



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

To: President-Elect Joe Biden
Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris
President-Elect Biden Transition Team

From: Katie Spiker, Director of Government Affairs, National Skills Coalition

RE: Recommendations for Administrative Actions to Support and Inclusive Economic Recovery

To Whom it May Concern:

National Skills Coalition (NSC) is a network of business leaders, labor leaders, community advocates and community colleges, workforce and education officials that are together advocating for an America that invests in its people. We want our nation's federal and state policies to give every worker and every industry the skills they need to compete in today's global economy. Numbering over 40,000 members and subscribers, NSC has for the past 20 years regularly brought these local experts into Washington to meet with federal policymakers—including Vice President Biden himself when he was overseeing the implementation of the Obama Administration's Recovery effort and later its Job Driven Training agenda.

We are excited about what President-Elect Biden and Vice President-Elect Harris will do to change how our nation prioritizes investing in the skills and careers of those working people often left behind by our nation's economic policies—be they workers of color, or low-wage workers in some of our lower-paying service sectors, or working class people who have not nor ever likely will pursue of a four-year college degree. We hope the Biden-Harris administration will “build back better” by making sure that everyone gets a chance to be a part of that effort, including those who require some additional training and support to be part of our nation's economic future

To that end, NSC is pleased to provide the attached memoranda outlining concrete steps a Biden-Harris Administration could take during the first year in office that would transform the lives of millions of US workers and businesses, and set us on a course to a truly inclusive economic recovery. Among other things, NSC recommends:

- Establishing – as part of a new Economic Recovery Task Force – an interagency Sub-Task Force on Skills for an Inclusive Economic Recovery, which would help prioritize federal investments in education and training as part of stimulus and recovery efforts to ensure that all US workers have the skills and

credentials to gain family-supporting employment while supporting US business growth.

- Directing existing and new federal investments to address digital literacy gaps for 48 million US workers with limited or no digital literacy skills.
- Supporting a new Assistant Secretary of Community and Technical Colleges at the Department of Education, who would be responsible for spearheading the President-Elect's ambitious plans for expanding community college access.
- Supporting the work of a new Office of New Americans within the White House, and particularly a new Skills for New Americans initiative that would focus on increasing equitable access to education and skills training opportunities for immigrants and refugees.
- Halting the Trump Administration's misguided efforts to create a new low-quality apprenticeship model, and reinforcing the importance of Registered Apprenticeship and other work-based learning strategies as a way to help workers earn a wage while learning necessary skills.
- Using existing Department of Labor resources to expand industry partnerships, a proven multi-stakeholder approach that helps workers enter into and advance along career pathways in key local or regional industries.
- Expanding access to income supports and reskilling opportunities for workers who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic, technological changes, or other economic disruptions.
- Putting workers at the center of future infrastructure investments by advancing policies that prioritize projects that hire and train community residents for family-supporting careers.
- Establishing a cross-agency data working group to support the setting and tracking of stimulus human capital goals outlined above, while also promoting data sharing, data transparency, and other policies that lead to more inclusive investments in education and training.
- Reversing the Trump Administration's cruel and ineffective policies expanding work requirements for public assistance participants, and instead focusing on building better educational and employment pathways for individuals in safety net programs.

We look forward to working with the Biden-Harris Administration to achieve these ambitious goals, and to ensure that all US workers and industries can share in our nation's economic prosperity. Please do not hesitate to contact me at katies@nationalskillscoalition.org with any questions you may have regarding these recommendation.

Investing in US Workers: Establish a White House Interagency Sub-Taskforce on Skills for an Inclusive Economic Recovery

- As part of White House-led Economic Recovery Task Force, prioritize investments in education and training to ensure that all US workers have the skills and credentials to gain family-supporting employment while supporting US business growth.
- An interagency sub-taskforce on Skills for an inclusive Economic Recovery would address racial and other equity gaps in education and employment by ensuring that our nation's workforce investments focus on what matters.

As the nation prepares to recover from the deepest and most abrupt economic recession in its history, and the devastating health impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, there has been growing momentum around the idea of President Biden and his Cabinet directing, from the White House, a new “Economic Recovery Task Force” that would be responsible for guiding the federal government’s implementation of new stimulus investments. Modeled on the highly successful recovery efforts under the Obama Administration – including the Presidential Task Force on the Auto Industry and then Vice-President Biden’s oversight and leadership of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) implementation – this new Task Force would be charged with ensuring that federal dollars are spent wisely and equitably in a way that allows us to “Build Back Better.”

To be truly successful, however, the Task Force needs to ensure that this recovery is focused on rebuilding our nation’s most important asset: **our workforce**. With tens of millions of US workers out of work or underemployed due to the effects of the economic downturn – and with many of those individuals already facing substantial barriers to career advancement due to structural racism, gender discrimination, and decades of underinvestment in education and training – our nation’s economic recovery efforts should prioritize an *inclusive economic recovery*, one that invests in the skills of US workers to make sure that every American has meaningful opportunities for a family-supporting job or career.

A Sub-Taskforce on Skills for an Inclusive Economic Recovery as a Foundational Component of an Economic Recovery Task Force

To ensure that skills are at the forefront of a Biden Administration recovery plan, we propose that the Task Force establishes a Sub-Taskforce on Skills for an Inclusive Economic Recovery. This would be responsible for setting ambitious national goals for our nation’s education, workforce, human services, and related systems to support investments in skills, while also providing guidance and leadership to states and other stakeholders in order ensure that they

are utilizing investments under any future economic stimulus legislation – and leveraging existing federal, state, and local resources – in support of those goals.

This new sub-taskforce would build on President-Elect Biden’s longstanding commitments to US workers, and particularly his role as a champion for skills. In 2014, then-Vice President Biden led a government-wide review of federal workforce and education programs and laid out a job-driven training agenda¹ for the 21st century that would support the creation of millions of new jobs and career pathways. Many of the innovative strategies identified in this report remain underfunded and underutilized due to the lapse in governance the past four years; the sub-taskforce should utilize this blueprint to reinvigorate our efforts to ensure all workers have a pathway to a good job.

After the release of the Vice-President’s Job-Driven Training agenda in 2014, then-Labor Secretary Tom Perez was put in charge of an interagency working group tasked with collaborating with the White House National Economic Council and the Secretaries of Education, Commerce, Health and Human Services, et.al. to coordinate on the implementation of the plan. In the current much larger and more critical context of the COVID recession, we believe this interagency model can be built upon to develop and implement the worker re-training and re-employment aspects of the White House’s larger Economic Recovery plan. As explained below, we would propose this new Sub-Taskforce be chaired not by a Cabinet Secretary, but by Vice President Harris, given the centrality of the sub-taskforce’s mission to the economic recovery plan and the Vice President-elect’s efforts on workforce training and equity issues as a member of the U.S. Senate.

In addition to helping to implement the White House’s recovery plan, this sub-taskforce would also be critical to ensuring the success of key policy priorities that President-Elect Biden outlined in the 2020 campaign. The President-Elect has called for investing \$50 billion in workforce training², including investments in industry-led training partnerships and expanding apprenticeship opportunities; and the ambitious goal of providing two years of tuition-free community college for recent high school graduates and adults who may need retraining to advance their careers or transition to new industries. These exciting proposals would have a transformative impact on the lives of millions of US workers, while also ensuring that small and medium-sized US businesses can quickly find the talent necessary to recover, grow, and compete in today’s economy.

