



March 31, 2025

Re: Letter of Support for HF2390 and the Steele County Workforce Development Office

Dear Chair Baker, Chair Pinto and Members of the Minnesota House Workforce, Labor, and Economic Development Finance and Policy Committee,

On behalf of our collective businesses and organizations, we are writing in support of HF2390 (Representative Sexton). HF2390 would make a crucial investment in Steele County's future through the appropriations of fundings for the Workforce Development office in Steele County. Previous to this funding being enacted in a prior budget, Owatonna and Steele County did not have a workforce development office and had to drive to Rice County for services. With a population of over 26,000 people, Owatonna was one of the largest cities in the state outside the great metro area that did not have a local workforce center.

As employers, access to a local, well-trained workforce is crucial to our success. Recently, there has been a need for increased onboarding and support for entry level workers which has increased costs for businesses. The workforce development office, and its staff are key in supporting our communities' job seekers and helping employers by connecting these job seekers to trainings in the career pathways that employers are seeking to fill.

Without HF2390, the Steele County workforce development office may be forced to close and return to serving Steele County residents out of their surrounding county offices. We know that the state's financial forecast will require difficult choices for you this year and we thank you for your work. For Steele County, we believe that investing in our local workforce development office has an excellent return on investment for our state and our business community. **We ask you to please support HF2390.**

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anne Winfrey". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent.

Anne Winfrey



Anne Winfrey

Director, People Operations

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STEELE COUNTY

FY23-24



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Workforce

DEVELOPMENT, INC.

The Workforce Development Board
of Southeast Minnesota

300+

Universal adult customers
served in Steele county.

400+

Employer outreach contacts
in Steele county.

300+

Youth customers
served in Steele county.

Meet with a Personal Career Planner Today!

Our professional Career Planners are ready to help job seekers on their employment path with support, training, and special programs designed to ensure success. Every WDI location is staffed by experienced professionals who care deeply about the people and communities in which they live and serve.

JOB SEEKER SERVICES

Many of our job seekers would like to explore the possibility of new, more satisfying work. Landing their dream job may take some specialized training, job search assistance, interview practice, or career preparation. WDI can help job seekers with any of these services and so much more. Job seekers are able to set up a totally **FREE**, one-on-one meeting with a Career Planner to figure out their goals and the steps they need to take to reach them. Our offices all across Southeast MN make it easy to find help nearby.



SUCCESS STORIES: Welding Cohort

WDI's June 2023 welding class showcased the power of education and training to create change. Each participant's journey highlights how skill development opens doors to new opportunities. By providing accessible training, WDI has transformed lives and strengthened the community—proving that with support and determination, success is within reach. *Read more below.*

Empowering a Young Person

A young female participant who grew up in foster care never graduated from high school and struggled to envision a brighter future. The welding program provided her with essential skills and, more importantly, the confidence she needed to take the next step in her education. After completing the course, she enrolled in a local Adult Basic Education program to earn her GED. This past spring, she proudly graduated with a phlebotomy degree from South Central, illustrating how a single opportunity can lead to a transformative path.

A New Beginning

Another participant faced the harsh reality of homelessness, living in his car and unable to find work due to a lack of skills. The welding class changed everything for him. With his newfound certification, he secured a job at a steel company. His hard work paid off, leading to a promotion and the ability to move into an apartment. His journey highlights the impact of education on breaking the cycle of homelessness.

Supporting a Family

Another participant was struggling with underemployment, unable to provide adequately for his family. He dedicated a week of vacation to attend the welding class, and upon completion, he landed a job that offered a wage high enough to support his family comfortably. This change has significantly improved their quality of life and stability.

Rebuilding After Incarceration

One participant had recently been released from incarceration and faced significant barriers in finding employment. The welding training equipped him with the skills necessary to secure a position with a manufacturing company in Owatonna. Not only has he successfully adhered to his probation requirements, but he has also embraced this opportunity for a fresh start, demonstrating the importance of second chances.

STEELECOWORKS

Workforce Development, Inc. (WDI) partners with **United Way of Steele County** and **Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce** to fund a youth career planner and outreach individual serving all Steele County high schools. This position meets with students and business to and provide career, training and educational guidance to students. The students also have the opportunity to enroll in WDI programs that provide paid work experiences, support and training to students and eliminate barriers to a career path. **SteeleCoWorks** organizes Made in Owatonna Days, providing a unique opportunity for students to explore careers in manufacturing, human services and business by touring various businesses and organizations and getting a chance to engage with professionals in the industry. Over 200 students from four different high schools attended this event every year.

DISLOCATED WORKER

Losing a job, especially through no fault of one's own, is one of the most frustrating and stressful events someone can live through. WDI is here to help anyone across Southeast Minnesota who wants assistance. Job seekers can take advantage of our completely free, individualized services and resources so that they can get back to meaningful, living-wage employment.

Success Story:

- *An individual who lost her job due to no fault of her own was looking for assistance with her employment transition and job search. The planner worked with her to make sure her resume was relevant to the positions she would be applying for. They also discussed the possibility of training and other resources. Less than six months after being dislocated, the individual accepted a hybrid position as a general accountant.*

YOUTH PROGRAMS

Making it through school, building a work history, and moving towards a career is stressful for anyone, however, job seekers can count on WDI for reliable support and guidance through all these difficult stages. They can chat one-on-one with a Career Planner to help figure out their goals, and take advantage of our many individualized and completely **FREE** services to achieve them.

INCUMBENT WORKER (STAFF) TRAINING

Twenty-two (22) incumbent workers at local Steele County businesses have undergone training to help them advance in their careers. These organizations come from a variety of sectors including manufacturing, nonprofit, and private industry. Each training approved is specific to helping the employees grow in their careers and move up in their organizations.

CAREER PATHWAYS

Career Pathways are WDI programs geared to help job seekers launch a new career in one of Southeast Minnesota's many key industries. Valuable Career Pathway programming is currently available in healthcare, manufacturing, customer service, business services and union trades. Job seekers can begin a Career Pathway conversation with one of our Career Navigators to receive individualized support along the way to sustainable, living-wage work.

BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT & OUTREACH

We are continuing to make connections with various employers in the community by partnering on initiatives such as **Made in Owatonna Day** and being active **Chamber** members. Through our community and business engagement efforts, we have made over **400** connections in Steele County and this number continues to grow. We utilize our partners to help us identify their employees' needs so we can provide the most relevant training and educational opportunities to our participants and thus, a quality applicant for the employer.



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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim Kingsley".

Jim Kingsley
Senior Vice President of Operations