



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Wilkes-Barre Connect Announces the Official Launch of NEPA Works.**

Wilkes-Barre Connect, the entrepreneurial and economic development arm of the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber, is excited to announce the official launch of NEPA Works on July 1, 2020. NEPA Works is a 12-month pilot program that will enhance the connectivity of our current workforce system, address skills gaps, and get displaced workers back to work in Northeastern PA. The program was designed in partnership with the PA Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) and funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC).

“NEPA Works is a solution created by the team at the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber, in response to addressing the challenges and opportunities currently facing our workforce system,” said Joseph Boylan, Executive Director of Wilkes-Barre Connect. “We are grateful for ARC’s and DCED’s support and commitment to our vision, and excited at the opportunity to partner with extraordinary leaders and organizations in Northeast PA, including The Institute, PA CareerLink, Codelicious, and Mobiniti.”

The NEPA Works pilot program consists of two components: Reimagining our Workforce and Coding the Coal Region. Reimagining our Workforce features a partnership between Wilkes-Barre Connect and local workforce providers in Luzerne County, with a goal to increase user activity through an aggressive marketing campaign and to enhance the communication process between job seekers and employers through the integration of a technology-focused communication strategy. Coding the Coal Region is a non-traditional approach that will address the skills gaps in the computer programming industry by instituting both a short and long-term solutions to develop a strong, vibrant, and skilled workforce in Northeast PA.

NEPA Works is tasked with producing an impact report and adaptable model at the end of the 12-month pilot program that can be replicated in other communities or across the entire Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The Institute of Public Policy and Economic Development, led by Executive Director Teri Ooms, will provide the critical role of collecting data points and outputs to measure the effectiveness and impact of the pilot program, and will lead efforts to create the replicable models. Most importantly, during our region’s most difficult unemployment crisis, NEPA Works provides a foundation to assist displaced workers get back to work faster in Northeast PA. For more information on NEPA Works, please visit our website at [www.NEPAWorksProject.com](http://www.NEPAWorksProject.com).

### **Reimagining Our Workforce**

"Reimagining our Workforce" is a partnership between the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber and our local workforce providers to launch a marketing and communication strategy to promote the public workforce system, with the goals of increasing user activity, improving communication channels, and increasing job placement rates. Reimagining our Workforce will be led by Michaela Benczkowski, Program and Membership Coordinator for the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber.

"Reimagining Our Workforce' will not only elevate job seekers and local employers, but Northeastern Pennsylvania as a whole. As a NEPA native, I am aware of the need to have a variety of career paths locally and the connections that are so vital in making those careers possible. The opportunities that come with this project are limitless, and it's only just the beginning," says Benczkowski.

Reimagining our Workforce includes an aggressive marketing campaign launched by the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber, to leverage our existing business and community network to increase user activity within the PA CareerLink system in Luzerne County. The Chamber will engage employers to educate them on the values and resources made available through PA CareerLink, in addition to assisting them in creating a profile and posting new job opportunities. The Chamber will also engage our academic institutions, young professional network, and community organizations to educate residents on the opportunities available in the PA CareerLink system, including the process to identify and apply to the latest jobs available in Luzerne County.

In addition, the Chamber will partner with Mobiniti to integrate a communication strategy to deliver the latest opportunities, segmented by industry, right to the mobile devices of job seekers. Mobiniti is a robust and user-friendly mobile marketing platform that assists clients looking to invite their customers to engage with their brand through SMS via their mobile phone. Leveraging the technology of Mobiniti, Reimagining our Workforce will allow job seekers and PA CareerLink users the opportunity the sign-up and receive updates on the latest jobs available in Luzerne County via text messages.

Mobiniti was founded in Wilkes-Barre in 2014 by Bryan Hunsinger and Rocco Ciavarella, and is currently headquartered in the Accelerator Building located in downtown Wilkes-Barre. The Accelerator Building is dedicated to helping growth phase technology and tech-enabled businesses achieve massive scale, through the ownership and leadership of local entrepreneur Kris Jones. More information on Mobiniti and the Accelerator Building can be found by visiting [www.mobiniti.com](http://www.mobiniti.com) and [www.acceleratorwb.com](http://www.acceleratorwb.com).

Our vision for Reimagining our Workforce is straight-forward: We want to help people get back to work in Northeast PA. By forging a partnership with PA CareerLink, the Chamber will leverage its innovative and creative vision to enhance the capabilities of our local workforce system. To learn more about Reimagining our Workforce, including how you as a job seeker and an employer can sign-up, please visit us at [www.nepaworkproject.com/about-row](http://www.nepaworkproject.com/about-row).

### **Coding the Coal Region**

During a six-month span in 2019, relying on the expertise of The Institute at Wilkes University, Wilkes-Barre Connect identified a major skills gap and inability to place our local workforce into the high-demand computer programming industry in Northeast PA. Further examination revealed the lack of a dedicated pipeline that aligned with the needs of our local employers. This research eventually led to Wilkes-Barre Connect being challenged by the America250PA Commission to create a solution that could "make Northeastern PA THE hub for an advanced computer programming workforce."

The Pennsylvania Commission for the United States Semiquincentennial (America250PA) was established by the legislature and Governor in 2018 to plan, encourage, develop, and coordinate the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States, Pennsylvania's integral role in that event, and the impact of its people on the nation's past, present and future. Led by Cassandra Coleman, Executive Director, America250PA has established a focus of celebrating the past and innovating the future by issuing challenges to communities across the Commonwealth.