However, getting Congress to make the scale of skills investments laid out by President-Elect Biden is not inevitable and will require real political leadership. As we’ve seen over the course of the past year, workforce development has not been a political priority in Washington: the \$2 trillion Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act passed by Congress in March 2020 included only \$345 million in workforce funding under the Department of Labor, and even the House Democratic-led Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency

¹ https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/skills_report.pdf

² <https://joebiden.com/beyondhs/>

Solutions (HEROES) Act included only \$2.75 billion for workforce programs – far less than the \$5 billion that was included in ARRA more than a decade ago. These relatively low levels of investment reflect a failure of current political leadership to recognize the importance of investing in workers as part of any economic recovery strategy and to invest in the capacity of community colleges, labor unions, community-based organizations, and other stakeholders to help those workers get the skills and credentials they need to succeed.

Appointing a dedicated Sub-Taskforce for an Inclusive Economic Recovery would send a powerful and important signal to Congress, and the nation as a whole, emphasizing the President-Elect’s commitment to expanding education and training opportunities for all US workers. The sub-taskforce should be comprised of heads of key federal agencies with responsibility for the administration of federal education, workforce, and human services programs (including the Departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services); and should include representation from demand-side agencies (including the Departments of Transportation, Energy, and Commerce) that will be responsible for job-creating investments in any stimulus effort, to ensure that those job creation efforts are paired with training strategies to help US workers take advantage of these new career opportunities.

At a minimum the Sub-Taskforce should be charged with:

- **Setting bold human capital goals** for federal stimulus efforts to support an inclusive economic recovery, with a specific focus on measuring the impacts of federal job creation, education, training, and human services investments in helping US workers and businesses achieve their dreams. For workers, an inclusive economic recovery requires us to track:
 - Economic gains for those who lost their jobs during the pandemic: increases in wages, skill attainment and/or credentials, and long-term advancement prospects
 - Reduced disparities in the above outcomes between workers of color and other workers; between women and men; between younger and older workers
 - Reduced poverty for those who have received federally funded training
 - Increased rates of quality credential attainment for workers without a BA
 - Increased rates of training participants who moved from jobs paying less than \$15 an hour to at or above \$15, including those who have obtained a good job with benefits

For businesses – particularly small and medium-sized businesses, an inclusive economic recovery requires:

- Increased occupational mobility of workers from contracting industries to skilled jobs in growing industries

- Increased number of small firms participating in and hiring from local workforce partnerships
 - Increased investments among small or medium-sized companies providing publicly subsidized on-the-job training, work-based learning, and upskilling opportunities for workers without a BA, including workers of color, women, and other workers who have historically been excluded from economic opportunities
- **Establishing a public “inclusive economic recovery” dashboard** that outlines the human capital goals and progress being made over time. The implementation process for ARRA included unprecedented levels of government transparency, with detailed agency by agency reporting on the uses of federal stimulus funds and outcomes from those investments. But it was often difficult to find comprehensive information about job placements and retention supported through ARRA funds. More importantly, there was little to no reporting on how those investments were improving economic outcomes for workers and businesses, particularly those who had historically been left behind due to factors such as structural racism, occupational segregation, and limited educational attainment. To build public confidence in federal stimulus efforts – and, more importantly, to demonstrate how those investments are reducing inequities and leading to new economic opportunities for historically marginalized workers, rather than just restoring the status quo – the task force should adopt an inclusive economic recovery dashboard that lays out the metrics established above, and provides regular updates on progress. This would also serve as a vehicle for identifying where investments weren’t working and allow for real-time course corrections to policies and strategies to ensure they are better aligned with the overall outcomes.
- **Updating and advancing the 2014 Job-Driven Training Strategy to serve as a blueprint for the reauthorization of federal workforce and education laws, including the Higher Education Act and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.** The 2014 report spearheaded by then-Vice President Biden was a milestone moment, identifying a range of proven workforce development strategies such as industry partnerships, career pathways, and registered apprenticeship, and putting the full weight of the federal government behind advancing those strategies to help US workers and businesses. The report drove a range of critical investments and changes in federal policy, including a well-regarded cross-agency effort to support the implementation of the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the release of more than \$300 million in federal grants to expand apprenticeship opportunities as part of the Administration’s Apprenticeship USA initiative. Unfortunately, virtually all of that progress has been stalled by the Trump Administration, which has done little to advance innovation in workforce development over the past four years. The task force should be charged with updating

and re-releasing the Job-Driven Training Strategy, including lessons learned from the implementation of WIOA and the 2018 Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (also known as Perkins V), as well as continuing Congressional investments in registered apprenticeship models. The updated report could serve as a blueprint for upcoming reauthorizations of key federal laws including WIOA and the Higher Education Act.

- **Supporting Additional Executive Efforts to Expand Access to Skills.** In addition to the broader strategic goals outlined above, there is a range of steps a Biden Administration can take in the first 100 days after taking office to meaningfully expand access to high-quality education and training, particularly for workers who have long been excluded from economic opportunity. Those steps include:
 - Directing existing and new federal investments to address digital literacy gaps for 48 million US workers with limited or no digital literacy skills
 - Supporting a new Assistant Secretary of Community and Technical Colleges at the Department of Education, who would be responsible for spearheading the President-Elect's ambitious plans for expanding community college access
 - Supporting the work of a new Office of New Americans within the White House, and particularly a new Skills for New Americans initiative that would focus on increasing equitable access to education and skills training opportunities for immigrants and refugees
 - Halting the Trump Administration's misguided efforts to create a new low-quality apprenticeship model, and reinforcing the importance of Registered Apprenticeship and other work-based learning strategies as a way to help workers earn a wage while learning necessary skills
 - Using existing Department of Labor resources to expand industry partnerships, a proven multi-stakeholder approach that helps workers enter into and advance along career pathways in key local or regional industries
 - Expanding access to income supports and reskilling opportunities for workers who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic, technological changes, or other economic disruptions
 - Putting workers at the center of future infrastructure investments by advancing policies that prioritize projects that hire and train community residents for family-supporting careers
 - Establishing a cross-agency data working group to support the setting and tracking of stimulus human capital goals outlined above, while also promoting data sharing, data transparency, and other policies that lead to more inclusive investments in education and training

- Reversing the Trump Administration's ineffective policies expanding work requirements for public assistance participants, and instead focusing on building better educational and employment pathways for individuals in safety net programs

For further information regarding these recommendations, please contact Katie Spiker, National Skills Coalition's Director of Government Affairs, at katies@nationalskillscoalition.org.

