



 **ECO DEVO 101**

CASE STUDY:

**EcoDevo 101: Wyandotte County
Businesses are Creating Jobs
& Opportunities**

The University of Kansas Health System GED Program provides a free avenue for employees to obtain a GED while maintaining employment within the system. The GED Program was developed in 2019 in response to the realization among health system leaders that those who do not have a high school diploma or GED have a lower ceiling for advancing their careers in the health system.

The health system partnered with Kansas City Kansas Community College (KCKCC) to provide on-site classes for employees so that they had no need to leave the hospital campus in order to attend class. The GED program has given many employees an opportunity to grow their careers without sacrificing additional time and finances on attending classes after work hours.



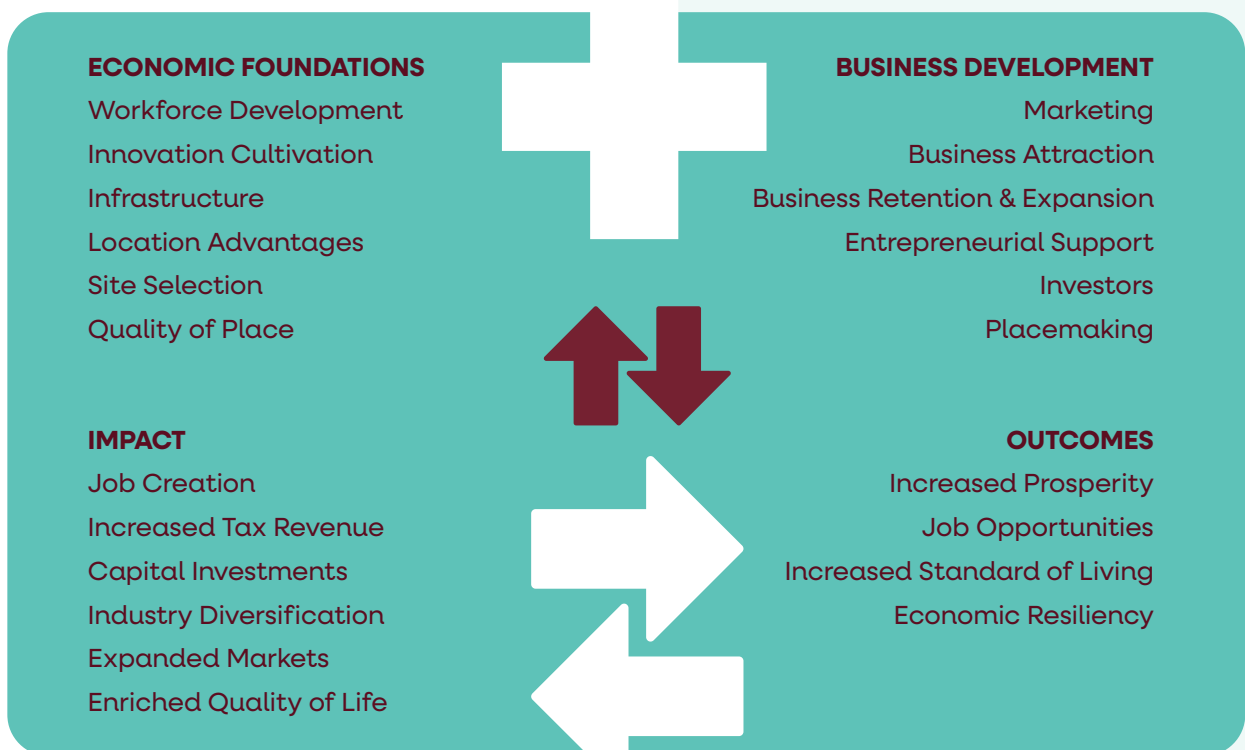
EcoDevo 101: How Economic Development Supports the Growth of Wyandotte County Businesses

Economic development is often discussed in terms of its parts, each category siloed and distinct: business retention and expansion, attraction, workforce development, and job creation, among others. [Wyandotte Economic Development Council \(WYEDC\)](#) joins other innovative thinkers working to flip the perception towards an ecosystem model where each objective is interlocked and dependent, like the pieces of a puzzle, to form the total picture of [EcoDevo 101](#).

Economic Development Ecosystem

Structuring economic development around this ecosystem framework — like pieces of a puzzle — creates an environment where economic foundations and business development create impact and favorable economic outcomes. Wyandotte Economic Development Council prioritizes:

- Creating Jobs
- Raising Household Income
- Building and Strengthening the Workforce
- Improving Quality of Life
- Generating Tax Revenue





Character of Place is an Important Economic Foundation

In [“The character of innovative places: entrepreneurial strategy, economic development, and prosperity”](#) (*Small Bus Econ* 43, 9–20, 2014), Maryann P. Feldman asks, “Why do investments in certain places yield jobs, growth and prosperity while similar investments made in seemingly identical places fail to produce the desired results?”

