



# Uplift

## Central Coast

California Jobs First  
Regional Plan Part I Executive Summary

JANUARY 2024

# What is the California Jobs First Program?

California Jobs First (formerly known as the Community Economic Resilience Fund or CERF) is a state-level program designed to bring funding to each area of the state for sustainable, equitable economic growth. It is tailored to respond to the specific needs and characteristics of each of the 13 California Jobs First regions, ensuring that job creation strategies are aligned with a carbon-neutral economy and the unique demands of different communities.



## Who is Uplift Central Coast?

Here in the Central Coast region, leaders have joined to form a coalition called Uplift Central Coast (*Uplift*), to engage in meaningful dialogue with our community and collaboratively define what economic opportunity means for this region. Uplift aims to use California Jobs First funding to create quality job opportunities, improve workforce skills, and address specific economic challenges here on the Central Coast to **help our communities not only survive, but thrive.**

Uplift is convened by three economic development agencies: REACH, Economic Development Collaborative, and Monterey Bay Economic Partnership.



Uplift is informed and governed by a collective of constituency groups who all share an equal seat at the table.



Members of each constituency group serve on our three collaborative committees, which are supported by Uplift's administrative team.



The Uplift committees and team members engage our regional stakeholders through...



# Defining the Central Coast

The Central Coast region includes the counties of Santa Cruz, San Benito, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Ventura, an area more than 2.5 million people call home.

Residents take pride in their community's natural beauty and diverse environment, known for its picturesque landscapes and coastlines. The region is also a hub for high-wage, knowledge-intensive industries like aerospace, defense, biotech, and precision manufacturing. Notable economic activities include high-tech developments around Santa Barbara county, biotech innovations in Ventura County, space exploration at Vandenberg Space Force Base, and advanced mobility startups in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties.

Despite these economic strengths, **many residents struggle to get by with low-quality jobs** in sectors like agriculture, hospitality, retail, and tourism, which often do not provide living wages and benefits. **High housing costs, expensive childcare, long commutes, and other financial burdens further reduce residents' quality of life.** While the region generally fares well in health outcomes, these benefits are not evenly distributed, with some communities of color disproportionately facing chronic health issues and limited access to quality healthcare.

Lastly, it is important to note that due to the large size and rural nature of the Central Coast, experiences vary significantly across its different areas. The northern counties (*Monterey, San Benito, Santa Cruz*) and southern counties (*San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura*) each have distinct economic and social dynamics. **Solutions to these challenges need to be tailored to individual communities** while addressing broader regional issues.





## A New Approach

Uplift is taking a fresh approach to economic development by bringing together residents from diverse communities, industries, the public sector, education, labor, and others. As a coalition, Uplift is not just making sure that all communities have a seat at the table, **Uplift is redefining the way the table is built entirely.**

The Uplift strategy recognizes the importance of **equity, sustainability, and access to opportunities**, viewing them as critical drivers for a thriving regional economy built on a shared prosperity. Over recent decades, major worldwide economic trends—such as globalization’s impact on places and workers as well as technology-induced changes to the nature of work—have made addressing these drivers more challenging.

To directly address these issues, **Uplift’s strategy focuses on inclusive community engagement**, alongside extensive research. Uplift has conducted wide-ranging Listening Sessions, data analysis, interviews, a public opinion poll, and more to understand trends and hear the voices of disinvested, underserved, and often excluded groups on the Central Coast. This inclusive approach aims to bring people into the conversation who have historically been left out, ensuring that their voices contribute to shaping the region’s economic development strategy.

“I feel good because this is the first time that we have been invited to the table.”

—Virtual Listening Session focused on the Black community

# Key Findings of Uplift’s Work so Far

Uplift’s vast research and deep listening with community to date dives into the real-life opportunities and challenges facing the Central Coast and its residents. It covers important issues like regional costs of living and other barriers limiting economic security (e.g., housing, childcare), industries offering the potential for quality job growth, and considerations for talent and workforce pathways. To learn more and access the full report, please visit [upliftcentralcoast.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Uplift-Regional-Plan-Part-I\\_January-2024.pdf](https://upliftcentralcoast.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Uplift-Regional-Plan-Part-I_January-2024.pdf).

