

Sports as Workforce Infrastructure

A Public-Private Asset Model for Townships, Counties, and State Workforce Systems

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This report reframes local sports not as a recreational cost center, but as workforce infrastructure, a community distribution network, and a monetizable local asset.

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Executive Summary

Most local sports systems are operated as cost centers. That is the structural error. Townships, counties, school-linked recreation systems, and community operators fund and maintain the participation base: fields, scheduling, trust, family relationships, and the recurring youth traffic that keeps the ecosystem alive. Yet the economic upside created by that base is often captured elsewhere by private clubs, tournament operators, trainers, software platforms, and outside advertisers. The public side retains the operating burden while outside parties retain more of the monetization. WSV's public reports positioning is already oriented around market structure, workflow bottlenecks, media and attention shifts, and transaction control. That framing is correct. The gap is not activity. The gap is value capture. [1]

Local sports should therefore be treated as more than recreation. It functions simultaneously as a participation engine, a workforce platform, a communications network, and a sponsorship asset. National youth sports data show that 55.4 percent of U.S. children ages 6–17 participated in organized sports in 2023, or about 27.3 million youth. That is recurring household traffic at scale, not a niche activity. Once that recurring traffic exists, it can support paid work roles, sponsor inventory, employer distribution, and public messaging. [4]

The workforce argument is stronger now because the labor market is changing. The International Labour Organization's 2025 update on generative AI exposure found that clerical occupations continue to have the highest exposure levels. Sports-created jobs sit in a different category: they require physical presence, real-time judgment, conflict management, rule enforcement, supervision, and public accountability. O*NET defines sports officials as workers who officiate live events, detect infractions, and decide penalties according to established rules. Those are not cleanly automatable tasks. [5][6]

The cleanest place to prove the model is officiating. Pennsylvania's interscholastic athletics association states that officials must be 16 years old or older to enter the pipeline and links directly to its Junior Official Program. Nationally, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects employment for umpires, referees, and other sports officials to grow 6 percent from 2024 to 2034, with about 4,600 openings per year on average. That combination—visible shortage, paid work, certifiable entry, and immediate service impact—makes officiating the strongest initial wedge. [2][3]

The public funding logic is already in place. The U.S. Department of Labor states that WIOA prioritizes work experience through a 20 percent minimum expenditure requirement, and the federal regulations are explicit that local youth programs must spend not less than 20 percent of their allocated funds on paid and unpaid work experiences. The policy stack exists. What is missing is a local operating model that families trust and that can simultaneously produce work outcomes, service coverage, and retained local economic value. Sports can do that. [2][7]

The core economic chain is straightforward: participation creates attention, attention creates inventory, inventory creates revenue, and revenue can fund workforce pathways and local service capacity. Communities that already host the participation base should stop acting like passive platforms for other people's business models. They should package, monetize, and retain more of the value they already create.

1. The Structural Problem: Communities Build the Base and Lose the Upside

The modern local sports economy rests on a public and community-built base. Parks departments, township programs, school-linked recreation systems, and community clubs maintain facilities, organize seasons, and absorb operating risk. Families supply recurring demand. Volunteers and local staff supply continuity and trust. This base is expensive to create and difficult to replace.

The problem is that most communities do not package the asset they have built. They host participants but do not organize sponsor inventory. They control recurring family touchpoints but do not structure employer access or workforce pathways. They carry the overhead while private clubs, event operators, trainers, and outside platforms monetize the traffic.

That is the core market failure. Communities are not short on participation. They are short on capture. WSV's public reports page makes this plain in its own language: it is focused on market structure, trust gaps, workflow bottlenecks, media and distribution shifts, and monetization control. Those are all capture questions. [1]

2. Sports Is Not One Asset. It Is Four.

First, sports is a participation engine. Project Play's youth sports participation data show that 27.3 million U.S. youth ages 6–17 participated in organized sports in 2023, equal to 55.4 percent of that age cohort. That creates recurring contact with families over multiple seasons and age bands. [4]

Second, sports is a workforce platform. The sports ecosystem naturally generates paid and supervised roles across officiating, event operations, assistant coaching, check-in, field support, media support, and game-day logistics. The Bureau of Labor Statistics recognizes sports officials as a distinct occupation, and O*NET identifies the work as rule enforcement and live event adjudication. [3][6]

Third, sports is a communications network. The operator that controls registration, scheduling, updates, weather notices, program reminders, and event logistics controls one of the most trusted recurring communication channels in a local market. That is not just administration. It is distribution.

