

# KEEPING A STRONG ECONOMY GROWING

## COUNTY FOCUSES on WORKFORCE QUALITY by BUILDING a WORK READY COMMUNITY

For Mississippi County, Arkansas, becoming an ACT® Work Ready Community was about making a good situation even better.

Mississippi County's economy is powered largely by manufacturing and health care, and business is good. Highly skilled workers abound, and the steel industry in particular has created a large employer base. The average income for workers with a two-year degree is around \$44,000—the highest in any Arkansas county.

But the region's economy has faced big challenges, including impacts on local manufacturers and competition from overseas steel companies. Challenges bring opportunities, and county leaders wanted to prepare its workforce for the long term by:

- Helping citizens gain and build on valuable work skills
- Providing a standardized measure of employee readiness for industries and educators

Using economic development funding from the Delta Regional Authority and the East Arkansas Planning and Development District, Mississippi County leaders launched an initiative to become an ACT Work Ready Community (WRC), along with four surrounding counties.

“Our employment rates were already on an upswing, but there was a need to enhance the skills of our existing workforce, validate the skills of our emerging workforce, and create regional value for credential attainments,” said Sherri Bennett, Vice President for College Readiness at Arkansas Northeastern College (ANC), who helped implement the initiative.

ACT Work Ready Communities help states, regions, and counties drive economic growth through the attainment of the ACT WorkKeys® National Career Readiness Certificate® (NCRC®), a portable skills credential recognized by employers across the country. An NCRC is earned by achieving qualifying scores on three WorkKeys Assessments: Applied Math, Graphic Literacy, and Workplace Documents.

## The Process

The county-wide effort was led by Gene Bennett, Vice President for Workforce Development at Arkansas Northeastern College. Gene attended ACT Work Ready Community Academies and formed a steering committee led by local industry, workforce and economic development, and education leaders.

Employer buy-in is key for community support. To push the initiative, ANC used its industrial training department to disseminate information and sign up employers at training meetings.

**“Our tactic was not looking just for big employers but for small businesses and sole proprietors, as well,”** Gene Bennett said.

The group also gained support from educators to reach emerging workers at local high schools and colleges. ANC staff presented to superintendents, principals, career and technical education faculty, and career coaches who advise students on the value of credentials and how to earn them. The Arkansas Department of Workforce Services helped collect data and monitor progress toward goals needed to obtain certified ACT Work Ready Community status.

## Challenges

Mississippi County covers a large geographic region and has two cities, at opposite ends, with a large industrial presence. Regional leaders viewed becoming an ACT Work Ready Community as a way to bring both ends of the county together to improve the local workforce.

**THE KEY:** recruiting co-chairs from industries at each end of the county.

**“The co-chairs needed to lead the conversations, to identify common challenges, and to introduce ACT solutions to improve their current and future workforce,”** said Sherri Bennett.

Each of these co-chairs presented the initiative to local civic groups and chambers of commerce to gain support from employers.

## Results

Mississippi County became Arkansas’ first certified ACT Work Ready Community in May 2017.

- 67 regional employers recognize or recommend the NCRC in hiring and selection.
  - **Example:** Big River Steel moved to Osceola as the county’s WRC initiative took hold. The company used the NCRC in selection criteria to expedite hiring, filling 500 positions from 5,000 applications received nationwide. Applicants who had earned an NCRC were put on a fast track to interviews. Since opening, the company has reported a markedly low turnover rate.
- More than 1,200 NCRCs have been awarded to the emerging, current, and transitional workforce.
- The WRC effort has opened a dialogue on the best ways to identify and boost crucial work skills among employers and educators.
- Awareness of the credential’s value has increased at high schools and colleges.
- Additional employers are either recommending or requiring the NCRC in hiring.
- Governor Asa Hutchinson visited Arkansas Northeastern College in January 2018 to commend the county on its achievement.

**“Mississippi County is one of the leading steel-producing counties in the nation,”** Gov. Hutchinson said. **“Whether I go to China, Europe, Mexico, or Japan, I talk about what is taking place here in this county. It is exciting for me as governor to market what is going on here.”**

**“The ACT Work Ready Community is a common instrument to help both employers and job seekers. It helps individuals enhance their basic skills and gives them a third-party credential that they can use anywhere. It helps employers hire the right people into positions, which increases productivity and decreases turnover—two of their biggest cost factors.”**

**—Gene Bennett, Vice President for  
Workforce Development,  
Arkansas Northeastern College**