

## Top Priorities for an Equitable Workforce Education and Training System

### Background

As the nation debates the need for stimulus to help the economy recover, it is critical to put in place policies that will create an equitable recovery. Raising overall economic activity will not equally distribute opportunity nor provide the relief needed to communities hit hardest by the crisis. The jobs that are created must be good jobs, and workers need support to secure those jobs, including increased access to effective education and training. To position the economy for an equitable long-term recovery, ambitious public investments are needed to create jobs with good wages and benefits, and major complementary investments in adult education and training are necessary to provide the support workers need to emerge from the crisis equipped for high quality jobs.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the stark inequalities that have long plagued the American labor market and society. Millions have lost their jobs or earnings, disproportionately people of color and those with less formal education who were already struggling before the crisis. In 2019, earnings for Black and Latinx workers had just returned to pre-Great Recession levels.
- While the unemployment rate has declined since the peak of the current crisis, it remains highly elevated especially for Black and Latinx populations and for workers without a college degree. At present, recovery is already starting to slow with fewer and fewer jobs added to the economy each month.
- To achieve economic security for those most impacted by the downturn, we need to take the following steps:
  1. First, we need to support those who cannot find jobs with unemployment insurance and income assistance.
  2. Second, we concur with those calling to raise the minimum wage and improve labor standards. This will raise the floor for all workers which will particularly benefit women and workers of color.
  3. Third, investments in sectors like infrastructure, clean energy, education, and public health can create opportunities with family sustaining wages, benefits, and stability, while also strengthening the nation's ability to respond to the daunting crises we face.
  4. Fourth, we need to provide impacted workers the support and training they need to access jobs that provide family sustaining wages.

**Without bold, complementary investments in a new adult training system, many of the most vulnerable workers will not be able to access good jobs and current inequalities will deepen—particularly along racial lines.**

As economic activity resumes over time, workers will return to a labor market that has permanently changed. Many of the jobs that have been lost will not come back. Workers will be forced to seek new opportunities in an economy where more consumers are relying on e-commerce, more businesses are adopting automation, and more people are teleworking. Many of the jobs that return will look fundamentally different and require new skills as workers navigate the transition from an industrial to a digital economy. For example, good jobs in sectors like construction now require significant technical training and home health aides use digital tools in their daily work.

### **Policy Goals**

To address the challenges presented above, a new framework for education and training policy would meet four objectives:

- 1. All unemployed and low-wage workers can afford effective training that will lead to a good job**
- 2. Employers, labor, and community partners collaborate to provide work-based training opportunities and improve job quality**
- 3. An adequate supply of effective education and training options are available, including online programs**
- 4. Workers have the information, guidance, and support needed to navigate the job market, training options, and pathways to economic security**

### **Goal 1: All unemployed and low-wage workers can afford the training programs that will lead to good jobs and wage increases**

#### Challenge

Many unemployed and low-income workers cannot access or afford effective career-oriented education and training programs that would help them secure good jobs in the economy that emerges. Community colleges and other training providers are struggling to maintain operations in the face of huge budget cuts and social distancing restrictions. Effective programs—including those delivered online—are unaffordable or inaccessible to too many workers, while many available training programs are ineffective and do not lead to good jobs.

#### Potential Solutions

- Create a new dedicated funding stream for unemployed and low-wage workers to pursue education and training programs that will help them get higher wage jobs. Workers should be given sufficient funds to pursue effective job training programs of their choosing with more funding available to the most effective programs.
  - To make sure everyone can participate successfully, funding should be flexible enough to cover both tuition and supportive services like childcare, housing, transportation, and other basic needs.
- Provide a basic small stipend to all unemployed and low-wage workers to pursue any online career-oriented training they choose, without meeting the above criteria, including digital skills training and prerequisites for more advanced training.
- Invest in state data infrastructure to improve insights into labor market information and measure the impact of training programs on employment and wages.

**Goal 2: Employers, labor, and community partners collaborate to provide work-based training opportunities and improve job quality**

Challenge

Public funding dedicated to helping employers meet their talent needs is not sufficiently tied to employers' commitments to creating good quality jobs, instead spending taxpayer dollars to help employers train people for low-wage work. Current programs are not designed to address the bias or discrimination in the education system or labor market that makes it harder for people of color to access good jobs.

Potential Solutions

- Provide funding to organizations – including labor-management partnerships, community-based organizations, and workforce boards – that work with groups of employers in a sector or a region to create effective training, improve the quality of existing jobs, and reduce bias in hiring.
- Support employers and unions in providing meaningful training opportunities to new and incumbent workers for quality jobs.

**Goal 3: An adequate supply of effective education and training options are available, including online programs**

Challenge

Social distancing has required many in-person programs to be cancelled or switched to online settings. Many adults are balancing new work and childcare arrangements that limit their ability to learn in person. The result has been an increase in demand for non-traditional and online learning options that give people the opportunity to quickly adapt to rapidly changing economic conditions. Despite the demand for online learning to be a greater part of the training landscape, gaps persist that will limit an equitable recovery if not addressed.

Potential Solutions

- Provide funding to increase the availability of effective online education that prepares people for good jobs.
- Support training providers like community colleges, which supply effective, career-oriented online training programs that prepare people for high-quality jobs.
- Adopt complementary proposals that make necessary investments in broadband, devices, and digital skills to enable everyone to successfully learn online.

**Goal 4: Workers have the information, guidance, and support needed to navigate the job market, training options, and pathways to economic security**

Challenge

The public workforce coaching system only has the resources to serve a fraction of those who need help. Those who do receive support will encounter a system that prioritizes immediate placement into any job, rather than providing the information, resources, and support to access quality jobs and the training needed that will provide economic security and mobility over the course of their career.

### Potential Solutions

- Expand federal funding to hire and train more career coaches in the federal workforce system.
- Create a new federal funding stream to support community-based organizations and other entities that provide career services that reach communities of color, low-income communities, and other populations that historically have limited access to these services.
- Provide funds to states to expand coaching in other organizations used by jobseekers including community colleges, community-based organizations, and labor-management partnerships, and provide training to career coaches in the state so that they can help clients get into higher-wage jobs.