide is a nonprofit workforce and human services provider rooted in Detroit neighborhoods, strengthening individual success through job training, career pathways, and wraparound supports that help participants build skills, earn credentials, and access economic opportunities.



*They immediately got us a whole bunch of publicity when we launched and helped us hire. In some other cities, we have struggled more to meet the requirements that we needed. Here, we were able to hire over 500 people in less than five months."*

— Giuseppe Ficarra, Senior VP of Global Sales, Majorel

## How to Leverage CBOs to Maximize Value

At times, employers entering Detroit and the communities where they operate have missed opportunities to realize the full value that community partners offer. Levers that determine success include:



**Engagement timing:** Employers that reach out to workforce partners only after hiring needs become urgent leave little time for training or candidate preparation.



**Role clarity:** Employers may not understand which organizations to engage or assume that one CBO can meet all needs, leading to duplication or missed opportunities.



**Relationship depth:** Partnerships have sometimes been limited to one-time job fairs or referrals, rather than the deeper, transformational relationships that lead to retention, advancement, and community trust.



**Incentive maximization:** Employers unfamiliar with local and state workforce incentives may leave valuable funding on the table that could support training and onboarding.



# Why Should Employers Engage with Communities in the Region?

## The Business Benefits:

### Stronger Bottom Lines Through Smarter Hiring

Community engagement is not just a “good neighbor” activity, it is a proven business strategy. Employers that build partnerships with local community-based organizations (CBOs) save money, reduce turnover, and strengthen their reputation as employers of choice.

CBOs such as MiSide and SER maintain strong pipelines of Detroit jobseekers and can connect employers to candidates faster than national recruiters. By engaging early, businesses can shorten hiring timelines and avoid expensive delays.

Companies that engage visibly with Detroit’s communities build goodwill and strengthen their brand. This is particularly valuable in competitive industries where reputation and word-of-mouth matter for both customer loyalty and employee attraction.



Employees hired through trusted community partners often demonstrate higher retention, because CBOs prepare workers with job-readiness training and provide wraparound supports such as childcare, transportation assistance, and coaching.

Employers that collaborate with CBOs can influence the design of training programs to match their specific skills requirements, reducing the learning curve once employees are hired.



*We wouldn't have been able to develop this partnership in Detroit without the support of the Detroit Regional Partnership and Detroit at Work and the MEDC. We're so grateful for how they've helped us really enter the community thoughtfully and mindfully."*

— Heidi Craun, Head of Customer Experience, ClearCover

## The Community Benefits: Shared Prosperity and Stronger Neighborhoods

For communities, employer engagement means more than jobs, it means opportunity. When businesses connect with local partners, they:

- ✔ **Expand access to stable employment:** CBOs help match Detroiters, including those historically excluded from opportunity, with quality jobs that offer living wages and pathways for advancement.
- ✔ **Strengthen families and neighborhoods:** Employment leads to economic stability, which supports housing, education, and local business growth.
- ✔ **Build trust and credibility:** Employers who show up consistently and transparently in the community build trust, which translates into stronger recruitment pipelines and a more loyal workforce.

When employers partner with CBOs in transformational, not transactional, relationships, they contribute to a stronger local economy while cultivating a motivated, reliable workforce that feels invested in the company's success.

## Backed by Research: Why It Works

Research nationally and locally reinforces the value of employer-community engagement:

- A 2023 Opportunity@Work research study found that employers who adopt skills-based hiring (rather than degree-based) gain access to a high volume of qualified candidates known as STARS, workers who have Skills Through Alternative Routes. Detroit has one of the highest populations of STARS in the country.
- Studies consistently show that wraparound supports (childcare, transportation, coaching) significantly increase employee retention rates, helping employers save on costly turnover.
- Detroit case studies (e.g., SER's long-standing training-to-placement programs, MiSide's neighborhood-based supports and continual small business engagement) highlight how community partnerships create long-term pipelines for industries ranging from manufacturing to customer service.

The evidence is clear: engagement works because it reduces barriers for workers and costs for employers.



## Incentives and Funding: Resources You Don't Want to Miss

Engaging with community partners also unlocks access to valuable incentives and funding streams:

- **On-the-Job Training (OJT) Funds:** Available through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), these can reimburse employers for training new hires.
- **Michigan New Jobs Training Program:** Allows employers to offset training costs through tax capture in partnership with community colleges.
- **Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC):** Provides federal tax credits for hiring individuals from target groups.
- **Federal Bonding Program:** Offers free bonds to reduce risk in hiring candidates who may face barriers.
- **Local incentives:** Detroit often layers additional workforce or community benefit incentives into economic development packages, meaning employers who engage early are more competitive in accessing these dollars.