Below are the major **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats** identified through Uplift’s listening and research:

## Strengths

- Strong sense of pride in community
- Beautiful and tranquil nature
- World-class innovation hubs, universities, and other higher education institutions
- Agriculture-suitable weather conditions
- Small businesses providing essential services
- Industry strengths in areas core to the modern economy, including semiconductors, quantum, and clean/blue technology

## Weaknesses

- High costs of living, especially housing
- Insufficient jobs, especially quality jobs
- Seasonal jobs/gig economy
- Insufficient affordable, conveniently located childcare, eldercare, and healthcare
- Far distances/designed disconnect (*exclusion*) from key resources
- Long, traffic-laden commutes
- Lack of public transit
- Inconsistent broadband connectivity
- From preschool through graduate degrees, educational attainment is inequitable and varies greatly by race and ethnicity
- Regional disconnect between counties

## Opportunity

- Grow industries with potential to offer more quality jobs to workers with less than a bachelor’s degree, such as subindustries of precision manufacturing and advanced business services
- Improve quality and productivity of jobs in prominent industries such as agriculture, food, healthcare, and hospitality
- Expand training and education through greater alignment of economic and workforce development activities
- Implement deliberate strategies to reduce racial, lingual, gender, geographic, and other disparities
- Enhance regional broadband connectivity
- Increase public-private partnerships

## Threats

- Extreme heat, wildfire, droughts, sea level rise, flooding, and economic ripple effects of global climate change impacts outside of the region
- Natural resource constraints, including already limited freshwater access
- Increasing prices and inflation may exacerbate residents’ financial challenges, potentially driving out or displacing locals who cannot afford to stay in their homes and communities, further exacerbating gentrification and displacement
- High rates of childhood poverty present a long-term threat to prosperity and growth

# We Are Listening: Common Challenges

The Uplift team met with over 1,600 community members during numerous Listening Sessions and Community Convenings, and conducted a public opinion poll of more than 1,200 Central Coast residents. Several topics came up time and again when residents were asked what their biggest barriers were to economic prosperity:

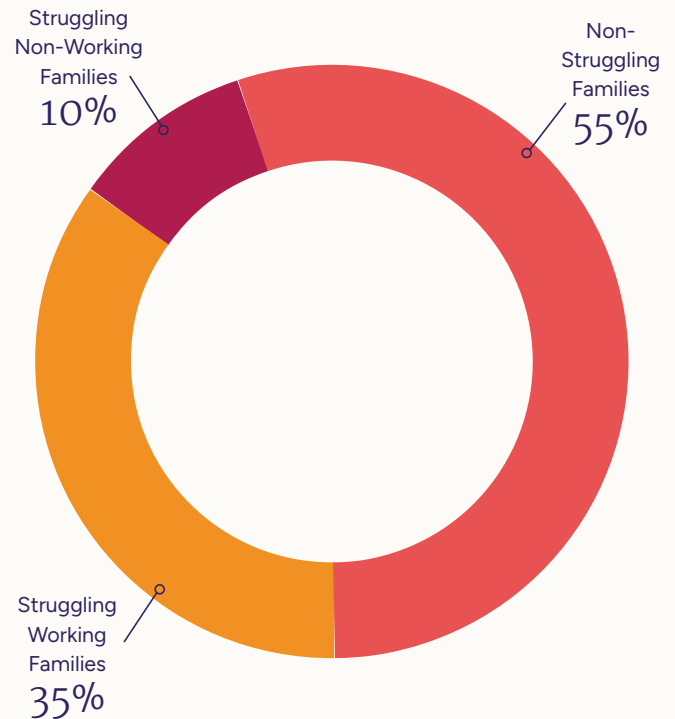
- Given the **lack of quality jobs and high cost of living**, especially the **high cost of housing**, Central Coast residents often do not see a future for themselves and their families in the region.
- The region's **underdeveloped infrastructure, especially in internet access and transportation**, poses challenges for Central Coast residents.
- The region's **under-resourced childcare and eldercare** are barriers to quality of life on the Central Coast.
- **Spanish and English language proficiency** is a significant factor in job eligibility, disproportionately impacting Hispanic/Latino/x/e, Black, and Indigenous residents.

