

# In the Meantime: How to Support Immigrant Skill Building While Waiting for Federal Action on Immigration

## A GUIDE FOR FUNDERS

Funders who are interested in supporting immigrant workers' skill-building have a variety of options for action, even as the new Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA) program and the expansion of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) are awaiting a decision by the courts.

**T**his brief outlines three skill-related domains in which funders can support low-wage immigrant workers. First, we review avenues to provide direct services to *people*, including those with a range of different types of immigration status.

Second, we look at opportunities to support the development and success of immigrant-serving *programs*, via activities such as program development and replication, technical assistance, peer learning, and capacity building. This category also includes field-building activities such as research and evaluation.

Finally, we examine mechanisms to scale and sustain effective programs through skills *policy* at the federal, state, and local levels. This category includes policy analysis and development, coalition building, and advocacy strategies.

**It is important to note that each of these activities may be undertaken within a funder's specific constraints:** for example, in a geographically specific area, for a particular subgroup of immigrants, or within a set timeframe.

In addition, many of these activities can fit comfortably within a variety of grantmaking topic areas, including reducing inequality, asset building, economic opportunity, adult education, workforce development, workers' rights, and other areas.

## SKILLS: THE NEW FRONTIER OF IMMIGRATION STATUS POLICY

Regardless of the details of any future immigration policy taken up by Congress or a presidential administration, it is a virtual certainty that it will include a skills component. That is, there will be some requirement that immigrants demonstrate educational attainment or credentials.

## WHAT ARE DACA AND DAPA?

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (**DACA**) is a federal program launched in 2012 that allows certain undocumented immigrants who were brought to the US as children to apply for protection from deportation and a temporary work permit.

While the program does **not** allow participants to apply for permanent immigration status, it does enable them to work legally and apply for driver's licenses, and otherwise facilitates their participation in society.

In 2014, President Obama proposed an expansion of the DACA program to allow additional individuals to become eligible. The President also proposed a new program, Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (**DAPA**), which would allow undocumented parents of US citizen or lawful permanent resident children to apply for similar protection from deportation and temporary work permits.

At present, the **original** 2012 DACA program *remains in effect*, and nearly 700,000 young people have obtained DACA status.

The 2014 **expansion** of DACA and the proposed new DAPA program are *on hold* and have not been implemented, pending the decision of a court challenge brought by a group of states. The case is currently on appeal to the US Supreme Court.

Have questions or want to learn about specific examples?  
Contact National Skills Coalition for details at [info@nationalskillscoalition.org](mailto:info@nationalskillscoalition.org).

[www.nationalskillscoalition.org](http://www.nationalskillscoalition.org)



NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION  
Every worker. Every industry. A strong economy.

Whether policies are focused on highly educated immigrants or those with limited formal education; those trying to gain admission to the US or those trying to regularize their status from within this country; the momentum is the same: Policymakers want to see proof that immigrants have attained key educational and/or vocational milestones, and — increasingly — that these milestones are relevant to US employer needs.

There are three basic ways that policymakers can insert skills requirements in immigration policy:

- A *threshold* requirement, as with the DACA program, which requires immigrants to obtain a high school diploma or equivalent, or be enrolled in school, in order to be eligible to apply.
- An *incremental* requirement, as with the DREAM Act and other immigration reform legislation that would require applicants to meet educational or workforce milestones before obtaining permanent resident status.
- An *aspirational* or incentivized component, such as citizenship legislation that encourages more immigrants to gain the skills they need to become naturalized US citizens and earn higher wages.

No matter which approach is used, the end result is similar: Immigrants must make investments in their own capabilities in order to reap the benefits of a given policy.

But while immigration policies increasingly require skills, our field is not fully in a position to help immigrants meet those requirements. There are three domains in which additional resources are needed:

1. **People:** Immigrants themselves have insufficient access to the direct services needed to meet these requirements.
2. **Programs:** There is a need to evaluate, replicate and scale what works in targeted education and workforce programs that can get immigrants where they need to be — both for individuals' economic success and to meet current and future immigration requirements.
3. **Policy:** To date, no education and workforce policy has offered the requisite resources to scale the field to the degree that would be needed to meet the demand that would be created by any new immigration policy. Moreover, there are unrealized opportunities to adapt *existing* workforce and adult education policies to better serve immigrant populations.