By working with CBOs, employers gain access to guidance on which programs are available and how to braid these resources effectively.



## Unlocking Community Talent: Meeting Qualified Workers Where They Are

Employers increasingly recognize that a community-focused approach is not optional, it is essential to attracting and retaining top talent. Community engagement directly supports the bottom line by:

- **Broadening talent pipelines:** Partnering with CBOs ensures employers reach Detroiters from all backgrounds and neighborhoods.
- **Fostering cultural competence:** CBOs help employers understand community context and adapt workplace practices to be more inclusive.
- **Meeting formal community benefit obligations:** More grants, incentives, and contracts now require documented community benefits. Engaging with partners early ensures compliance and strengthens competitiveness for future opportunities.

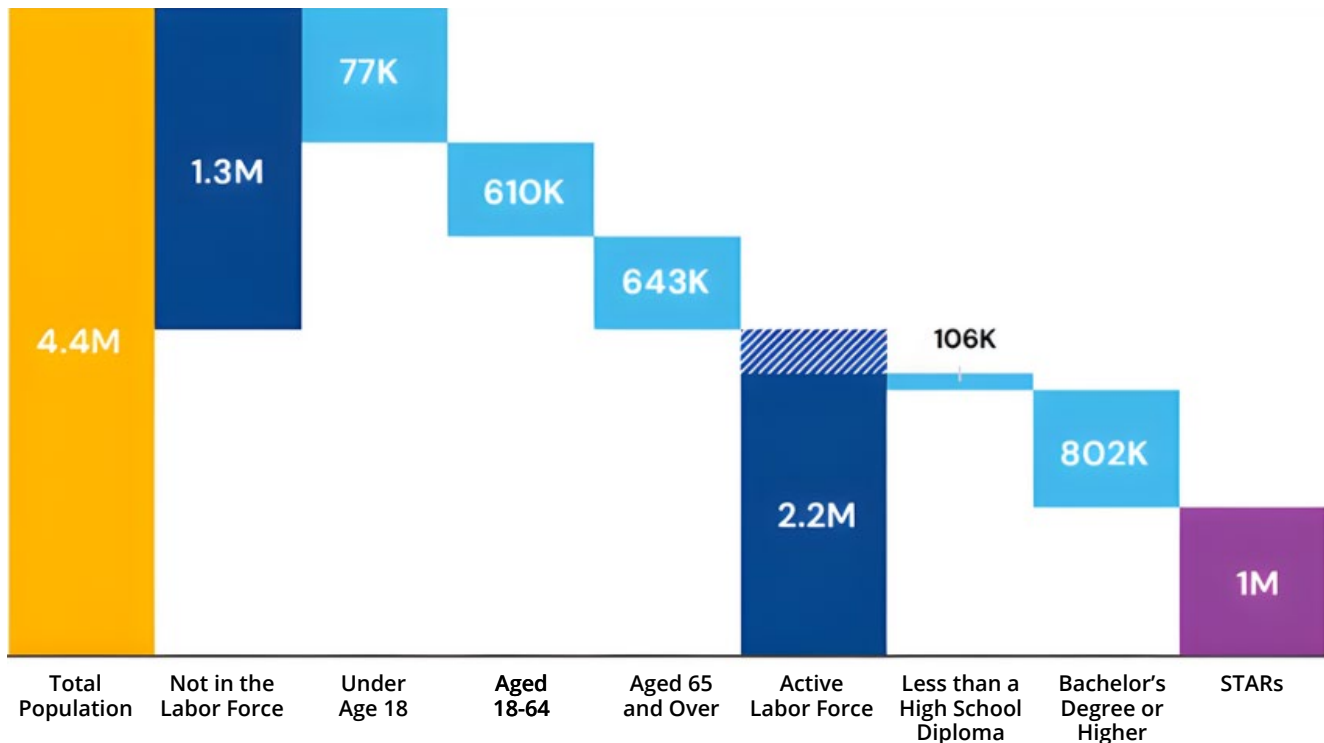
Through engagement with CBOs, employers will have access to Detroit's large and diverse talent pool.