According to Uplift's community engagement and research, **many Central Coast individuals and families are struggling to make ends meet**, meaning their incomes do not cover basic costs of living. About 45% of Central Coast families struggle to make ends meet—that amounts to over 1 million residents, as of 2021.

With so many working Central Coast residents struggling, it suggests that many of the region's jobs do not provide family-sustaining wages.

Younger, less formally educated workers, and workers who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) are more likely to face economic challenges throughout the Central Coast. For instance, 47% of Hispanic/Latino/x/e workers struggle, compared with 28% of Black workers, 24% of Asian and Pacific Islander workers, 22% of American Indian workers, and 21% of white workers.

## Share of Central Coast Population in Families that Struggle to Make Ends Meet



*Source: Brookings / Cities GPS analysis of University of Washington Self-Sufficiency Standard and American Community Survey 1-year public-use microdata sample, 2019–2021.*

“I work at the only restaurant in New Cuyama. I need to take turns with my sister-in-law to go to work because we don't have childcare for our kids.”

—Listening Session in New Cuyama



# Let's Talk Jobs

## The Central Coast Needs More Quality Jobs

The Central Coast region has a **significant gap in providing quality jobs to many residents**, particularly those who are younger, less educated, and non-white.

Only a quarter of jobs in the Central Coast currently qualify as quality jobs, due to the dominance of low-wage industries, such as agriculture and hospitality, and the region's high costs of living. A further 15.2% qualify as "promising jobs," meaning they provide a pathway to a quality job within 10 years. The remainder of regional jobs—59.3%—count as neither quality nor promising jobs.

**These startling realities demand an urgent focus on creating more quality and promising jobs, plus upgrading existing jobs.**

### Definition of a "Quality Job"

Uplift's research approach set three standard criteria for a "quality job":

- Pay an annual living wage that allows families to make ends meet while accumulating long-term and emergency savings. This wage was defined as \$70,000 per year in the southern sub-region of the Central Coast and \$75,000 per year in the northern sub-region, following the goal of enabling half of all struggling parents to meet basic costs of living.
- Offer employer-sponsored health insurance (*a proxy for other worker benefits*).
- Provide worker stability in terms of retaining or leading to another quality job in the future.

A "promising job" provides a pathway to a quality job within ten years.

## Turning the Tide: Unlocking Hidden Potential

Uplift's research dives deep into what industries already have a foundation within the Central Coast and future trends, asking where there could be major growth in the number of accessible quality jobs.

### CENTRAL COAST INDUSTRIES WITH POTENTIAL

The Central Coast's economy is propelled by agriculture, hospitality, and local-serving sectors (*e.g., healthcare, construction, food service, retail, and other parts of the economy that cater primarily to local consumers*), alongside manufacturing and knowledge-intensive industries such as information and finance. These industries offer different prospects for both achieving high-value growth and providing more workers with quality jobs.

The research found that **certain dimensions of manufacturing and business services offer particular promise for both growth and providing quality jobs** for workers holding less than a bachelor's degree. These industries center around complex instruments and microelectronics. Applications vary from the blue economy to quantum computing and aerospace. Investments in education and training will be important to creating pathways to these opportunities for workers.

At the same time, the region needs to do more to create more quality jobs in large industries that employ a significant number of Central Coast residents. This includes working with agriculture, healthcare, and hospitality employers to continue to improve wages and working conditions.