Digital Skills for a Digital Age:

How the Biden Administration Can Ensure that America's Workers and Businesses Are Prepared to Thrive in Today's Economy

- **US workers have serious gaps in their digital skills, even as the pandemic has dramatically increased the demand for those skills in virtually every industry and occupation**
- **Previous administrations have failed to make substantive investments in digital skill-building, and the time is ripe for immediate executive action to boldly lay out a vision for widespread digital literacy and a path to help millions of American workers attain these skills**

Our economy urgently needs workers with digital skills

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the urgent demand for digital skills in virtually every occupation and industry. Whether workers are on the frontlines of retail, in greenhouses working on precision agriculture, serving as mid-level health professionals, or employed in advanced manufacturing, they need digital literacy to succeed in their jobs and support their families.³ American businesses need technologically skilled workers to help them adapt to a rapidly changing economy – including new, necessary tasks such as online COVID-19 safety training or transforming in-person services to an online environment.

Meanwhile, unemployed workers need digital skills to participate in much-needed reskilling opportunities. And even beyond the workplace, individuals need digital skills to engage in education and upskilling, support their children in K-12 education, access telehealth services, and more.

Yet nearly 48 million US workers have few or no digital skills.⁴ Many have *fragmented knowledge* – that is, they can carry out certain digital tasks (such as sending a text) but don't have the skills to do others (such as create a spreadsheet). These skill gaps have high costs for workers and employers; they are an invisible drag on productivity as workers struggle to navigate job requirements and spend precious time compensating for their skill gaps.

The White House should take immediate action

President-Elect Biden recognized the nation's urgent need for investment in digital skills with his campaign pledge⁵ to pass the Digital Literacy Act. As legislative action begins to get underway, the Biden Administration can and should take decisive *administrative* action to fill

³ Digitalization and the American Workforce, Brookings Institution, 2017. Viewable at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/digitalization-and-the-american-workforce/>

⁴ The New Landscape of Digital Literacy, National Skills Coalition, 2020. Viewable at: <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/New-Digital-Landscape-web.pdf>

⁵ See: <https://joebiden.com/infrastructure-plan/>

the vacuum in national leadership on digital literacy. In particular, the White House should convene a new Digital Skills for a Digital Age interagency task force that includes among other agencies the Departments of Commerce (DOC), Labor (DOL), and Education (ED).⁶

This initiative should: 1) develop a formal definition of occupational digital literacy, which can be embedded in workforce and education policy; 2) identify ways to better support digital inclusion and skill-building through existing federal policy, and issue any necessary guidance to encourage or incentivize such action at the state and local level; 3) identify and standardize digital literacy variables as part of data collection and reporting for federally funded programs, and; 4) make recommendations to the White House for new budget investments in digital inclusion and upskilling.

Particular actions that can be taken immediately:

- 1) **The Department of Labor should issue a Training and Employment Guidance Letter (TEGL)** that clarifies how and when digital literacy activities can be paid for by Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I dollars (e.g. as part of technical training for an Integrated Education and Training [IET] program).
- 2) **The Department of Labor should call out digital literacy as a priority activity** or otherwise incentivize applicants to address this issue in their responses to existing federal discretionary Solicitations for Grant Applications (such as those for apprenticeship grants).
- 3) **The Department of Education should use a portion of its WIOA Title II national leadership dollars to support capacity building** among adult education providers. These technical assistance activities should be aimed at speeding up the development and replication of effective IET models that include occupational digital literacy.
- 4) **The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) should establish a priority category** or similar incentive for occupational digital literacy projects as part of its discretionary grantmaking. IMLS should encourage its grantees to collaborate with WIOA system partners in Labor and Education to achieve this – an approach that was originally encouraged by the Obama administration in a 2014 tri-agency communication,⁷ but has been sadly neglected by the Trump administration.

⁶ The specific agencies leading the effort should be Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), Labor's Employment and Training Administration (ETA), and Education's Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education (OCTAE) and Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE). Additional agencies engaged should include the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Services; the Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Administration on Children and Families (including the Office of Refugee Resettlement); the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD); and the Department of the Interior's (DOI) Bureau of Indian Affairs.

⁷ See: <https://www.ims.gov/blog/2014/11/libraries-and-workforce-innovation-and-opportunity-act>

As part of the Digital Skills for a Digital Age effort, the White House should incorporate clear, simple messaging into *all* of its workforce and education initiatives. This messaging should communicate the urgency and importance of digital skills for adult workers – not just for K-12 students – as well as the role of the federal government in supporting states and localities to help workers develop those skills and the vision for how that will be achieved.

This communications component is particularly important given the absence of focused federal leadership on this issue under the Trump administration. A new administration must provide timely, succinct messaging to illustrate the new chapter in federal policy. Strong messaging can also help to counter the mistaken but widely held beliefs that the existence of widespread smartphone ownership and young “digital natives” mean that digital skill gaps are a short-term problem that is quickly disappearing and does not need federal action -- when in reality, data proves the opposite.

The White House should draw on recommendations from the task force in its proposals to Congress. The legislative branch has a useful role to play in strengthening existing workforce legislation to include more explicit digital literacy components, and in advancing new legislation to meet the needs of today and tomorrow. Beyond the Digital Equity Act referenced in President-Elect Biden’s campaign platform, the Biden administration should work with Congress to embed digital literacy across key workforce and education policies as follows:

- **Capitalize on the upcoming reauthorization of WIOA** to expand and update Title II to include additional investment in support of digital literacy as a core component of any adult education program. Congress should also update WIOA Title II performance reporting to include digital literacy and problem-solving skills as a way to demonstrate measurable skill gains by participants. This should be woven into existing performance reporting systems to minimize administrative burden, should be measured using a reputable and validated assessment tool, and should be accompanied by an increased investment so as not to serve as an unfunded mandate on providers.
- **Capitalize on the upcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act** to invest in partnerships between industry and education providers to ensure that education and training programs are responsive to the particular occupational digital literacy needs of local employers.
- **Expand investment in the Higher Education Act and the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the Twenty-First Century Act** (known as Perkins V), to offer additional technical assistance and funding to states and educational institutions to expand access to blended learning opportunities and proven digital skills training models in community college settings.

More details on these proposals can be found in National Skills Coalition’s [*Digital Skills for an Equitable Recovery*](#).

A vacuum in federal leadership: how the US fell behind

Data from a rigorous international assessment conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) show that US millennials' digital skills are below the level of their peers in 17 out of 18 industrialized countries.⁸ Yet despite these sobering numbers, the federal government has been relatively slow to recognize the economic costs of US workers' patchy digital skills, and even slower to invest in the policies that can help workers and businesses prepare to meet technological demands. While ED, DOL, HUD, HHS, and USDA all touch various aspects of digital inclusion in relatively peripheral ways, only Commerce has been squarely tasked and funded to do substantial work on digital inclusion – and these activities have focused heavily on broadband access in particular.

In fact, previous administrations have done little to support occupational digital *skill-building* per se. Efforts have instead focused on the other two elements of what is often termed the three-legged stool of digital inclusion – that is, high-speed internet access, and access to digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, or desktop computers. While these activities are certainly worthy, mere access alone is wildly insufficient to help workers gain in-demand skills. Simply having a computer and broadband access does not equip people to use these tools effectively in the workplace, nor does it prepare people to enter and succeed in online higher education or job training. Rather, workers need high-quality programs and services that can help them build digital skills in the context of their other education and career goals. This is especially important for marginalized adult students and jobseekers who face racial and other inequities.⁹

Prior efforts include the Obama administration's [Broadband Opportunity Council](#), which was housed at the Department of Commerce's NTIA. This entity worked across federal agencies to advance wider broadband adoption in American communities. The Trump administration issued an executive order refocusing efforts as the [American Broadband Initiative](#), but this much smaller effort has been heavily focused on broadband access and has largely failed to address digital skill-building needs.

