A sense of place.

A strength of purpose.

A spirit of partnership.

SOAR
Shaping Our Appalachian Region

2016 Impact Report

A sense of place.

The people of our region love this land and are loyal to their communities. It sets us apart from many other areas of the country, where a house is merely an address, not a home or identity. Because of that sense of place, we are more deeply tied to our communities and more invested in their success.

A strength of purpose.

Economic difficulties but also the opportunities of the future give us a new strength of purpose – one that focuses on what can be rather than what has been.

We are bound to this land but no longer bound by this land. We are erasing boundaries and overcoming barriers. Technology opens up a global marketplace of goods and ideas for our entrepreneurs, artisans, students and patients.

A spirit of partnership.

That's why SOAR has convened and is serving as a conduit to so many people and organizations who are determined to remake our story. We are connecting strategies, resources and connections to create a multiplier effect – on jobs, ideas and investments.

The goal is simple yet profound: Achieve one of the greatest rural economic rebounds in the nation's history.

The tasks at hand are challenging yet promising. Please take a few minutes to review the highlights of what we have accomplished as partners for the region. Together, we are working to RETRAIN workers, REGAIN employment, RENEW communities. Together, we can and will transform a region.

Jared Arnett
Executive Director
SOAR

Greetings

As Kentuckians, we know the value of hard work. We also understand that our efforts are more successful when they are accomplished together.

SOAR is harnessing those two attributes to help propel the region toward a healthy and sustainable economic future. The level of collaboration is unprecedented – public and private; local, state and federal. These partnerships are overcoming obstacles and maximizing strengths. As a result, new jobs are being created, businesses are expanding, long-time tourism dreams like the Appalachian Wildlife Center are coming to life, and the hope of a brighter future is anchored deep in our soil.

The resilient people of Eastern Kentucky have taken bold strides to begin reviving and re-imagining their hometowns. Together, we have initiated a successful strategy to diversify and transform the region through workforce development, expanded entrepreneurship, regional collaboration and new high tech opportunities, as detailed in this annual report.

SOAR is a critical think-tank for this time in our history and has proven to be an organization of visionary action.

We're proud to show the country and the world that Kentuckians always persevere during challenging times, and we look forward to seeing how that action will spur us into the future.

United, we SOAR.

Gov. Matt Bevin

U.S. Representative
Harold "Hal" Rogers

Blueprint Created for Building Jobs, Capacity and Health

The goal of employing more than 30,000 people starts with one – one plan of action and collaboration to spur our region's economy.

That's why the SOAR Executive Board approved a regional blueprint for economic growth and diversity.

The SOAR Regional Blueprint will coordinate a strategic, action-packed and systematic approach across federal, state and local levels to shape the future of Kentucky's Appalachian region.

SOAR has solid information on what needs to be done to overcome the economic challenges, thanks to the input of so many community members during listening sessions held across our 54 Appalachian counties.

The plan was built in the region, by the region and for the region. It is an accumulation of ideas drawn from all that Eastern Kentuckians know from living, working and raising a family in Appalachia and combined with the analysis of local experts to determine a path forward.

Each section of the blueprint includes strategies/solutions, opportunities for collaboration and ideas on strategic partners who can help achieve this success.

Many people are already working on these goals, but more help is needed. To read the SOAR Regional Blueprint – and most importantly – to be a partner in building our new economy, visit http://soar-ky.org/blueprint.
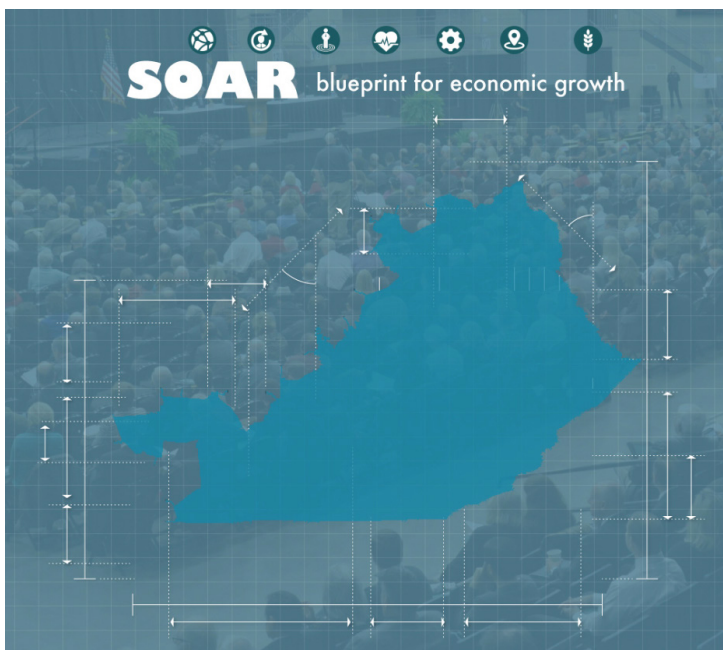
The blueprint focuses on seven overarching goals to spur economic development:

• Increase access to affordable high-speed broadband;

• Develop a 21st century work force;

• Create and expand entrepreneurship/small businesses by leveraging the digital economy;

• Reduce health disparities—specifically the physical and economic impact of obesity, diabetes and substance abuse;

• Increase industrial business and employment;

• Create a local foods movement; and

• Establish Kentucky's Appalachian region as a tourism destination.

ARC Roundtable
Lexington Forum
ADD Boards
Commerce Lexington
KAED Conference
One Harlan County
Patton Leadership Institute
Maysville Rotary Club
Joint Legislative Committee testimony
KWIB Board

SOAR blueprint for economic growth

Innovators

Innovators showcased

141

Solutions

from our Appalachian region

◉ Summit Connects Over 1,100 Innovators

The 2016 SOAR Innovation Summit connected the innovators leading action in their community with people who could help them.

With hundreds of innovators, federal partners, community leaders and individuals with ideas together in one place, everyone had the opportunity to find people who could support them.

For example, health discussion participants ranged from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention former director Dr. Tom Frieden to officials from Pikeville Medical Center to local grocery store owners.

With both hard-copy commitment cards available at the Summit and a commitment card available through the Summit mobile app, people were able to take what they learned and focus it into action-oriented solutions.

SOAR innovation SUMMIT 2016 — RECAP

1,100+ Attendees

(every ⦿ = **22** people)
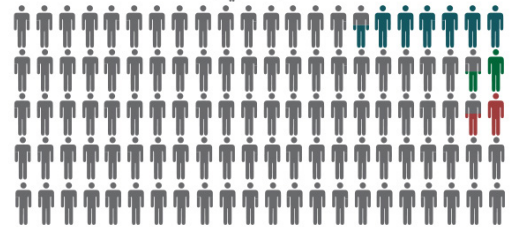
141 innovators   **35** media attendees   **34** volunteers

43 representing Counties

◉ Website Gets Homegrown Makeover

Because the exchange of information and ideas can take place so effectively through technology, SOAR upgraded and redesigned its website. The site makes it easier to find updates and resources. It also places greater emphasis on multi-media – offering visitors more video and graphics.

Best of all, displaced coal miners did the coding and design. Bit Source, which is featured on page 7, created the new and improved site. Stay tuned for additional technology advances created by Bit Source.

SOAR will be launching the region's very own networking platform, so entrepreneurs, community leaders, educators and students will be able to connect without leaving their home or office #coaltocode.

It's just another way that SOAR is breaking down barriers and utilizing the skills right here in Eastern Kentucky to do it.
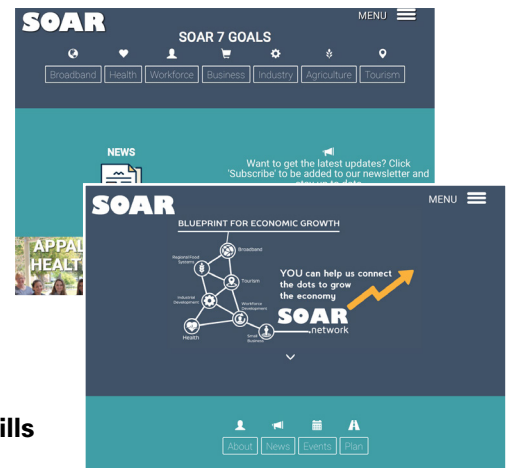
⬤ First MIT Health Hack-a-thon Held in Appalachia to Create Innovative Solutions to Challenges in SOAR Region

19 TEAMS AND 38 MENTORS

14/19 Teams utilized technology

The mentors included:

3 Designers
8 Business people
2 Web Developers/IT
9 Scientists
10 Clinicians

Partcipant age range: **13-55+**

Hacking can be a good thing -- not the kind that breaches computer systems but the challenge-solving technique used by the technology industry and companies like Google.