Fourth, sports is a sponsorship asset. Once household attention is recurring and geographically concentrated, it becomes sellable. Local employers can buy hiring access. Hospitals can buy repeated family visibility. Banks, colleges, and service businesses can buy trusted local association. Most communities acknowledge the first asset and ignore the other three. That is why they remain under-monetized.

3. Why the Workforce Case Is Stronger Now Than It Was Five Years Ago

The workforce case is stronger because entry-level labor markets are being reorganized by digital tools and generative AI. The International Labour Organization's 2025 update states that clerical occupations continue to have the highest exposure levels. Exposure does not mean automatic elimination, but it does mean the most routine, screen-based, language-heavy roles are under more pressure than they were before. [5]

Sports-created work sits in a different operating environment. Referees make real-time decisions. Event staff manage physical flow and conflict. Coaches and assistants supervise children, schedules, parents, and safety. O*NET's profile for sports officials centers on live officiating, infraction detection, and penalty decisions under established regulations. [6]

For county and state workforce systems, that matters. They need pathways into roles that still require people, still teach judgment and accountability, and still generate visible community value. Sports already produces those roles. The failure has been strategic framing, not labor demand.

4. The Referee Wedge: Start Where the Pain Is Already Obvious

Every serious platform needs a wedge. Officiating is the right one because the market pain is already visible. The PIAA's official entry page states that officials must be 16 years old or older and points prospective officials to the Junior Officials Program. That is a direct institutional signal that the pipeline must expand earlier. [2]

The national labor signal confirms the relevance. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects 6 percent growth in employment for umpires, referees, and other sports officials from 2024 to 2034 and estimates about 4,600 openings per year on average over the decade. Many of those openings are replacement demand, which means the need is durable, not cyclical. [3]

For a township, school district partner, or county workforce board, officiating has the right characteristics. It is paid. It is certifiable. It solves a visible service problem. It creates discipline and judgment. It is difficult to automate. It is easy to explain to parents, funders, and administrators in one sentence. If a pilot can reliably recruit, train, certify, and place young officials, it proves the broader model.

5. The Public Policy Fit Is Already There

There is no policy gap here. There is an execution gap. The U.S. Department of Labor states that WIOA prioritizes work experience through a 20 percent minimum expenditure requirement in local youth programs. The federal regulations are more specific: local youth programs must expend not less than 20 percent of allocated funds on paid and unpaid work experiences for in-school and out-of-school youth. [2][7]

That matters because sports can be used as a delivery mechanism for outcomes policymakers are already required to support: paid work experience, supervised placements, barrier reduction, labor-force attachment, and pathway-building. Government would not be subsidizing sports for its own sake. It would be funding work experience and service capacity through an institution that already has household trust.

Sports is especially useful because not every role requires elite athletic ability. A referee, event operations worker, field assistant, media helper, or check-in lead can create economic value without being the best player in the system. That broadens eligibility and practical relevance.

6. The Economic Chain: Participation to Attention to Inventory to Revenue to Workforce Outcomes

Participation creates attention. Recurring youth sports engagement means repeat household contact. The Project Play data show the scale of that base nationally. [4]

Attention creates inventory. Once an operator controls repeated family touchpoints, it can create sponsor placements, employer spotlights, event branding, local hiring packages, registration cross-sell, newsletter inventory, text-message promotion, and community notices.

Inventory creates revenue. Local employers, hospitals, colleges, banks, and service businesses all pay for targeted visibility into trusted local channels. The sponsor proposition becomes stronger when access is repeated, local, and associated with child development and community use rather than with generic advertising.

Revenue funds workforce outcomes. Sponsor dollars, hiring packages, and event activations can underwrite certifications, stipends, supervision, scheduling systems, and paid placements. Public funding can then be used where it belongs: barrier reduction, work experience support, and scaled outcome delivery.

7. The Communications Layer Is Not Marketing. It Is Demand Formation

Most local operators underestimate the value of distribution control. Whoever owns the channels that families actually watch controls more than announcements. They control which jobs get seen, which programs fill, which employers get applicants, which sponsors get repeated exposure, and which civic partners reach households.

In practice, the communications layer can distribute referee recruitment, event jobs, seasonal placements, sponsor campaigns, school or township notices, public health messages, and partner programming. The reason it works is simple: sports channels are tied to schedules and routines that families already monitor.

That makes the communications layer infrastructure, not decoration. It is one of the few trusted channels that still reaches local families repeatedly without buying commodity media.