While acknowledging that geography and clustering of resources play important roles, she postulates, “What matters most is human agency — the building of institutions and the myriad public and private decisions that determine what I call the character of place — a spirit of authenticity, engagement and common purpose.”

In the Kansas City, KS, (KCK) region, Wyandotte Economic Development Council (WYEDC) supplies the human agency for placemaking, bringing assets, stakeholders, innovators and agencies together to fortify the region’s economic development ecosystem. WYEDC promotes and strengthens Wyandotte County’s economy through innovative approaches to programs, partnerships and incentives, as well as leadership in industrial, residential, office, and retail markets. [In 2023](#), WYEDC’s efforts resulted in 27 announced projects, \$456 million in capital investments, and 934 new jobs. Over the last 10 years, there has been over \$5.7 billion in capital investments.

How The University of Kansas Health System GED Program Benefited Local Businesses & Our Community

“We knew the GED program would expand employment opportunities for individuals in hospitality services and nonclinical areas while also helping them with their education. Obtaining a GED would result in a greater retention of employees who can grow their careers and increase their wages and compensation within the health system,” said Jeff Novorr, Vice President of Hospitality Services, The University of Kansas Health System.

Prior to developing the GED Program in 2019, the health system had removed a restriction that all employees had to have a high school diploma or GED. This restriction was removed for a small portion of jobs – primarily those in hospitality services and nonclinical areas.

“We did this to increase the number of people who could apply for entry level positions in the system,” said Novorr.

This decision alone led to an increase in opportunity for employment for those in the community, but the health system decided to take things a step further by also adding the option to obtain a GED while employed within the system.





Those working full-time positions in the health system face several barriers to continuing an education:

- a lack of access to local GED programs that don't require transportation to another part of town
- finding the time after a full day of work to attend classes
- securing the financial resources necessary to cover class and material fees.

“Obtaining a GED usually requires students to enroll in a formal program, but we knew that would be a challenge for some. Many of our employees are already working multiple jobs and taking care of families. We hoped that if we removed this barrier to adult education, employees would jump at an opportunity to get a GED,” said Novorr. “We just needed to eliminate the costs, provide classes on campus and allow our employees to work during normal business hours to make this program work.”

“After partnering with KCKCC to develop the program, we were able to secure teachers from the college who are actually able to come to our hospital campus to teach classes each week. Philanthropic support from local business partners allowed us to buy supplies for the program and pay the college fees. Thanks to this support, we are able to provide each student with a laptop to use, backpacks, books, exam vouchers and everything else they need to get through these classes without removing funds from hospital operations,” said Novorr. **“These employees are essentially getting paid to go to school.”**

Employees who enroll in the GED program are required to attend class for eight hours a week, which generally equals out to two hours a day, four days a week. Since employees are allowed to attend classes during their regular shift, they receive their full hourly pay during class. The program is self-paced. Depending on how much time each student dedicates to education, they could get through it quickly or they are able to pace themselves as needed. The GED program is open for enrollment every three months. The number of students enrolled is usually around 20-25.

The only criteria needed to qualify for the GED program is that an individual has been employed within the health system for three months and that they are in good standing with their manager. The students go through a Test of Adult Basic Education– required for all GED students in the state. This test determines what level class they should be placed in: beginner, intermediate, or advanced. Two KCKCC GED instructors are on the hospital campus full-time teaching classes; this allows students to have different classes throughout the day.

“Every student enrolled in the program has a leadership mentor to support them. This person is a professional from the health system who volunteers for the role and is assigned a student. Students are encouraged to be in touch with their mentor a few times a week to check in. These mentors can help with tutoring and encouragement. Where else can a housekeeper have a transplant surgeon’s direct phone number to ask for help with school whenever they need it?” Novorr said.

In addition to the mentorship program, students have 17,000 health system employees cheering them on. As one of the largest employers in Wyandotte County, the health system workforce is a community in itself. The physicians, nurses, researchers, educators and other professionals here empower GED students to use their new skills and passions by encouraging them, leading them and serving as a sounding board along their educational journey. The community-forward mindset works to keep the family growing and promote from within where possible.