In the next phase of Uplift's work, the coalition will dive deeper into these industry challenges and opportunities, collecting additional stakeholder and community input. This input will inform strategies that attract future investment to our region.

**"Más allá del tipo de trabajo que se haga el sueldo no es suficiente para pagar la renta, que es muy cara. Por 40 horas nos pagan \$560, y la renta es \$3,500 o \$3,600, por eso en una casa llega a vivir hasta 3 familias y eso es un problema. No concuerda el salario con los altos costos".**

**—Listening Session in Monterey with Spanish-speaking parents of children with disabilities**

# Next Steps

## Key Considerations

- Lowering costs of living and improving the well-being of residents must be a major priority for the region. Pursuing funding, policies, and programs that expand the availability of affordable housing and childcare is crucial.
- The region faces significant barriers to growth around ecological, political, and economic constraints.
- The region has a path to sustainable, quality job creation in industries such as precision manufacturing and advanced business services.
- Improving job quality and productivity in industries such as agriculture and hospitality, which already have a large existing workforce, is essential.
- The region must bolster access to quality job opportunities in new or existing industries through expanded/improved educational pathways, training opportunities and lowering other barriers.
- Physical access and proximity are barriers to opportunity for families and businesses. The region's large area and rural nature are challenges.

## Where Uplift Goes Next

With the completion of Uplift's Regional Plan Part I, Uplift will transition from a focus on research to **strategy development**. This will entail applying the input and analyses found through extensive research and community engagement to identify impactful ways to **equitably improve the economy throughout the Central Coast—together**.

In collaboration with Committee members, and the community at large, and informed by research, **Uplift will develop strategies and identify priorities where resources and investment will make the biggest difference**. California Jobs First funding is aimed at building long-term plans that could help mobilize collective action and investments to *uplift* communities for years to come.

Based on Uplift's learnings from this phase, there are **numerous strategic opportunities** to build upon across the six-county region. In the coming months, Uplift—in partnership with the community—will work to identify and narrow down these priorities, in alignment with the vision of those who call the Central Coast home.



# Meet the Team Behind Uplift Central Coast

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**Michael Boyer**, Boys & Girls Clubs of Mid Central Coast; Diversity Coalition San Luis Obispo County; San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce

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**Scott Lathrop**, ytt Northern Chumash Nonprofit; California Polytechnic State University-San Luis Obispo

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## Vision Committee:

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**Cesar Lara**, Monterey Bay Central Labor Council

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**Garrett Wong**, County of Santa Barbara

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## Northern Steering Committee:

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**Enrique Arreola**, San Benito County Health and Human Services Agency; California Workforce Association

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**Richard Vaughn**, County of Monterey

# A Note from Uplift

On behalf of Uplift Central Coast Coalition, we are proud to share this insightful, community-informed report and analysis of our collaborative work to date. This report reflects the complex realities, lived experiences, and disparities that exist across the region for the community members who strive to build their lives on the Central Coast. **Our work is powered by Central Coast residents working together toward a shared vision of a sustainable, diverse, inclusive economy built by and for the region's residents.**

As with anything, as communities grow and evolve, so must our practices, policies and frameworks for strategy and implementation. Inclusive economic development planning seeks to create a more sustainable and equitable economy by balancing economic growth with social inclusion and environmental stewardship.

Traditionally marginalized and disinvested communities have been excluded from economic conversations for too long. As a coalition, we are working to not just make sure that these communities have a seat at the table, **we are redefining the way the table is built entirely.** Together, we are focused on addressing systemic barriers that hinder equal access to economic opportunities and shared propriety.

We are grateful and humbled to work alongside our talented and thoughtful team of staff, partners, committees, and community members who have given their time and talents to shape this work. We are confident that together, we are well on our way to uplifting the Central Coast. Visit our website to learn more about this work and join our growing coalition of collaborating organizations.

**In partnership and solidarity,  
Uplift Central Coast Team**

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Central Coast