8. What the Private Side Actually Buys

Sponsors are not donors in this model. They are buyers. They buy access to concentrated family households, repeated local visibility, employer-brand positioning, and association with a credible community institution.

A hospital sponsoring a referee academy is buying trust, visibility, and workforce relevance. A bank sponsoring an event-operations or youth work-readiness track is buying local presence and repeated category exposure. An employer buying hiring inventory is purchasing access to an identifiable first-job labor pool.

The stronger the operator's outcomes data become—placements, wages, certifications, staffing coverage, sponsor response—the stronger the private-side value proposition becomes.

9. What a Pilot Should Actually Include

The first mistake operators make is trying to prove too much at once. A pilot should be narrow, measured, and built to answer operational questions, not branding questions.

A credible first pilot should include a referee academy or junior-official pathway, assistant coaching and event-operations placements, basic field and facility support roles, a unified communications layer for jobs and partner notices, three to five founding sponsors, and a reporting framework tied to wages, credentials, staffing coverage, and sponsor performance.

That is enough to answer the only questions that matter: can the community recruit, train, staff, monetize attention, and document outcomes. Anything beyond that in phase one is distraction.

10. The Metrics That Matter

Vanity metrics are useless here. The right measures are economic and operational: number of youth placed in paid roles, total wages earned, credentials completed, games and events fully staffed, referee vacancy reduction, sponsor revenue closed, employer or hiring packages sold, response rates from owned channels, and sponsor renewal rates.

Those metrics tell you whether the platform is functioning as an institution. If placements rise, wages are real, service coverage improves, and sponsors renew, the model is working. If those conditions are not present, the operator does not yet have a business system. It has a concept.

11. What This Means for Townships, Counties, and States

For townships, the implication is direct: the recurring household traffic tied to youth sports is not background noise. It is a monetizable civic asset.

For county workforce boards, the implication is even clearer: sports offers a credible way to place young people into supervised, paid, local work experiences inside a policy framework that already favors work experience spending. [2][7]

For state systems, the implication is scale. Once the model is proven in one geography, the state can replicate a standard architecture across local markets: officiating pathways, sponsor packaging, employer distribution, and shared reporting.

Conclusion

The thesis is not that sports is merely important. That is too vague to be useful. The thesis is that local sports already functions as a latent economic platform and should be operated as one.

The participation base exists. Household attention exists. Staffing demand exists. The public funding framework for youth work experience exists. The officiating shortage proves the labor need is real. The only missing element is an operator willing to connect the system, professionalize the inventory, and measure outcomes with discipline.

The new model is simple: sports is the platform, workforce is the anchor, attention is the monetization engine, and retained local value is the outcome.

Sources and Proof

[1] White Sports Ventures, “Reports | WSV Research & Analysis.” Public reports page states WSV publishes research built around operators, market structure, workflow bottlenecks, media and distribution shifts, and monetization control. <https://www.whitesportsventures.com/reports>

[2] Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association, “Become an Official.” Page states officials must be 16 years old or older and links to the Junior Official Program. <https://www.piaa.org/officials/become/default.aspx>

[3] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook, “Umpires, Referees, and Other Sports Officials.” Projects 6% employment growth from 2024 to 2034 and about 4,600 openings per year on average. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/entertainment-and-sports/umpires-referees-and-other-sports-officials.htm>

[4] Aspen Institute Project Play, “Youth Sports Facts: Participation Rates.” Reports 27.3 million youth ages 6–17 participated in organized sports in 2023, or 55.4%. <https://projectplay.org/youth-sports/facts/participation-rates>

[5] International Labour Organization, “Generative AI and Jobs: A Refined Global Index of Occupational Exposure.” States clerical occupations continue to have the highest exposure levels. <https://www.ilo.org/publications/generative-ai-and-jobs-refined-global-index-occupational-exposure>

[6] O*NET OnLine, “27-2023.00 - Umpires, Referees, and Other Sports Officials.” Defines the occupation as officiating competitive events, detecting infractions, and deciding penalties according to established regulations. <https://www.onetonline.org/link/summary/27-2023.00>

[7] Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, 20 CFR § 681.590. States local youth programs must expend not less than 20 percent of allocated funds on paid and unpaid work experiences. <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-20/chapter-V/part-681>

[8] U.S. Department of Labor, “WIOA Youth Formula Program.” States WIOA prioritizes work experience through a 20% minimum expenditure rate for the work experience program element. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/youth/wioa-formula>