Other efforts to support digital literacy under existing federal policies have been modest at best. Digital skill building is an "allowable activity" for Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Title II-funded adult education providers but is not easily captured in existing performance measures, making it under-utilized. Similarly, digital literacy can theoretically be incorporated in services under USDA's SNAP Employment & Training program, HHS's Community Services Block Grants, or other federal investments, but to date, there has been very little federal guidance and support for doing so.

A clear, bold digital upskilling initiative would benefit key stakeholders

⁸ <https://www.ets.org/s/research/30079/millennials.html#fig4> (PS-TRE chart)

⁹ Supporting Community College Learners Online, Urban Institute 2020. Viewable at: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/supporting-community-college-learners-online>

Small and mid-sized businesses, workers in rural communities, and workers of color are some of the constituent groups that would be most significantly affected by investment in digital literacy.

- **Small business:** Among businesses, small and mid-sized companies are more likely to employ workers with digital skill gaps,¹⁰ and often the least able to mount ambitious in-house upskilling efforts. Many smaller businesses have also been hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. A White House initiative could help direct upskilling resources to these economically vital firms.
- **Rural communities:** Workers in rural communities face compounded challenges – they are more likely to lack broadband internet access due to their geographic location, and this lack of access then hampers their ability to get online and build better digital skills by participating in educational and workforce opportunities. Tackling these issues as part of a federal digital literacy initiative is crucial to ensure an even playing field for workers in rural locations.
- **Communities of color:** While many workers with digital skill gaps are white, workers of color are disproportionately affected. Data show that fully 50 percent of Black workers, 57 percent of Latino workers, and 36 percent of Asian American/Pacific Islander workers have limited or no digital skills, compared to 23 percent of white workers.¹¹ (Data on Native populations is not available due to low sample size, but given other barriers such as low income and limited educational attainment that many indigenous communities face, it is reasonable to assume that they also face disproportionate digital skill gaps.) Similarly, immigrants and adult English learners are also more likely to lack digital skills, compared to white native-born Americans. Federal digital inclusion efforts should be intentional about using race and ethnicity data to understand inequities and should prioritize interventions and policies that have been demonstrated to close equity gaps.

The American public supports this issue

Voter polling conducted by ALG Group for National Skills Coalition in Spring 2020 showed overwhelming support (84 percent) for public policies that expand access to digital learning and increase digital literacy to make it easier for people to retrain. The public grasps the import and urgency of this issue, especially given the COVID-19 pandemic.

For further information regarding these recommendations, please contact Katie Spiker, National Skills Coalition’s Director of Government Affairs, at katies@nationalskillscoalition.org.

¹⁰ The New Landscape of Digital Literacy, National Skills Coalition, 2020.

¹¹ Applying a Racial Equity Lens to Digital Literacy, National Skills Coalition, 2020. Viewable at: <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/Digital-Skills-Racial-Equity-Final.pdf>

Create an Assistant Secretary for Community and Technical Colleges within the Department of Education

- **National Skills Coalition (NSC) proposes the Biden administration develop a new position of the Assistant Secretary for Community and Technical Colleges who reports directly to the Under Secretary of Education**
- **The position would elevate and oversee community and technical colleges' essential, multiple-mission work, closely coordinate with other agencies and offices, and implement the new community college grant programs the President-elect has proposed**

President-elect Biden's proposals for postsecondary education are ambitious. They include a grant program to assist community colleges in improving student success, \$50 billion for high-quality training programs, and funding for community college facilities and technology. Given their magnitude, they deserve to be administered by a newly created Assistant Secretary for Community and Technical Colleges who has the power within the Department of Education (ED) to elevate the administration's community college mission in ED and across other departments, including Labor and Health and Human Services.

If the United States wants to increase the attainment of postsecondary credentials and degrees, community and technical colleges are foundational to doing so. They provide high quality, cost-effective education. They provide training for the 35-year-old mother of two who seeks a credential to lead her out of low-wage employment. They open their doors for previous college dropouts to restart their education and training and first-generation students who need to stay close to home. They provide a curriculum for workers developed in conjunction with their employer. They provide academic transfer pathways for students seeking entry to a four-year degree. In some cases, they are offering four-year degrees themselves. They are a linchpin to our country's economic well-being and will be essential in our recovery from the COVID-19 recession.

Elevating the Community College Agenda to succeed

Given community and technical colleges' importance to our nation's success, NSC proposes the Biden administration develop a new position of the Assistant Secretary for Community and Technical Colleges who reports directly to the Under Secretary of Education. When the position for community colleges was originally developed, it was intended to be a policy advisor to the Secretary of Education. The re-imagined position would oversee community and technical colleges' essential, multiple-mission work and implement the new community college grant

programs the President-Elect has proposed. It will assist in the implementation of the President-elect's proposal for individuals to access two years of community college or training without debt. It will help ensure community college reforms that support student success -- such as remediation and transfer -- are scaled through policies at the federal level. If we are to tap into the transformational nature of community colleges, their position at the federal level must reflect their importance.

The current administrative setting in the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education is inadequate and outdated

Currently, the main federal staff position related to community colleges—the deputy assistant secretary of community colleges—resides in the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE). OCTAE's primary responsibilities include overseeing Perkins Career and Technical Education (CTE), Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA-Adult Education) and Corrections Education. The Perkins program largely provides funding for state career and technical education in high schools, with much smaller dollars flowing to community colleges. The Adult Education component of OCTAE supports adults and immigrants seeking basic skills, literacy, and English language instruction, the instruction of which may or may not reside in community colleges.

It may have been appropriate for the main federal official responsible for community colleges to reside in OCTAE when two-year colleges had a narrower mission, but times have changed. The students that community and technical colleges serve—44 percent of undergraduates enrolled in postsecondary education programs in 2017-18—need to be recognized within ED by elevating the official responsible for the diverse goals they hope to accomplish. This position should also be provided with a staff that will focus on ensuring community colleges, and their students, succeed. It does not make sense that the responsibility for community colleges, which are primarily funded through higher education and workforce legislation, should reside in an office that is largely focused on much smaller funding streams and programs of CTE and Title II of WIOA.

Recent polling shows that 75 percent of voters want to see more nimble, short-term education and training options. The goal of making post-secondary training more responsive to the needs of workers is precisely the type of target this new position could prioritize as our post-secondary education and training systems are revamped.

Recommendations:

- The new assistant secretary should be engaged with all relevant interagency coordination, such as with the Department of Labor (DOL), as well as intra-agency coordination with offices like the Office of Postsecondary Education and OCTAE.

Coordination with DOL is particularly important given the post-secondary workforce

funding administered by the Employment and Training Administration. This position could also help align investments made in community colleges, including those currently administered through OPE, such as grant programs for minority-serving institutions and TRIO (particularly Education Opportunity Centers and Student Support Services programs residing in community colleges).