**Below we provide a short contextual overview of the immigration and workforce landscape, followed by a menu of options for philanthropic support.**

### Immigration Context:

There are 41 million immigrants in the US today, representing 13% of the total population. Immigrants comprise an even higher share of the US *workforce*, at 17%.<sup>1</sup>

The subset of undocumented immigrants represents approximately

27% of all immigrants, 4% of the total US population, and 5% of the US labor force.<sup>2</sup>

Many immigrants are working in low-wage jobs. A full 25% of employed immigrants are in the service sector, traditionally a source of lower-paying jobs.<sup>3</sup> The percentage employed in the service sector is even higher (33%) for undocumented immigrants.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, earnings for immigrant workers can be low: Nearly a third of full-time, year-round immigrant workers (31%) earn less than \$25,000 a year.<sup>5</sup>

A significant proportion of immigrant workers need to build foundational skills in spoken English, math, or reading. Results from the international Survey of Adult Skills show that there are 12 million immigrants of working age who lack basic skills.<sup>6</sup>

There are also nearly 1.6 million immigrants with degrees from abroad who are constrained by so-called “brain waste,” a phenomenon in which their foreign credentials and experience are not recognized, leaving them languishing in low-wage jobs.<sup>7</sup>

### Skills Context:

Several major pieces of skills legislation have recently been reauthorized or are expected to be considered this session in Congress. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), reauthorized in 2014, provides more than \$3 billion in funding that supports GED classes, English language classes, occupational training and employment services for low-income individuals.

Legislation expected to be taken up by Congress in the 2015-16 session includes the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, which could provide an opportunity to make federal financial aid more responsive to working learners, including immigrants; and of the Carl D. Perkins Career & Technical Education Act, which could increase access to occupational training, work-based learning, and other skill-building opportunities for youth and adults.

Meanwhile, states are moving forward to implement the WIOA legislation passed last year. While WIOA does not track the number of participants who are immigrants, data does show that approximately 700,000 people a year are served in English language classes. Limited English Proficient individuals<sup>8</sup> also participate in other WIOA-funded services such as job training.

WIOA's *workforce* services require that participants be legally work-authorized,<sup>9</sup> but its *adult education* services are typically open to individuals regardless of immigration status.<sup>10</sup>

While WIOA officially took effect on July 1, 2015, states and localities are engaged in ongoing planning and implementation activities. Most notably, each state is required to submit a “unified plan” for how WIOA services will be coordinated across the workforce and adult education systems. Plans are due to the federal government in March 2016. Other areas of focus for WIOA implementation include the

design and implementation of **career pathways** that enable workers to progress through levels of training and obtain industry-recognized credentials, and the formation of **industry sector partnerships** that bring together employers and other stakeholders to design training that meets local labor market needs.

Even before WIOA's passage, advocates and policymakers in many states were already seizing new opportunities presented by revived state budgets and responding to growing concerns from employers about skilled worker shortages amidst recovering economies. As such, there is now both policy *and* political opportunity within many states, as Governors and state legislators are looking to advance new initiatives that can help to increase the skills, earnings, and employability of workers while closing skill gaps.

## SUPPORTING IMMIGRANT WORKERS THROUGH DIRECT SERVICES

Private philanthropy can be a crucial glue for binding together fragmented education and workforce systems, and ensuring that immigrant participants do not fall through the cracks. In this section, we outline specific opportunities for funders to supply that glue in the form of supplemental, connective, and/or innovative “builds” on the existing workforce system.

Funders interested in these issues can also amplify their impact by connecting with colleagues in different areas of the philanthropic sector – such as workforce development, adult education, or immigration. By sharing knowledge, information, expertise, and best practices across issue areas, funders can reduce duplication and improve coordination within philanthropy.

- Fund additional slots in **Integrated Education and Training (IET)** programs. Such programs are proven to be effective in helping workers to acquire basic skills in English or math while also working toward employment in a specific occupation or industry. IET programs are an eligible activity under WIOA, but there is limited funding available to implement them.
- Provide **gap funding** to allow education and training providers to serve immigrant participants who are ineligible to be served by other funding streams (due to, e.g., their income level, education level, or immigration status).
- Fund **targeted services** for low-wage workers who have degrees and credentials from their home countries and would like to re-establish professional careers in the US.
- Fund **additional slots** in high school equivalency (GED) classes, helping more young immigrant Dreamers become qualified to apply for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).
- Support efforts to **identify and assist** Dreamers who are DACA-eligible but have not yet applied, which disproportionately include those in Asian/Pacific Islander, African, and Caribbean communities.

## STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING DREAMERS

Undocumented immigrant youth known as Dreamers successfully fought for the establishment of the original Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program in 2012. Since then, as described above, nearly 700,000 young people have received temporary work authorization under the DACA program, which is still in effect. (Only the *expansion* of DACA is on hold due to the court case.)

But while DACA's 2-year work permits mark a major step in helping young people move from informal jobs to formal employment, they come with no guarantees.