Coleman states, "The visionary framework of America250PA – especially the themes to educate, preserve, innovate, and ultimately after six years of hard work, celebrate those accomplishments - contains the essential messaging to bring the Semiquincentennial to life and we believe that Coding the Coal Region is just the beginning to the educational impact we hope to have on the future generations of Pennsylvanians across the Commonwealth."

After months of research, focus groups, and discussions, Wilkes-Barre Connect answered the challenge posed by America250PA by developing the "Coding the Coal Region" component of the NEPA Works pilot program. Coding the Coal Region is the establishment of a short-term solution to train, align, and place our local workforce with opportunities currently available in the computer programming industry, and the creation of long-term solution that provides students in grades 6-12 in Luzerne County, with the opportunity to participate in an after-school, instructor-led, computer programming course pathway program. Both the short and long-term solutions are designed to create a talent pipeline and our vision to fulfill the challenge issued by the America250PA Commission of "making Northeastern PA THE hub of an advanced computer programming workforce."

The short-term component of Coding the Coal Region includes the launch of online, industry-led training courses that will provide pathways to employment within the computer programming industry in Northeast PA. The requirements and application process will be posted in September 2020. Working with several key partners, including Ben Franklin Technology Partners, Wilkes-Barre Connect will identify the needs of our local employers to create a customized set of training modules that will address the skills gap issues currently plaguing the localized computer programming industry. Courses will be made available for FREE to 50 workforce participants located in Luzerne County, for both the Fall of 2020 and the Spring of 2021 semesters. The Institute will provide data collection to conduct an analysis of the program, including number of participants, job placement rates, and overall impact of the pilot.

Coding the Coal Region will be led by Shanie Mohamed, Economic Development Specialist for Wilkes-Barre Connect, who says of the program: "As a recent college graduate and new young professional, I am consistently reminded how important computer programming knowledge is for a society built around technology. Coding the Coal Region will not only provide the youth of our area with the arsenal of skills they need to apply themselves in the computer science industry, but it will also develop a well-rounded population of future leaders ready to excel in any field and make meaningful contributions to their workforce."

The long-term component of Coding the Coal Region is designed to institute an afterschool, online, curriculum-based course catalog to ensure that all students, grades 6-12 in Luzerne County, have access to computer programming skillsets – in an effort to develop a talent pipeline in Northeast PA. The courses are customized to create pathways within the computer programming industry and will be made available for FREE to students. To participate, a student will be required to have a device (computer or tablet) and internet access. To those students who don't have access, the Greater Wilkes-

Barre Chamber, through Wilkes-Barre Connect, will provide both devices and internet access via the THINK Center to eliminate barriers and to ensure that any and all students have an opportunity to participate.

The courses are designed to provide students with access to the following pathways: graphic design, web design and development, and game & app development. The courses have been created and will be offered through a partnership with Codelicious. Located in Indiana, Codelicious provides full-year computer science curriculum for K-12. Through instructor-led coursework, educators deliver all aspects of computer science, beyond just coding. As a result, the Codelicious curriculum provides the foundational knowledge students need to be successful in college, career, and life. For more information on Codelicious, please visit [www.codelicious.com](http://www.codelicious.com).

The application period for students, grades 6-12, will run from July 1<sup>st</sup> to July 31<sup>st</sup>, for the Fall 2020 semester, and requires the assistance of a parent or guardian. Courses in the Fall of 2020 will launch August 17<sup>th</sup> and run through the week of December 14<sup>th</sup>. The 15-week curriculum (plus two holiday weeks) requires a commitment of 2-hours per week and will be offered in your choice of nine different day and time combinations. Parents interested in registering their child for the Fall 2020 semester can do so by visiting [www.nepaworksproject.com/abouttcr](http://www.nepaworksproject.com/abouttcr).

At this time, Wilkes-Barre Connect is also seeking volunteers to serve as instructors for the courses. This opportunity is made available to all, with a focus on securing current and former educators, along with industry leaders with a passion to make a difference in our community. Once selected, our volunteer instructors will participate in FREE trainings offered by Codelicious. For more information on becoming a volunteer instructor, please visit [www.nepaworksproject.com/abouttcr](http://www.nepaworksproject.com/abouttcr) and complete the corresponding volunteer application.

### **Changing the Economic Landscape of Northeast PA**

NEPA Works represents the first of several initiatives launched by the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber to improve the quality of our workforce and assist displaced workers get back to work in Northeastern PA.

“As a Chamber, one of our primary goals is to build a delivery system to grow and sustain the workforce. To this end we support educating, upskilling and training the workforce to reach higher paying family sustaining jobs that in turn improve the quality of life and the vibrancy of the community. NEPA Works is the beginning of an array of workforce programs that will align critical business job needs to an upskilled workforce that will grow the legacy businesses in the area, attract new businesses to the Valley and provide higher paying jobs”, said Wico van Genderen, President and CEO of the Greater Wilkes Barre Chamber.

In response to the Covid-19, the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber has established itself as a true leader and advocate for the businesses and community of Northeastern PA. Leveraging a creative and innovate team, the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber will continue to evolve and provide the resources necessary to make Northeastern PA a great place to live, work, and play.

Lindsay Griffin, COO/Vice-President of the Greater Wilkes Barre Chamber states, “Our focus has been on the safety, health and well-being of our businesses and community during this time. We have been and will continue to work diligently alongside of our partners in collective efforts to strengthen and assist our businesses, citizens and community as a whole. Through these collective efforts, innovative

programs like NEPA Works were created and will not only address immediate workforce needs, but also be a catalyst for continued positive recovery and growth for our area.”

For more information on the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber, please visit [www.wilkes-barre.org](http://www.wilkes-barre.org).

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