That's what the first-ever Appalachia Health Hack-a-thon achieved when it was held in October at the Center for Rural Development in Somerset, KY.

A team from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) partnered with SOAR to facilitate the hack-a-thon, which convened 160 people with different backgrounds to form teams, collaborate within a limited time frame and focus on a specific problem to create innovative, disruptive solutions for healthcare's biggest challenges.

Nineteen teams, including six student teams, identified opportunities for improved health and job creation. The impact will last well into the future by serving as a model for problem-solving throughout the Commonwealth.

ODX Naloxone delivery, which won second place in the substance abuse category, is working to create an app to connect providers and volunteers to people who are experiencing a drug overdose. At the time of a suspected

overdose, an alert would be sent out to the nearest responders who then would indicate that they would respond. It would be similar to Uber for Naloxone.

"Bit Source participated in the SOAR/MIT Health Hack-a-thon and developed a solution for a rapid response naloxone delivery system for people experiencing an overdose," said Payton May, creative director for Bit Source and a member of the ODX team. "We went on to compete in the Naloxone App Competition held by the FDA and afterward continued development on our product. We're currently expanding features and plan to deploy and beta test the application. We are thankful for the opportunities SOAR provided to spur innovation to problems in our region and attempt to solve them from within."

Pikeville, Paintsville and Letcher County students participated in the event virtually. They worked with their teachers, Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative staff, local subject matter experts and software developers from Pivotal, a technology company based in New York. Many of the students came to school during their fall break and even missed Homecoming festivities.

Simple Health 555, a student group from Pikeville, won first place in the obesity category with the idea of creating a 5-5-5 app. It would encourage participants to live healthier lifestyles by drinking five glasses of water per day, eat five servings of fruits and vegetables, and walk for five minutes five times per day. The team researched how much time it takes to develop a habit and they have put this into the design of the application. The idea is that once someone has gone through the whole process they will develop healthy habits. They placed fifth in the Samsung App contest "Solving for Tomorrow" and are looking for sponsors to continue development.

Hack-a-thon sponsors were Community Trust Bank, Passport Health Plan, Lindsey Wilson College, Lake Cumberland Regional Hospital, Wellcare, Pikeville Medical Center, the University of Pikeville College of Osteopathic Medicine/A-Optic, Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky and Ugly Mugz Coffee.

[REPRESENTING]

176 PARTICIPANTS
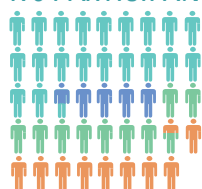
38 Mentors
81 Professionals
19 Higher Ed Students
38 High School Students
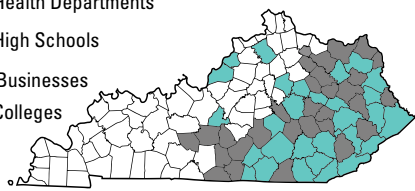Each 👤 represents 3 people

24 SOAR Counties
4 Additional KY Counties
& 4 Appalachian States

11 Hospitals
4 Health Departments
5 High Schools
9 Businesses
6 Colleges

represented at the Hack-a-thon
SOAR county not represented

Health Movement Attracts National Resources, Benefits Local Efforts

SOAR Healthy Communities in Action

- The Substance Abuse Roundtable — drew over 100 people to Natural Bridge State Park to present research, problems and solutions to the region's substance abuse epidemic. This event brought awareness to emerging issues and fostered deeper connections and partnerships that would expand access and treatment for substance abuse and it's consequences.

- The Hepatitis C Town Hall — a follow up event to the Substance Abuse Roundtable was held in collaboration with the Kentucky Department for Public Health. The Town Hall convened federal, state and local experts and stakeholders to provide information and education on the risks of substance abuse, ways to combat the associated threat of communicable disease and link harm reduction efforts with treatment options.

- The SOAR Innovation 5K — over 200 people participated in the first ever SOAR 5K to kick off the 3rd annual SOAR Summit and put healthy lifestyle recommendations into action.

- The Appalachia Health Hackathon — to continue focus on action oriented solutions, SOAR founded the first ever Health Hackathon held in partnership with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Hacking Medicine Team. Participants were encouraged to utilized broadband and technology to create solutions to challenges in healthcare.