Since 2019:

29
Graduates

19
Remain Employed
by the Health
System (70%!)

13
Have Been
Promoted

“The first open enrollment took place in January of 2019, and there were around 27 employees in the inaugural GED class. Today we have 29 graduates of the program. 19 of the graduates remain employed by the health system, which equals around 70%. 13 of 19 graduates have been promoted or moved into jobs they otherwise would not have been eligible for. Two of these employees have advanced to supervisor or managerial positions in the original department they worked with. Others have advanced to positions as a medical assistant, imaging tech, accounts payable worker, patient care assistant– jobs that come with a measurable increase in compensation,” said Novorr.

Novorr reported that three of the GED graduates left to enroll in higher education. Two of the graduates enrolled in nursing school. One of the employees earned a two-year analytics degree. Others have opted to attend the police academy, mortuary school, or additional college courses. The opportunities for growth that have stemmed from the GED program are evident in these transitions, and they not only benefit the health system, but also the community as a whole.

The University of Kansas Health System holds a graduation on campus every year. Health system leaders and the KCKCC leaders attend to congratulate the new GED graduates.



THE UNIVERSITY OF

Wyandotte County Jobs

“The University of Kansas Health System is like a small city– any job you can think of is probably available within the system– from plumbing to cyber security to marketing,” said Novorr. “The health system is a viable place of employment even if you don’t want to be a doctor or a nurse.”

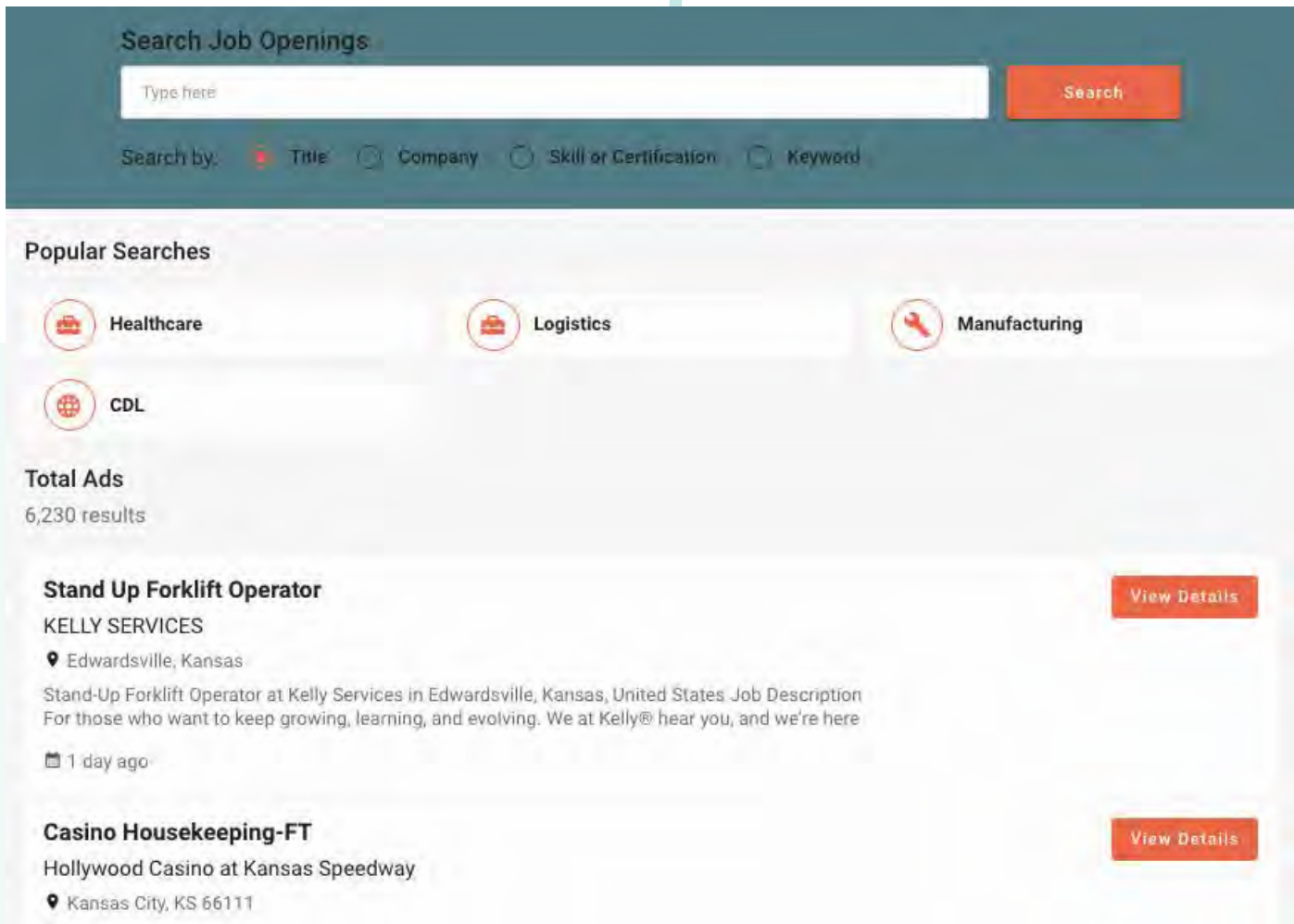
Through the Wyandotte Economic Development Council, students from KCK public school district were given an opportunity to see this firsthand during the recent Career Pathways Student Tour of the hospital. 23 students attended the tour and were able to witness a different side of the health system.