- The new assistant secretary could help coordinate policies to better align anti-poverty and postsecondary programs, including public benefits access for community college students, based on the joint agency letter released Nov 15, 2016 during the Obama administration. In addition, the assistant secretary could review all negotiated rulemaking changes that impact community colleges and were made over the past four years.
- The new assistant secretary position should also be responsible for corrections and re-entry education and coordinate with other administrative units in ED involved with corrections education. Moving the Office of Corrections Education from OCTAE would elevate the importance of postsecondary corrections education, which is particularly relevant as interest in corrections education grows and the ban on Pell Grants supporting such programs is reconsidered.
- NSC would also expect that the new assistant secretary would be involved in the issuance of any further state education stabilization dollars that might be included in a future stimulus package and any substantial investments in infrastructure.
- The position should also have responsibility for any administrative and national activities related to new major community college grant funding. Such funding could be used not only for the direct emergency needs of students, but also to develop career pathways, provide seed funding for industry partnerships to quickly train individuals who have been negatively impacted by Covid-19, and bolster financial aid for such programs.

We anticipate there would be broad support for the creation of this position, given community college's essential role in educating and training millions of Americans. If the administration wants to address the inequitable outcomes and higher levels of indebtedness among Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other populations of color who attend for-profit institutions, the elevation of community colleges will help ensure these public institutions have the support needed to advance equity.

For further information regarding these recommendations, please contact Katie Spiker, National Skills Coalition's Director of Government Affairs, at katies@nationalskillscoalition.org.

Skills for New Americans

How the Biden Administration Can Ensure that Immigrant and Refugee Workers Achieve their Highest Potential

- **The Biden administration has an opportunity to fill a vacuum in federal leadership on immigrant inclusion by establishing a White House Office of New Americans and an accompanying Skills for New Americans initiative**
- **This issue has wide, bipartisan appeal to the public and provides a win-win solution that benefits immigrant adult students and workers as well as their US-born employers and colleagues**

An opportunity for White House leadership on the lesser-known side of immigration policy

Immigrants represent one in six American workers – yet federal immigration policy has barely acknowledged their interest in accessing the same opportunities for skill-building and talent development that other workers receive. Instead, policy has focused almost entirely on the high-profile, thorny issues of who is allowed a visa or work permit to stay in this country. As important as those issues are, **the true measure of long-term immigration success is the degree to which New Americans are fully engaged as students, workers, and members of our broader civic community.** This issue has wide, bipartisan appeal to US-born and immigrant constituents alike, who share common values about the importance of connecting newcomers to longtime residents and helping them apply their skills in local economies.

Regretfully, the federal government has traditionally practiced a hands-off approach to the work of helping new immigrants integrate into American society and ensuring that they can contribute their skills and talents to our economy. In the absence of federal leadership, over the last decade, numerous states and localities have implemented innovative and evidence-informed strategies that demonstrate the value of a more active public policy approach. Their success proves that intentional, well-crafted immigrant inclusion policies can help American communities to thrive economically and socially. In particular, effective and well-resourced adult education and workforce development policies can catapult immigrants into skill-appropriate roles that allow them to contribute to their best and highest abilities while providing American businesses with skilled workers.

What the White House should do now

The Biden administration has a singular opportunity to seize a leadership role on immigrant inclusion and advance a powerful vision for incorporating immigrant workers at all levels of our workforce and across every industry. By taking decisive action to establish a federal Office of New Americans and an accompanying Skills for New Americans initiative in the early days of the administration, the President-Elect and his team can ensure that immigrant workers

are fully incorporated in every aspect of adult education and workforce development policy – from entry-level to white-collar jobs, across all industries.

A federal Office of New Americans is needed to play a vital “air traffic control” role in coordinating policy among federal agencies and supporting the replication of effective immigrant inclusion approaches developed at the state and local levels. The Office of New Americans can be established by executive order and housed within the Executive Office of the President. It should have responsibility for coordinating immigration-related policy across the federal government.

A primary mission of this Office should be a “Skills for New Americans” initiative that ensures that immigrants and refugees have equitable access to the education and workforce opportunities they need to thrive. This initiative can begin work immediately through existing pathways within the federal government, such as:

- **Working with the Department of Labor to issue Training and Employment Guidance Letters** or similar policy guidance to advise state and local workforce boards about program models and strategies for serving immigrants and English learners in the public workforce system.
- **Working with the Department of Education to expand technical assistance** to federally funded adult education programs to improve on-ramps to apprenticeship, workforce development, and postsecondary programs.
- **Ensuring that relevant upcoming federal discretionary Solicitations for Grant Applications include immigrants** as a target population or priority focus. These can include DOL H1-B-funded workforce development grants, American Apprenticeship Grants, Institute of Museum and Library Services grants, etc.

In addition, the Office for New Americans should be charged with developing and implementing an *overall* federal strategy on immigrant inclusion that incorporates the best recommendations of state and local leaders and practitioners as well as federal agency staff. Congress also has a role to play in advancing federal immigrant inclusion policy. To date, unlike *immigration* policy, very little legislation has been introduced on *immigrant inclusion*. However, in October 2019, House Democrats introduced the first major bill of this kind, HR 4928.¹ Known as the New Deal for New Americans Act, it would have established a National Office of New Americans within the Executive Office of the President (EOP) and made substantial investments in adult English language learning and workforce development. Whether the 117th Congress decides to take up this bill or another effort, legislation could support and amplify the White House’s efforts.

How we got here: History of previous administrative actions

While the Trump administration has focused primarily on immigration enforcement and related priorities, the Obama White House did take some initial steps toward interagency coordination on immigrant inclusion efforts. In particular, the White House Task Force on New Americans brought together federal agencies to address cross-departmental policy issues. However, the Task Force had such a broad range of responsibilities that it was difficult to focus sustained attention on the important areas of adult education and workforce development.

Near the end of the administration, in June 2016, the Task Force did convene a National Skills and Credential Institute that brought together leading state and local practitioners to discuss one aspect of immigrant workforce development. However, the short time remaining did not allow for additional federal follow-up after the convening. Also, during the Obama years, the Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (which oversees the primary federal investment in adult English language programs) implemented a multi-year technical assistance initiative known as Networks for Integrating New Americans. This effort provided technical advising (but *no* additional funding) for five small local immigrant inclusion efforts centered on adult education.

Additional benefits to launching this work

Advancing a Skills for New Americans initiative within a broader Office for New Americans would have other positive spillover effects. For example, this effort could help to close the disproportionate gaps faced by immigrants and English learners in the area of *digital* literacy.² As the Covid-19 pandemic has made painfully clear, lack of digital skills has heavy costs for workers, their families, and broader communities. Ensuring that immigrants can acquire in-demand technological skills – as well as the broadband access and digital devices they need to participate in upskilling – would be a vital component of federal immigrant inclusion work.

Similarly, an Office of New Americans would be an important stakeholder in reducing the racial inequities faced by many immigrants, particularly Black immigrants and Latin American immigrants with indigenous heritage. The field's understanding of how public policy can close these gaps has grown substantially in recent years, but to date, there has been little overlap between federal work on racial equity and the particular challenges faced by immigrants of color. The time is ripe for meaningful action.