Developing healthy families, communities and employees is one of the foundations of SOAR's work. And it has attracted national resources and cultivated local efforts.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) former director Dr. Tom Frieden has participated in listening tours in the region as well as the SOAR Innovation Summit. The CDC also has dedicated two full-time employees to serving on the ground in Eastern Kentucky, along with other staff support in its Atlanta office.

In coordination with local leadership, SOAR has created the Healthy Communities initiative, which is focused on maximizing collaboration and education to reduce the physical and economic impact of obesity, diabetes and substance abuse. The Community Health Action Team (CHAT) is working to help create sustainable economic infrastructure and healthy communities.

media media media

WFPL Louisville | New York Times | Bloomberg | Reuters | Lexington Herald-Leader | KET | Regional newspapers | WYMT | The (Louisville) Courier-Journal | The Lane Report | East Kentucky Broadcasting

◉ Company's Story Making Headlines Around the Globe

They never imagined that they would make headlines and be featured in The New York Times, Fortune, NPR, CNN, Bloomberg and Reuters.

But even more importantly, these former coal miners probably never dreamed they'd be computer coders and web developers in an old Coca-Cola bottling plant in Pikeville for a company called Bit Source.

It's an Eastern Kentucky story. It's a SOAR story.

Bit Source, a technology company started in 2014 by Rusty Justice and Lynn Parrish, was born as a result of ideas created through the SOAR process: Why not teach former coal-industry employees how to write computer code and develop websites?

"We told them, 'Quit thinking of yourselves as unemployed coal workers; you're technology workers,'" Justice told The New York Times. He called his pep talks "re-imagination training."

And it worked. Almost 900 people applied for the company's 10 training slots. These 10 applicants participated in a 22-week training program, administered through EKCEP and funded by a Department of Labor grant. They learned computer languages such HTML and JavaScript.

Today, clients range from local small businesses to SOAR, and Bit Source landed its first Fortune 500 client in 2016.

Bit Source has a complete team of programmers, architects, designers, testers, managers and support technicians. The company's slogan "A New Day, New Way" signifies the intention of re-purposing the great qualities of the local workforce by adopting technology, specifically software development.

The latest headline is a powerful one: **Bit Source was named to Fortune's list of 7 World-Changing Companies to Watch**. But it's not the last. The company is helping SOAR with a social network specifically for Eastern Kentucky that will launch later this year.

◉ Study Assesses Work Force Capabilities to Attract Outside Investment

Eastern Kentucky now can quantify the skills and assets of the region's workforce as a result of a newly completed study.

The East Kentucky Works Survey, which focused on cataloging the capabilities of the region's workforce, was developed after surveying thousands of job-seekers and employers.

The goal was to establish how prepared the region's workforce is to begin working in various industries and occupations, so that knowledge can be leveraged to attract outside investment.

Among the report's findings:

- The coal industry workforce possesses an array of skills that will transfer well to other industries, including transportation equipment manufacturing, metal, plastics and wood;
- The workforce has a very strong work ethic, is loyal to its employers and offers broad skill sets;
- It has limited credentials to demonstrate those skills to employers but is willing to pursue additional skills training if it will enhance their job opportunities;
- Many jobseekers are willing to commute 50 miles or so for good jobs;
- Total labor force in the region has declined 20 percent; and the regional labor participation rate is 44.74 percent compared to 59.8 percent in Kentucky and 63.9 percent in the country;
- The majority (78 percent) of employers surveyed in the region said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the region's workforce as it applies to their business; and
- The majority of employers surveyed also think the cost of the workforce is on track or lower than it should be for the quality of work they are receiving.

A list of recommendations to improve the region's workforce include developing an education coalition, increasing soft skills training and creating a new apprenticeship program.

Boyette Strategic Advisors conducted the study, which was led by One East Kentucky. Other partners in the study were EKCEP; AEP Kentucky Power; Big Sandy Community and Technical College; SOAR; Morehead State University; Eastern Kentucky University's Center for Economic Development, Entrepreneurship & Technology; and the Ashland Alliance.

● Logan Corp. Transforms Its Mining Equipment Plant, Plans for 500% Growth

It saved a dozen jobs, will create 70 more and invest $2.6 million into the region. But the Logan Corp. success story is even more than that.

This project is a testament to how regional cooperation among counties increases the likelihood of success. It proves that manufacturing can work in Eastern Kentucky because Logan Corp. is serving clients up and down the East Coast – from Florida to the Northeast – as well as Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. And, it is a model for other companies who relied on the mining industry on how to think outside the box and find other markets that use the same machines and know-how of workers to come up with a new product.