“We had students from the KCK public school system spend half a day here. They were able to hear from our cybersecurity and engineering teams and tour areas of the hospital such as our large main hospital kitchen and a few medical laboratories,” said Novorr.

During the tour, the students learned from facilities leaders about how cybersecurity protects the infrastructure of the hospital and how the plumbing and electricity grid powers the entire hospital. Many graduating seniors saw for the first time that many of the career opportunities at the health system lie outside of the medical field. Their eyes were opened to hundreds of employment opportunities they didn’t even know existed.

“At The University of Kansas Health System, most would think of careers for doctors and nurses. During the Career Pathways Student Tour, we spoke about the medical side for about 5 minutes. The rest of the day, the students learned about careers in food service, cyber security, mechanical engineering, construction, media, fundraising, transportation and so much more– all available right in the health system. They learned they can start with an entry level position, and if they chose to go on to college in a field needed at the hospital, their education could be paid for with tuition reimbursement,” said Monica Brede, Senior Director-Business Retention & Workforce Solutions, WYEDC.





New Job Board

WYEDC continues to foster community growth through programs like the Career Pathways Student Tour. More recently, WYEDC developed a [Job Board](#) feature that provides potential employees with an all-inclusive multiple job search platform that highlights available work opportunities in Wyandotte County.

“Our WYEDC Job board was created to drive our residents to the companies in Wyandotte County. Wyandotte has many career opportunities with companies that have a great culture. A resident can commute closer to home, cutting down on time and travel expenses. The more money a person can keep in their pocket, the better it is for their household income and the local economy,” said Brede, WYEDC.

Job search tools provided by WYEDC and education advancement opportunities like the GED program at The University of Kansas Health System create a ripple of success that extends throughout the community.

2024 for The University of Kansas Health System GED Program

“There’s this false stereotype about adults that did not finish school. There’s an assumption that they dropped out of school because they got into trouble or were lazy. This is rarely the case. Most employees without a high school diploma were unable to complete school because life got in the way– sick parents or they needed money to keep food on the table. They had other people to care for. These employees now have an opportunity to earn a GED while they continue working to provide for their families. Many of them obtain a GED to set a great example for their children and grandchildren,” said Novorr.

The health system doesn’t need to advertise the GED program, because it’s a great recruitment tool in itself. Word of mouth takes care of spreading the word. The health system expects enrollment to continue to grow in 2024 as more employees hear about this valuable opportunity.

“No one else in the country does this that we are aware of– a GED program for free, on site. It’s an incredibly rewarding and valuable program. We are in year 5 and momentum is sustained,” said Novorr.

Wyandotte Economic Development Council’s EcoDevo 101

Wyandotte Economic Development Council’s focus and facilitation improves the county’s economic development ecosystem by pulling the pieces of the puzzle together: business attraction and job creation, business retention and improved quality of life.

What does the puzzle’s total picture look like? Prosperity for Wyandotte County residents. Through creating jobs by supporting local businesses and bringing new companies to the county, the median household income and tax revenues are increased. The additional property taxes from new projects help provide additional resources to the local school district, library system, community college, and local and state general services. It’s EcoDevo 101 and it’s what Wyandotte Economic Development Council does. The best news is, there’s always room for new pieces for our prosperity puzzle.



Wyandotte County Economic Development Council (WYEDC) helps businesses harness "The Power of the Dotte." WYEDC promotes and strengthens Wyandotte County's economy through innovative approaches to programs, partnerships and incentives, as well as leadership in industrial, residential, office and retail markets. Contact us today! Follow WYEDC on LinkedIn and Facebook!



THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS HEALTH SYSTEM

The University of Kansas Health System is the largest employer in Wyandotte County, employing over 17,000. The GED program strengthens the local workforce and opens up a world of opportunities for those within the health system as well as within the community. To learn more about employment and educational opportunities with The University of Kansas Health System, explore here.



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Wyandotte Economic Development Council
727 Minnesota Avenue
Kansas City, KS 66101
913.371.3198
www.wyedc.org