The American public supports these ideas

A wide array of constituent groups has supported immigrant inclusion efforts at the state and local level and would be primed to support a new federal effort. These include:

- Higher education institutions, particularly those that serve substantial numbers of immigrant learners and have been at the forefront of inclusion efforts

- Labor unions and labor-management training partnerships, especially those with sizeable immigrant memberships
- Immigrant advocacy organizations, including national organizations, state-level nonprofit immigrant rights' coalitions
- Immigrant service providers, including adult education organizations, refugee resettlement agencies, ethnic-specific associations, and others
- State Offices of New Americans (approximately seven offices to date nationwide) and mayoral Offices of Immigrant Affairs (roughly thirty offices), who play this role at lower levels of government

Advocates for marginalized job seekers of all backgrounds (e.g., formerly incarcerated people, former foster care youth, people with disabilities, etc.) could also be allies for this work *if* this initiative is an intentional part of a larger strategy to ensure that all individuals who face barriers to employment have meaningful access to education and workforce development.

In addition, voter polling conducted by ALG Group for National Skills Coalition in Spring 2020 showed overwhelming support (84 percent) for public policies that expand access to digital learning and increase digital literacy to make it easier for people to retrain.

For further information regarding these recommendations, please contact Katie Spiker, National Skills Coalition's Director of Government Affairs, at katies@nationalskillscoalition.org.

Charting the Right Course on Apprenticeship: Returning to a Focus on Quality

- **Office of Apprenticeship (OA) should halt all work on Industry-Recognized Apprenticeship (IRAP), refocusing instead on expanding pathways of work-based learning and registered apprenticeships for all workers, especially those who have been historically excluded from these pathways, and for more businesses in more industries.**
- **Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration should work with OA to ensure pathways to alternative forms of high-quality work-based learning, including pre-apprenticeship and other pathways that include earning credentials and wages, are available to all workers, especially those on our safety net programs and those most impacted by the current economic and health crisis.**

Our country faces the most devastating economic crisis since the Great Depression and the Department of Labor’s strategy in the coming months and days will have a significant impact on the lives of workers and businesses across the country.

Skills training and apprenticeships alone cannot address the challenges workers and businesses face right now. But programs under the Department of Labor’s jurisdiction can have a meaningful impact on the lives of millions of U.S. workers by helping them reskill, succeed in training, and fill open positions with companies in their communities. Skills are critical to the Department of Labor’s role in driving the country towards an inclusive economic recovery.¹

Apprenticeship programs are a “win-win” — workers earn wages while learning new skills and businesses can customize training to their workforce needs. For companies in desperate need of new workers, these programs immediately place motivated hires on-site. Because businesses are directly involved in onsite and classroom learning, they can align training with the skills they need at any moment and adjust training quickly as their workforce needs change. The approach has been shown to reinforce employee engagement, leading to better morale, higher retention and lower turnover.²

During the Obama Administration, the Department of Labor launched the American Apprenticeship Initiative and ApprenticeshipUSA,³ which supported grants to states to engage in innovative practices to expand apprenticeship. The Obama Administration also launched contracts with national organizations, including the National Urban League and organizations serving women and people with disabilities, to help facilitate technical assistance to states and apprenticeship programs on improving equity within them.

While purportedly continuing a focus on apprenticeship, the Trump Administration continued some of the Obama Administration's work but also took several administrative actions that harmed the progress made under the prior administration.

To effectively continue momentum around expanding apprenticeship, especially as a strategy to open doors to good jobs for workers to whom they have previously been inaccessible, the Biden Administration should take the following steps to move *Apprenticeship Forward*:¹²

- **Rescind harmful Executive Action from the Trump Administration.** The White House should rescind Executive Order 13245, Expanding Apprenticeships in America. The Trump Administration focused on creating a new Industry Recognized Apprenticeship system at the detriment and expense of all other workforce programs, calling for all available funding to be directed towards the new system. Multiple Executive Orders,⁴ including EO 13245 and EO 13845, directed agencies to cut expenditures on workforce and education programs that help workers who most need access to succeed in skills programs. The Apprenticeship Task Force, convened by the Secretaries of Commerce, Education, and Labor, issued a recommendation to cut funding to workforce programs to fund IRAP programs. Both the 2018⁵ and 2019⁶ Presidential Budget Requests from the Trump Administration proposed moderate increases in funding for apprenticeship, coupled with proposals to significantly cut workforce funding for other programs. Overall, these efforts lacked necessary alignment between our public workforce and apprenticeship system. The Trump Administration perpetuated a narrative that apprenticeship – particularly their IRAP system – should exist outside of and in place of our public workforce system, which negates the important contribution the workforce system has played over the past decade to expanding apprenticeship.⁷ The Secretary should work with the White House to rescind these Executive Orders and instead focus on modernizing workforce programs.
- **Halt all efforts to create Industry Recognized Apprenticeship.** The Department should reabsorb all Office of Apprenticeship staff and resources into those efforts that expand registered apprenticeship. The Department should rescind all guidance and all Training and Employment Guidance Letters related to IRAP programs and reissue guidance affirming a commitment to registered programs.

The Trump Administration's stated goal in creating a new IRAP system was to address perceived challenges with registered apprenticeship. When evaluated next to the standards to which DOL holds registered programs, IRAPs are provided significant flexibility in program structure, wage progression, oversight, and interaction with the public workforce system that seem counterproductive⁸ to protecting workers or meeting industry demand.⁹ Additionally, the system fails to

¹² <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/Definition-and-Principles-for-Expanding-Quality-Apprenticeship-in-the-U.S..pdf>

address existing challenges, creating, instead, unnecessary confusion for workers, businesses, and communities. Any changes to an established system should be to better serve those stakeholders who rely on it, and IRAP failed to do so. Instead, it created more difficulty for states and training programs by reducing opportunities for alignment at the local level and removing state autonomy from regulating programs within their borders. The program also provided inconsistent measures of quality, meaning workers and businesses could be faced with an imprecise picture of the training programs' effectiveness. Finally, the Trump Administration failed to apply equal employment opportunity standards to IRAP that address discriminatory impacts of recruitment, selection, hiring, and retention policies within apprenticeship programs. These regulations, last updated under the Obama Administration in 2016, are critical to expanding apprenticeship in an equitably and effectively.¹⁰

- **Issue guidance on the importance of work-based learning programs outside of registered apprenticeship programs, where appropriate for workers and industries.** Registered apprenticeship is a high-quality training model that aligns business demand and worker need. Not all workers, however, have had access to the skills or qualifications to meet rigorous application standards for apprenticeship programs. Businesses provide a spectrum of quality work-based learning opportunities that do not rise to the rigor or depth of training encompassed in an apprenticeship program. The Department of Labor should issue guidance on quality work-based learning programs that help workers gain credentials and skills that lead to career progression. This guidance should include specific information on aligning work-based learning opportunities with the needs of workers – or potential workers – who are also beneficiaries of public benefit programs like TANF and SNAP. This will require working with the Departments of Health and Human Services and Agriculture to ensure administrative restrictions under those agencies' jurisdiction maximize access to work-based learning of all kinds, including registered apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship.
- **Work with Congress to modernize registered apprenticeship to meet worker and business needs.** The existing registered apprenticeship system has not been significantly updated in more than eighty years. Congress has, over the past five years, however, increasingly appropriated funding intended to expand apprenticeship into new industries and for new workers. The Biden Administration should work with Congress to support legislation, consistent with the work of the [Apprenticeship Forward Collaborative](#), that builds on successful practices in states and communities, meet industry demand and worker need, and protects the health, safety, and wellbeing of apprentices and mentors.