The solution began with a phone call between Randy Risner, general manager of manufacturing and engineering for Logan, and SOAR Executive Director Jared Arnett. Then came One East Kentucky, a nine-county regional organization that recruits industry and investment that is comprised of private businesses and local chambers of commerce.

The declining coal industry forced layoffs at Logan Corp.'s mining equipment plant, and the company was struggling to stay afloat. Innovative leadership, a flexible work force and collaboration from economic development and community partners in multiple counties made this success possible.

Turning to its management's previous experience in the truck-body industry, Logan Corp. decided to design and build custom dump truck beds.

In months, the company hired two sales people and orders poured in. The shop has delivered about 150 finished trucks but maintains a log of 150 orders. Because the original building was too small, Logan was turning away additional business.

"We didn't want to lose an existing business, especially one positioned for growth," said Chuck Sexton, CEO of One East Kentucky. "But if we hadn't all worked together, those jobs would have been gone to West Virginia."

Logan moved from its Martin County facility to a recently closed mining-related facility in Magoffin County, which, at the time of the announcement, had the highest unemployment in the state. The new building is five times larger and will allow employees to work on a dozen trucks at once instead of three.

"The community had been devastated by the loss of Joy Global," Risner said. "At one time, I had 500 job applications. The stack on my desk was over two-feet tall. It's a testimony that people want to work. They are ready to go to work right now."

Kentucky Economic Development Finance Authority (KEDFA), One East Kentucky and local governments worked with management at Logan to find a solution and financing that kept workers within commuting distance of the previous facility.

● 600 Jobs Being Created in Rockcastle County

SourceHOV is partnering with the SOAR initiative to fill 600 jobs in Mount Vernon as it continues to expand its capabilities to help digitize records and reduce the nationwide backlog of veterans' claims. Most of the 600 job openings have been filled.

During the announcement, the hard-working employees in Southern and Eastern Kentucky were highlighted.

Dallas-based SourceHOV has been a part of the Mount Vernon community for more than 24 years and contributes more than $11 million to the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The company is a subcontractor for CSRA, which was awarded a competitive federal contract from the Department of Veterans Affairs.
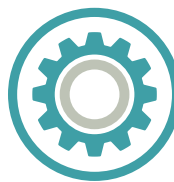
● Company Selects Corbin as North American Site, Will Create 90 Jobs

North American Sticks, a manufacturer of ice cream and coffee stir sticks, announced it will open a facility in Corbin, create 90 jobs and invest $15 million.

The French company picked this location as its presence in North America because of abundant beech wood resources, the availability of quality manpower and the warm, professional welcome from the local Corbin team.

About 2 billion of the 10 billion coffee stirrers and popsicle sticks it manufactures each year will be made in Kentucky.

The Kentucky Economic Development Finance Authority, Corbin Economic Development Agency and Southeast Kentucky Industrial Development Authority were instrumental in working on the announcement.

Pikeville Receives $5 Million Grant to Build Industrial Park on Reclaimed Mine Land

Pikeville will receive a $5 million AML grant from the Office of Surface Mining and Reclamation Enforcement to begin construction of an industrial park on former mine land.

The money will fund a 50,000-square-foot spec building in what will become the Marion Branch Industrial Park, located on 400 acres of reclaimed mine land. It is a key strategy to provide a resurgence of jobs by attracting large and small companies.

As part of the AML grant, conduit will be installed for high-speed broadband through the KentuckyWired initiative that will provide 1 gigabyte service to the park, which will be some of the fastest speeds in Kentucky.

The industrial park proposal has already received approvals for $34.6 million in grants and loans for the property purchase, construction of a new road and bridge, new sewer, water and transmission lines and additional sewer capacity. In addition to the AML grant, funding has come from the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet, the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, a rural development loan & grant, the Economic Development Administration, a community development block grant and coal severance money.

$12.5 Million Grant Will Help Develop Appalachian Wildlife Center

A $12.5 million grant from the U.S. Office of Surface Mining and Reclamation Enforcement will help develop the Appalachian Wildlife Center in Bell County. It is expected to attract 638,000 annual visitors by the fifth year of operation and generate more than $1 billion in regional economic activity in the first 10 years.

The center will include a museum of natural and regional history, a theater, a hall dedicated to the natural history of elk, bird watching, an astronomy pavilion and a 15-mile, self-guided scenic loop road for wildlife viewing.