# The Detroit Workforce: Untapped Talent, Proven Resilience

Detroit offers one of the most diverse, resilient, and adaptable workforces in the country. Its strengths include:

- **A large population of STARs (Skills Through Alternative Routes):** Workers with strong skills gained through community college, military service, on-the-job learning, or training programs, but without four-year degrees (see figure below).
- **Multilingual and multicultural talent pools:** Detroit's immigrant and refugee communities provide language skills and global perspectives that are assets in many industries.
- **Industry experience:** Detroiters have deep experience in manufacturing, logistics, customer service, healthcare, and skilled trades, industries critical to the region's economy.
- **Community networks:** With strong neighborhood ties and support systems, Detroit's workforce brings not only skills but also resilience and commitment.

Employers who engage with these strengths tap into a pipeline of motivated workers who are eager to contribute to business success.



Source: Opportunity@Work analysis of American Community Survey 2024 1 year sample

## Key Takeaway

Engagement is not a burden, it's a business advantage. Employers who connect with Detroit's communities early and consistently gain access to incentives, achieve employment goals, reduce costs, and build a reputation as trusted partners.

At the same time, Detroiters gain access to quality jobs and career pathways. The result is shared prosperity through strong businesses, thriving workers, and vibrant neighborhoods.

# How Employers Can Engage Effectively

## Your Engagement Checklist

Think of community engagement as a process, not a one-time event. Employers can follow these core steps to set themselves up for success:

- Start Early:** Engage with Detroit Regional Partnership (DRP) and community-based organizations (CBOs) as soon as you begin exploring incentives or site selection.
- Clarify Needs:** Share projected hiring numbers, timelines, and skill requirements. The earlier this information is provided, the more time partners have to prepare talent pipelines.  
Nondisclosure Agreements can protect employer identity when needed.
- Build the Right Team:** Identify which partners (SER, MiSide, LISC Detroit, Michigan Works! (American Job Centers) should be at the table for your specific industry and workforce needs.
- Leverage Supports:** Work with CBOs to design training, prepare candidates, and access wraparound services (transportation, childcare, uniforms, coaching).
- Commit to Partnership:** Move beyond job fairs, engage consistently, provide feedback, and plan for long-term talent development and retention.

## What Effective Partnerships Look Like

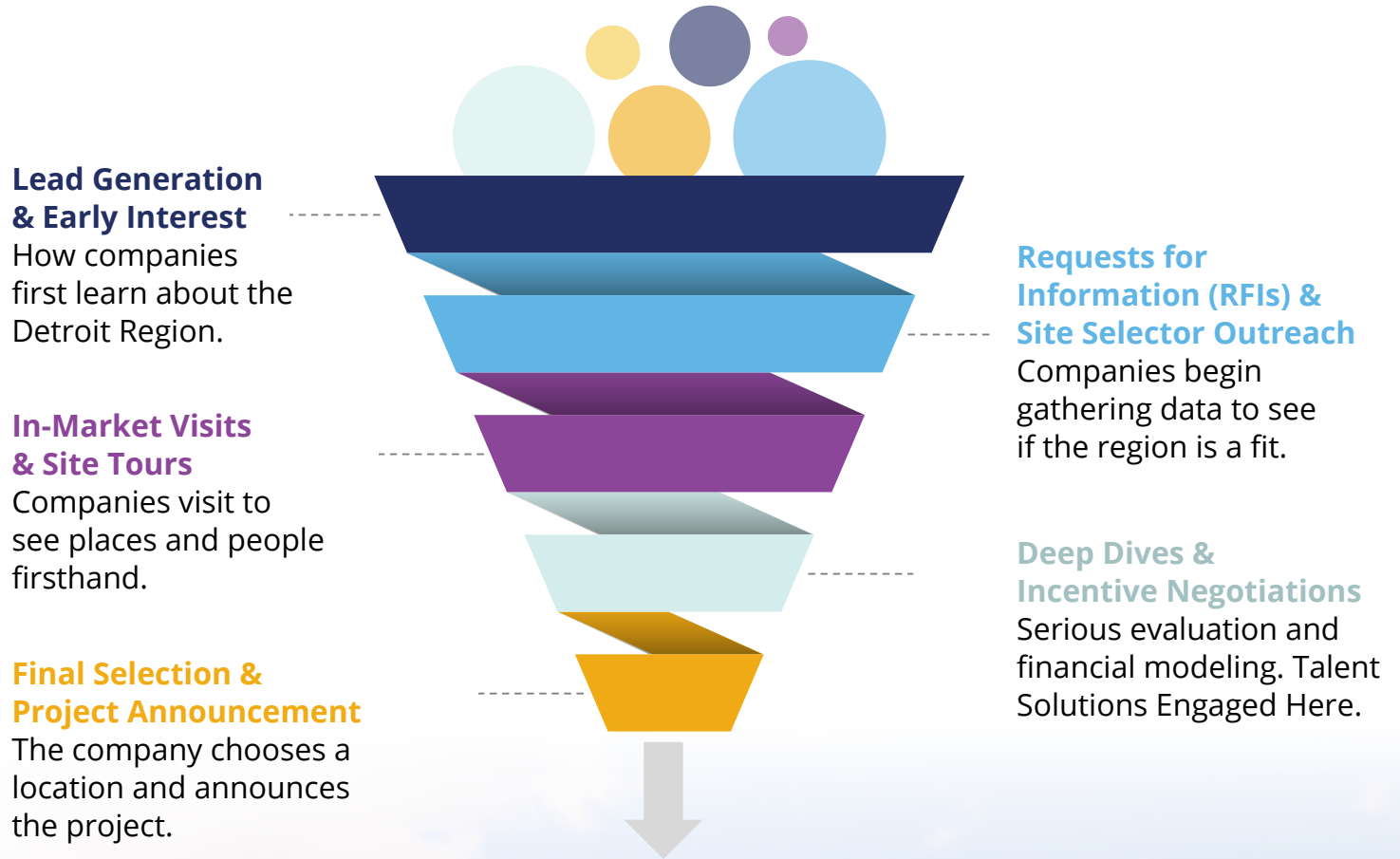
An effective partnership with a CBO is transformational, not transactional. Employers should expect:

- **Two-way communication:** CBOs need clear job descriptions, skill requirements, and timelines to prepare candidates effectively.
- **Flexibility:** Employers who adapt training models or adjust timelines see stronger results.
- **Ongoing feedback:** Regular check-ins with partners ensure that both sides can adjust as hiring and business needs evolve.
- **Shared success:** When employers invest in retention supports and career advancement, employees stay longer and communities thrive.

# The Business Attraction Funnel

The funnel chart shows the typical journey an employer takes when deciding where to invest or build a new facility. Each stage represents a deeper level of engagement and a smaller number of companies still active in the process, much like a sales funnel.

During this process, employers have the option to sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement, or to have the name of the company withheld until disclosure has been made. These options allow employers to begin their partnership with community-based organizations earlier than later. This can speed up the hiring process once the project is announced.



## Timelines & Scenarios for Engaging Talent Solutions

Different employers arrive with different requirements.

CBOs can customize solutions based on employer timelines and needs.

2-6 Months	6-12 Months	12+ Months
<b>FAST-TRACK</b>	<b>MEDIUM-TERM</b>	<b>LONG-TERM</b>
<b>Goal:</b> Fill jobs ASAP	<b>Goal:</b> Train-to-hire	<b>Goal:</b> Build talent pipelines
Employers with urgent needs can leverage job-ready candidates at hiring events and job fairs from SER and MiSide, plus supports like workplace literacy and career readiness.	Allows time to design customized training programs with CBO partners and community colleges. Examples include upskilling, apprentice programs, and adult education.	The ideal scenario, partners can co-create talent pipelines, take advantage of incentives, and build career ladders for advancement.

## Services from Key Partners

Employers don't have to navigate alone. Here's a quick overview of what each partner can provide:

- **Detroit Regional Partnership (DRP)**: Incentive guidance, site selection support, introductions to and coordination with workforce partners.
- **SER**: Job placement, job fairs, training programs, wraparound supports (childcare, transportation), work-based learning and transitional work experience.
- **MiSide**: Neighborhood-based connections, career coaching, skills training, supportive services for jobseekers, work-based learning and transitional work experience.
- **LISC Detroit**: Access to community networks, employer reputation building, and connections to neighborhood initiatives.
- **Detroit Economic Growth Corporation**: Business development including attraction and retention, with a focus on three sectors: automobility and advanced manufacturing, clean energy and sustainability, and research, engineering and design.

There is no wrong door – any of these organizations can help you with referrals to other partners.

### Key Takeaway

#### Detroit's CBOs:

- Facilitate connections to workforce programs
- Act as your access point and guide for workforce needs
- Provide expert market insights on how to attract talent

#### Employers succeed in Detroit when they:

- Engage early
- Communicate clearly
- Commit to long-term partnerships
- Use the full range of services and incentives available

# Contact A Community-Based Economic Development Partner Today!



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