The American public supports these changes

In national polling conducted prior to the pandemic, 88 percent of voters and 63 percent of business leaders wanted increased public funding to expand apprenticeship.

Any Biden Administration focus on apprenticeship should include a return to basics – ensure that workers’ needs are addressed and that programs are meeting industry needs.

For further information regarding these recommendations, please contact Katie Spiker, National Skills Coalition’s Director of Government Affairs, at katies@nationalskillscoalition.org.

Modernizing the Public Workforce System to Equip Workers with 21st Century Skills

- **Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration (ETA) should modernize our public workforce system to meet unprecedented demand from unemployed workers while still prioritizing investments in upskilling incumbent workers most vulnerable to displacement.**
- **Modernization should include supporting industry partnerships, empowering states to use their Eligible Training Provider List as quality control mechanisms and improving access to incumbent worker training – including increased access to digital literacy skills.**

Our country faces the most devastating economic crisis since the Great Depression, and the Department of Labor’s strategy in the coming months and days will have a significant impact on the lives of workers and businesses across the country.

COVID-19 has demonstrated that we need a different approach to supporting displaced workers as they get ready for their next job. When the pandemic subsides, workers who lost their jobs will not all be able to return to the same companies or even the same occupations. Instead, many workers will need re-training to get a new job, along with income, health care, and other supportive services while they re-train. National Skills Coalition recommends aligning different programs to provide a more comprehensive re-employment response.¹³

At the same time, the health and economic crises have affected key industries in very different ways but has disproportionately impacted small and mid-sized businesses across industries. To reduce ongoing economic hardship for businesses and workers and to work toward recovery, we must support small and mid-sized businesses – which represent the majority of businesses – in averting layoffs, keeping their employees paid, and supporting employee re-training during down-time.

A response to a crisis of historic scale needs to include investing in workers at the backbone of America’s economy – those who need training past high school, but not a four-year degree.

Improve our public workforce system to better address needs of workers who have lost their jobs and those most vulnerable to displacement

¹³ See our memo on *A 21st Century Reemployment Accord* on page 25

To ensure the public workforce system can truly keep pace with worker and business demand for skills, the Biden Administration needs to fundamentally rethink how workers access training services, shifting from a model where training is treated as a last resort, and instead creating a system that guarantees workers and jobseekers access to necessary training. A parallel shift is necessary in how the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding supports services for businesses – the Biden Administration should prioritize a workforce system that can truly respond to skill demands in the local economy.

WIOA is the nation’s primary law governing investments in job training, but the program no longer serves enough participants. Only 123,000 adults received training under WIOA Title I in Program Year (PY) 2018,¹⁴ compared to over 200,000 individuals accessing training services in PY 2004¹⁵. In a labor market where more than 80 percent of all jobs require some form of education and training beyond the high school level – and an economy where nearly 50 million workers are unemployed or underemployed and looking for better opportunities– we can’t afford to have our workforce development system sitting on the sidelines.

This decline in training is largely caused by decreased funding at the federal level. The workforce system is drastically underfunded compared to historic levels and those invested by other industrialized countries. Formula grants to states have declined by 40 percent since 2001, adjusted for inflation.¹⁶ The U.S. also invests less than every industrialized country in active labor market policy, except for Mexico, and we would need to invest \$80 billion more *annually* just to reach the median level of investment of other industrialized countries.

As discussed below and for that reason, it is imperative that any administrative changes made by the Department be coupled with a robust legislative strategy to improve workforce investments.

Additional policy decisions also exacerbate funding challenges. WIOA funds may only be used to support training if other grants or assistance (such as Pell Grants) are unavailable or insufficient to cover the costs of participation, and only after job center staff make a formal determination that the individual needs training in order to achieve self-sufficiency and otherwise meets eligibility requirements. While these rules are theoretically intended to preserve limited funding, in practice they create bottlenecks that mean frustrated jobseekers and employers who often simply forego WIOA resources due to lack of responsiveness and flexibility.

WIOA is up for reauthorization in 2020, and the Biden Administration should lead on a set of legislative priorities that create a public workforce system that can be an engine of innovation.

¹⁴ https://www.doleta.gov/performance/results/WIASRD/PY2018/PY_2018_WIOA_and_Wagner-Peyser_Data_Book.pdf

¹⁵ https://m.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/NSC_TPIB_WIA_Title.pdf

¹⁶ <http://www.americasworkforce.org/latest-action-list/2019/9/19/investing-in-americas-workforce-a-national-imperative-for-the-21st-century>

These include proposals like those championed by Vice President Harris' Senate office in the 21st Century Skills Act – creating a guaranteed public investment in skills training for workers who lose their jobs and support partnerships between industry and educators that ensure public and private investments support workers' access to skills that lead to good jobs.

To empower these shifts, the Department of Labor should prioritize three key steps:

- **Use H-1B Skills Training Grants to support expanding Industry or Sector Partnerships.** These partnerships bring together industry, educators and the workforce system to scale workforce best practices, inform training programs, and support worker success, including by disrupting patterns of systemic racism in training, hiring and employment faced by workers of color.¹⁷ Training programs provided in a sectoral approach lead to higher wages and retention rates for workers. As of 2017, more than thirty states had adopted specific policies to build or expand sector partnership strategies, in part due to the increased focus under WIOA.¹⁸ The Obama Administration also pushed for a \$3 billion investment in industry partnerships in their Fiscal Year 2017 Presidential Budget Request through a program called the American Talent Compact¹⁹ and these partnerships were a priority for then Vice President Biden's Middle Class Task Force.²⁰

Industry partnerships are also an entry point for businesses in to engaging with the public workforce system, making it easier for the system to serve more employers more effectively. The World Economic Forum found that the private sector in the U.S. is poised to cover one-third of the costs associated with increased automation and technology in the workplace. By convening more partnerships between employers in the same industry, however, that same private investment can cover more than half the costs, lowering the investment necessary from the federal government.²¹ The Department should use H-1B funds to support a federal grant program to expand these partnerships in all communities, and all industries, across the country.²²

¹⁷ National Skills Coalition, Roadmap to Racial Equity: an Imperative for Workforce Development Advocates (2019) https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/Racial-Equity-Report_6x9_web.pdf

¹⁸ We are not aware of any studies since 2017 on state adoption or expansion of sector partnerships. One useful area of research would be to reexamine current utilization of these strategies relative to the 2017 baseline, and to look at any barriers to local or state implementation.

¹⁹ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/04/fact-sheet-president-obama-proposes-new-first-job-funding-connect-youn-0>

²⁰ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/100226-annual-report-middle-class.pdf>

²¹ http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Towards_a_Reskilling_Revolution.pdf

²² This funding is currently being used to support the Trump Administration's Industry Recognized Apprenticeship Program. Repealing EO 13245 will free up funding to be targeted to this solution.