It is projected to cost $24 million and take five years to complete. Revenues from admission fees and on-site spending are projected to make it financially self-sustaining in the second year of operation, while generating funding for scholarship, research and land conservation programs.

U.S. Rep. Harold "Hal" Rogers (KY-05), chairman of the U.S. House Appropriations Committee, worked to secure the funds through the FY 2016 Omnibus appropriations bill. The grant is part of $30 million in federal grant money through the 2016 AML Pilot program for projects in Appalachian counties that have the potential to create long-term economic benefits.

In addition, the Economic Development Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Appalachian Regional Commission will provide a $1.8 million grant under the Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization (POWER) Initiative to install water infrastructure.

The project is a joint effort by the Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development, the Department for Local Government, the Kentucky Tourism, Arts and Heritage Cabinet, and the Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet, Division of Abandoned Mine Lands.

jobs jobs jobs

SourceHOV
600

Alltech
15-50

28

TEKY
Rajant
50

Logan Corp
70

eTeams
125

Teleworks
133+

9

◉ First Kentucky Appalachian Regional Development Fund Grants Awarded

Kentucky Appalachian Regional Development Grant Program

Objective: to increase job creation and retention across the 54 county SOAR region.

$1,498,503 awarded to community organizations and non-profits to fund innovative projects

JOBS **3,300** estimated jobs resulting from KARD community projects

83%
of project funding provided by funding matches

17% of project funding provided by KARD grant
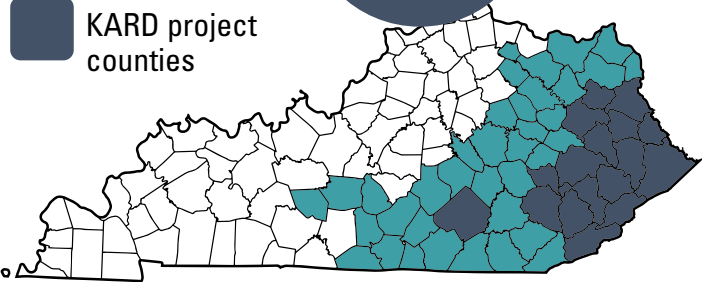
KARD investment by county

SO AR region

KARD project counties

For the first time, grants were distributed through the Kentucky Appalachian Regional Development (KARD) Fund. The state established KARD through a $2 million appropriation during the 2015 legislative session.

This seed money supports efforts that include job creation and retention, entrepreneurship, tourism, broadband deployment, workforce training, leadership development, health and wellness, infrastructure and economic diversity.

Recommendations are made by the SOAR Executive Committee and distributed by the Department of Local Government.

The projects recommended were innovative, collaborative solutions often bringing together partners that, up until now, had not worked together. In line with the SOAR mission to align local strategies with a regional vision, projects with a regional focus and collaborative approaches were prioritized.

Key projects already are making an impact, including:

Owsley County Teleworks

All-new telework training and job opportunities are coming to residents of Owsley and surrounding counties as Teleworks USA opened its fifth regional Teleworks Hub in Booneville.

The fully equipped workstations for 30 teleworkers will allow them to perform their remote-work jobs at the Hub if they lack the access to suitable Internet speeds or computer equipment at home.

In addition to the workspace, Teleworks USA's customer service and digital literacy training will also be offered at the Hub to prepare potential teleworkers for the customer service jobs they will be applying for and working with in the future.

Teleworks USA, an initiative of the Eastern Kentucky Concentrated Employment Program, Inc. (EKCEP), identifies and develops remote-work, distance learning opportunities. Graduates of the training receive four separate certifications, assistance with their résumés and interviewing skills as well as up-to-date tech training to secure employment with one of the many national companies that work with Teleworks USA.

Telemedicine technician certificate

Hazard Community and Technical College received $250,000 to create a telemedicine technician certificate and workforce training program.

HCTC purchased four portable telehealth systems, which will be used by students in both classroom settings at HCTC and clinical settings at Hazard Appalachian Regional Healthcare,

Paul E. Patton East Kentucky Veterans Center and University of Kentucky's Center for Excellence in Rural Health, which are partners in this project. HCTC will train 20 people each year.

With the expansion of broadband, telemedicine is now possible in the region. HCTC and health-care providers now will be able to implement this technology.

Economic development director in Harlan County

Creating a structure for true economic development in Harlan County is vital to future job creation and hired its first economic development director.