Many DACA-mented youth are struggling to identify the full range of education and career options open to them, as well as navigate complicated processes for accessing those options.

In addition, there are an estimated 400,000 more young people who would be eligible to obtain DACA if they met educational requirements, and still more who are now “aging in” to eligibility. (You must be at least 15 years old to apply for DACA.)

Among the menu of philanthropic options presented in this brief are several that could help Dreamers on their path to career success.

- Support **career navigator** or similar positions at immigrant organizations to help youth and adult jobseekers navigate complex pathways through education and training programs into future employment.
- Work with supportive employers to provide **onsite education and training** to help workers advance.
- Support a public relations campaign to **educate DACA-mented youth about their options** for accessing federally funded adult education and job training services.

## FOSTERING EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS TO SERVE IMMIGRANT WORKERS

The lack of dedicated funding for immigrant workforce services means that many organizations are focused on patching together support for their existing programs. They often have limited bandwidth for developing or learning about and replicating new program models, and lack funding and time to develop collaborations with new and unusual partners. Private philanthropy can fund valuable breathing room and time for these organizations to develop such capacity.

- Support adult education providers in **creating curricula** and **providing professional development** for instructors who are working to comply with new WIOA requirements for Integrated Education and Training and Integrated English Literacy/Civics Education.
- Support existing or new **industry sector partnerships** (and the intermediaries needed to convene them) that design occupational training based on local employer demand, and include meaningful access for immigrant participants.
- Convene immigrant, adult education, and workforce stakeholders to discuss how the **career pathways** required under WIOA legislation can include effective on-ramps for workers with limited education.
- Work with Local Workforce Development Boards and immigrant organizations to identify potential opportunities for serving Dreamers through federally funded **employment and training services**.
- Convene nonprofit organizations and colleges which have successfully helped DACA-mented youth to **obtain occupational certificates** or licenses, enabling them to share promising practices.
- Fund research to “**back-map**” and understand which activities or pathways have been most effective in helping former low-wage workers advance into higher-paying jobs.
- Fund **dissemination** projects to communicate key findings (to advocates and workers) from prior research on what actually helps low-wage workers to advance.
- Identify opportunities to **facilitate connections** across immigrant and workforce organizations in a given community to improve local competitiveness for federal grant opportunities.

## WINNING POLICY CHANGES THAT SUPPORT IMMIGRANT WORKERS

Developing a deeper understanding of immigrant workforce policies is vital in identifying the levers that can help organizations enact meaningful change. Activities in this domain include the ability to analyze existing policies, develop new or improved policy, and organize the coalitions needed to enact policies through effective advocacy/communication efforts. Funders can provide vital support for these activities, which are crucial pre-requisites for programmatic success and sustainability.

Fund **policy analysis** to identify barriers facing immigrant workers in existing local, state and federal policies, and identify policy changes for overcoming them.

Fund **policy development** to create new policies or expand existing policies that can scale and sustain effective models for improving employment outcomes through skill development for immigrant workers.

Fund **coalition-building** across immigrant-serving organizations and community colleges, adult education providers, and workforce development organizations so that a diversity of stakeholders are weighing in on policy.

Support advocacy — including **strategic communications** and campaign development — to increase investments and improve/expand federal, state, and local skills policies.

Support implementation of policies. For example, provide resources to help organizations advocate with state and local officials to ensure that immigrant organizations are **included in WIOA planning efforts**, and can help to document local immigrant workforce demographics and adult education needs.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Migration Policy Institute analysis of US Census/American Community Survey data. See: <http://migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states#Workforce%20Characteristics>
- 2 Pew Research Center estimates. See: <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2014/11/18/authorized-immigrant-totals-rise-in-7-states-fall-in-14/>
- 3 Ibid. Note that this substantially outweighs the number of employed native-born Americans in service-sector jobs (17%).
- 4 Pew Research Center estimates. See: <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/03/26/share-of-authorized-immigrant-workers-in-production-construction-jobs-falls-since-2007/>
- 5 US Census, American Community Survey 2009-13. “Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Period of Entry into the United States.” (Table S0502.)
- 6 *Time for the U.S. to Reskill?* (OECD, 2013.) See: [www.timetoreskill.org](http://www.timetoreskill.org)
- 7 Migration Policy Institute analysis of US Census data. See: <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/brain-waste-US-state-workforce-characteristics-college-educated-immigrants>
- 8 It can be assumed that a significant percentage of Limited English Proficient individuals are immigrants, though others were born in the mainland US or in the territory of Puerto Rico.
- 9 This *does* include individuals who have received temporary work permits via the DACA program.
- 10 A few states, such as Arizona, have imposed more strict requirements than exist at the federal level.