Here is the complete list of projects funded:

- Telehealth Technician Certificate Program: Hazard Community and Technical College, $250,000
- Transforming & Creating The Tech Community in Eastern Kentucky: Big Sandy Community and Technical College, $250,000
- Fostering Lifelong S.T.E.A.M. Learning at the Dream Discovery Center: Morehead State University, $248,871
- Eastern Kentucky Food Collaborative: Community Farm Alliance, $148,832
- Harlan County Economic Development Authority Operations Funding: Harlan Fiscal Court, $125,200
- Strategic Economic Development Initiative: One East Kentucky, $125,000
- Pikeville Farmers' Market: City of Pikeville, $100,000
- Wired Owsley County: Owsley County Action Team, $95,200
- City of Prestonsburg Broadband Strategic Plan & Feasibility Study: City of Prestonsburg, $78,000
- Southeastern Kentucky Final Mile Project: Perry Fiscal Court, $65,000
- Coal Fields Business Park Environmental Certification: Coal Fields Authority, $12,500

◉ Advanced training will prepare students for work as CNC machinists

Advanced Manufacturing Training Center Established in Paintsville

Advanced manufacturing -- it's the future of manufacturing and provides good-paying jobs. Experts state that it also is the main source of innovation and global competitiveness for the United States.

Through a $2.5 million grant that will establish an HTEC Advanced Manufacturing Training Center in Paintsville, Eastern Kentuckians will have a better opportunity to gain employment in advanced manufacturing. The grant was facilitated by Governor Bevin and Congressman Rogers.

It will provide CNC (computer numeric controlled) skills training, which will be certified through the National Institute of Metalworking Skills. The training, conducted on state-of-the-art equipment, will bridge the global skills gap in advanced manufacturing and prepare students for employment as CNC machinists.

The Kentucky Division of Abandoned Mine Lands awarded the grant to the eKentucky Advanced Manufacturing Institute, Inc. (eKAMI) through the Office of Surface Mining and Reclamation Enforcement.

In addition, eKAMI has applied for funding from the Appalachian Regional Commission to support the proposed project as well as to the HAAS Foundation. Other partners providing assistance include Eastern Kentucky Concentrated Employment Program (EKCEP), which is funding up to $2 million in training costs for unemployed participants from the 23-county region its serves.

The funding will support the acquisition and renovation of a facility as well as the purchase of necessary equipment for instructional use and the first year of operational expenses. Ongoing operating and maintenance expenses are expected to be covered by employers' funding of tuition and workforce development programs.

Counties that will benefit from the project include Floyd, Johnson, Knott, Lawrence, Letcher, Magoffin, Martin, Perry and Pike. The program will be open to anyone seeking advanced manufacturing training.

The patient who is too sick to travel but needs access to medical experts outside the region.

The mother who has to take her children to the local fast food restaurant in the evening to do their homework because they can't access the Internet at home.

The small business owner who might have to leave the region because it takes him four hours to download documents that his big-city counterparts can do in four minutes.

KentuckyWired Moving Forward

KentuckyWired, the state's high-speed broadband Internet initiative, will benefit the entire region. It will help bring the world to Eastern Kentucky and will bring Eastern Kentucky to the world – benefiting students, workers and businesses.

Currently, Kentucky ranks 47th in the country in broadband speeds and capacity, which puts the state at a major disadvantage for attracting new jobs and educational opportunities. Broadband, like electricity, water and sewer, is now an essential service. However, it has been too expensive for private carriers to build out a high-speed, high-capacity network across the entire state.

KentuckyWired has placed top priority on Eastern Kentucky because 34 percent of houses in rural Kentucky can't access Internet service with a download speed of 25 megabytes per second, which is the federal standard for broadband.

Significant progress has been made in engineering, site design and surveys along with strategic partnership agreements.

With KentuckyWired, the state will be responsible for building out the middle portion of a fiber network. Local public or private Internet service providers then can connect to the network and extend services locally to homes or businesses

SOAR has created a Last-Mile Broadband Action Team to help identify best practices to deliver affordable broadband. It also will develop a road map for communities to plan for ways to provide infrastructure that brings that "middle mile" of broadband to the premises of homes and businesses.

A couple of local projects already are under way.

The Southeastern Kentucky Final Mile (SKY FM) broadband fiber planning project released a broadband action plan -- the first step in expanding high-speed broadband across Clay, Knott, Leslie, Letcher and Perry Counties. This plan helps communities identify priorities and plans for how to expand networks and use them more effectively.

In addition, Southeast Kentucky Economic Development Corporation is spearheading an effort called Moving Eastern Kentucky Forward with Broadband. The project is identifying short and long-term economic development projects in 26 Kentucky counties that may be eligible for approximately $500,000 to $2 million in funding from various sources.

Helping to Connect Your Economy

SOAR has developed the "Connect Your Economy Practical Seminar" to show how communities can leverage statewide fiber-optic infrastructure for economic growth.

As communities are working on increasing both supply and demand for broadband, SOAR is helping build community-level teams and enable collaboration between individuals and organizations to find best practices.

The primer and toolkit contain information on broadband technology and planning, along with tools and resources to assist with the broadband planning process. It focuses on identifying unserved demand for broadband, forming creative partnerships and lowering barriers to entry for new and existing providers into underserved markets. It is bolstered by real-life stories of broadband planning and adoption across the Appalachian Region. Check it out at www.soar-ky.org/ARCToolkit.

Silicon Valley Training, Jobs Come to the Mountains

When Interapt CEO and Owensboro native Ankur Gopal gave a speech at his induction into the Kentucky Entrepreneur Hall of Fame in 2014, little did he imagine that two years later, he would be instrumental in starting a technology ecosystem in Eastern Kentucky.

"I told the crowd that we had a responsibility to help create the jobs of tomorrow and help communities move forward," Gopal said. "I didn't know at the time that SOAR board member Jim Host was in the audience."

Interapt, a Louisville-based company, is a leader in mobile app, healthcare and manufacturing technology solutions and one of only 10 Google Glass partners in the world.

SOAR asked Gopal to be a part of a fledgling movement, where companies such as Bit Source were trying to create high-tech jobs as part of the TechHire Eastern Kentucky (TEKY) Initiative.

TEKY is part of a national Tech Hire designation, under the leadership of EKCEP, to train and create middle and high-skilled technology jobs. There is a gap of 500,000 between the mid- and high-skill technology jobs available nationwide and the people with the skills to fill those jobs. Those numbers, combined with the thousands of coal jobs lost, pointed to an urgent need for an accelerated training program for computer coding.

"We knew we needed to partner with a company that had direct ties to Silicon Valley," said Michael Cornett, director of agency expansion for EKCEP. "We can't train people and hope they get hired. We must locate an employer and find out what their needs are. It must be industry led."

Gopal spent the next three months meeting with educators, business leaders and workers throughout the region.

"They were all passionate about their homes and all willing to work hard," Gopal said. "They just needed the opportunity. But for this to happen, everything had to fall into place. I created a long list of things that needed to occur. At every item, the SOAR board said 'done.'"

In February, he made a presentation to the SOAR board. In June, the program was announced, and applications were accepted. In September, the first day of class was held

– a mere seven months after the plan was hatched. And in January 2017, the first class graduated from the program, which is housed at Big Sandy Technical and Community College in Paintsville.

Here's how it works: Candidates are accepted into TEKY and receive a weekly stipend of $400 each week while they learn coding for 10 weeks, then complete a six-week apprentice internship. They are guaranteed full-time employee upon successful completion of the internship.

The first class had 35 graduates – ranging from laid-off coal miners to fast food workers. One graduate, a former Marine, said it was more mentally challenging than boot camp.

The second class of students will begin in the fall.

Gopal said other cities have fallen behind Eastern Kentucky because they are still in the planning stage.

"There were so many reasons for a project like this to fail, but it didn't thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit and all the partners," he said. "There was an urgency here. Today, people now have the latest and greatest skills that won't go away even if a company closes. We've encouraged them to come up with their own projects, create their own apps and potentially start their own company.

"This project demonstrates that if you encourage people who can execute and deliver and if you all come together, you can make it a success. It is the true utopia of a public/private partnership where everyone wins."

The program has been funded through EKCEP and a POWER grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission.

In addition to SOAR, EKCEP, Big Sandy Technical & Community College, the Appalachian Regional Commission, East Kentucky Power Cooperative, Kentucky Community and Technical College System and the SOAR Co-Chairs Gov. Matt Bevin and Congressman Hal Rogers were instrumental in this program.

"It can be a model not just for the state but for all of rural America," Cornett said. "It shows the power of partnerships. And it demonstrates what people can do with their lives – the tenacity and adaptability of Eastern Kentucky."

"The key element is talent, because it solves all the other problems."

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