- **Issue guidance to improve access to funding for incumbent worker and on-the-job training through contracts with workforce boards.**

WIOA allows significant flexibility to use local adult and dislocated worker funds to support incumbent worker training. Local areas can use up to 20 percent of their combined funds to support incumbent worker training, and have the option of reducing matching requirements for common forms of training such as on-the-job training (OJT) or customized training, depending on the size of the firm receiving assistance.²³ However, despite this flexibility, the number of people participating in these forms of training has actually *declined* since WIOA was passed. National participation in OJT has gone from 16,385 in PY 2014 to 11,846 in PY 2018; and participation in customized training has gone from 5,667 in PY 2014 to just 2,789 in PY 2018.

At a time with historic unemployment, training for unemployed workers is a critical tool to restore our economy and workers' economic security. But this strategy should also be combined with strategies that help keep people in the workforce and provide them with the skills their employers need, especially newly emerging areas such as digital skills. Training for workers on the job is an imperative form of layoff aversion and a pathway to economic opportunity that can help workers— especially those most at risk for losing their jobs— avoid ever needing to access services designed to help people weather periods of unemployment. Training for existing workers can also help those who are new to an industry gain skill necessary to be successful in maintaining employment.

Investing in workers' training while they are employed allows for maximizing private investment in that same training and minimizes public costs associated with finding a worker a new job or supporting income replacement while unemployed. Incumbent worker training also supports greater racial equity. Women of color, for example, are disproportionately concentrated in lower-wage jobs in the health care industry.²⁴ Investing in incumbent worker training and upskilling will help create ladders to good jobs for workers in jobs deemed "essential" during the pandemic, but which do not pay wages commensurate with the risk or skill required to do.

The Department should reissue guidance, building on that issued during the Obama

²³ It is worth noting that despite Congressional intent to make incumbent worker training more accessible, the final rules implementing WIOA established a requirement that incumbent workers must have worked for the employer for at least six months, thus reducing the utility of the program as a means to upskill newer hires.

Administration, to better facilitate state and local administration of Incumbent Worker Training and on-the-job training, to workers who are most at risk to displacement.²⁵

- **Empower states to utilize their ETPL as meaningful quality assurance mechanisms**

Eligible Training Provider Lists (ETPL) serves as a resource that can help individuals make strong educational choices to advance their careers in alignment with state or regional economic needs and supports equitable access and transparency to the training and education opportunities available for participants in WIOA Title I programs, including the Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth programs. States are required to set eligibility criteria for training providers and their programs to be put on and remain on the state's ETPL, and continued eligibility must include a measure of the "quality of the program or training services²⁶" with states setting their own definitions for quality. The Department should issue guidance that strongly encourages states to establish quality criteria for ETPLs that aligns with metrics needed to support an inclusive economic recovery, such as advancing along a career pathway, and disaggregating employment and wage outcomes by race and ethnicity to ensure that participants of color are being served equitable across and within eligible programs, and to ensure that eligible providers and programs do not perpetuate and potentially advance the systemic inequities that people of color have endured in our education and training system.

This also gives the Department a transformative opportunity to identify training providers whose programs may not meet the threshold for continued eligibility and for whom state-led technical assistance could increase the equitable outcomes not just of WIOA participants, but all participants of a given training program. DOL could issue guidance to states on how to provide technical assistance to training providers who commit to corrective action to remain on the ETPL by purposefully working to improve outcomes for learners of color.

Finally, the pandemic magnified the need for flexibility in training delivery methods available to individuals when in-person learning is not possible and for easily accessible cross-state information on eligible training opportunities. The Department should advance the ETPL as a collection of information on training programs, their characteristics, and employment and wage outcomes, using standard language and definitions, which could be made transparently available to national credential clearinghouses. This would ensure that WIOA Title I participants, as well as students

²⁵ See <https://wdr.doleta.gov/directives/attach/TEGL/TEGL12-09acc.pdf>

²⁶ https://wdr.doleta.gov/directives/attach/TEGL/TEGL_8-19.pdf

and other adults in career transition, have greater access to training opportunities they may wish to pursue.

The American public support these changes

Nearly 90 percent of voters want public investments in partnerships between workforce programs and local businesses and 75 percent of voters want to see more nimble, short-term education and training options so people can quickly retrain. At the same time, 82 percent of voters believe the government should help businesses train, instead of laying off, workers.²⁷

The Biden Administration has the opportunity to modernize and reinvigorate workforce programming to meet the needs of workers and businesses. Any focus on the workforce system should include supporting partnerships, empowering states to use their ETPL as a quality control mechanism and supporting training for workers on the job most vulnerable to displacement.

For further information regarding these recommendations, please contact Katie Spiker, National Skills Coalition's Director of Government Affairs, at katies@nationalskillscoalition.org.

²⁷ On behalf of NSC, ALG research conducted a nationwide online survey of N=800 likely 2020 general election voters between May 21-25, 2020.

¹⁴ <https://www.policylink.org/our-work/economy/national-equity-atlas/COVID-workforce>

A 21st Century Reemployment Accord: Modernizing our Unemployment System to Better Function as a Reemployment System

- **As currently structured, our workforce and unemployment system only provides one out of every twenty workers who lose their jobs with both income support during their unemployment and training to help them access a new job.**
- **The Department of Labor (DOL) should enable better access to unemployment benefits for workers in training—including for dependent costs—and should ensure increased alignment between workers on unemployment insurance and those who access training and dislocated worker services funded by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.**

Our country faces the most devastating economic crisis since the Great Depression, and the US Department of Labor’s strategy in the coming months will have a significant impact on the lives of workers and businesses across the country.

Nearly one-third of the workforce lost their jobs over the first half of 2020 and our unemployment insurance system saw unprecedented demand for income support from these workers.²⁸ More than 40 percent of that job loss was concentrated among workers earning less than \$40,000 a year, and workers with only a high school diploma have been displaced at nearly three times the rate as those with a bachelor’s degree. Across the labor market, workers of color and immigrants, particularly women, have shouldered the greatest job loss.

This disproportionate impact on our most vulnerable workers is directly attributable to ineffective and inefficient policy choices in the past that make skills and education inaccessible to too many workers, including policies that perpetuate the impacts of systemic racism.

There is significant research in showing that workers who lose their jobs have the best outcomes when they receive: 1) training for a new job, coupled with 2) income support during that training and 3) access to other supportive services that help them complete training and succeed in a new job.

²⁸ <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/NSC-Skills-for-an-Inclusive-Economic-Recovery-web-Sept-2020.pdf>

- Income support, including Unemployment Insurance (UI), is a vital income stabilizer for workers after job loss.²⁹ Workers who receive unemployment insurance are able to minimize the reduction in their spending on things like their mortgage, student loan payments or child care expenses — spending that ensures they have the time and space to train for a new job and invest time in a job search.
- Workers who receive income supports for an adequate amount of time — from eighteen months to two years — have increased wages in their new employment and are more likely to maintain that employment in the years following their dislocation.³⁰
- Workers who have access to income supports are more likely to find a good job and have improved job retention once reemployed.³¹
- Access to benefits for one year has also been shown to reduce transitions between UI and means tested programs serving workers with less immediate workforce attachment, like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.³²

Some states have taken the lead in providing these holistic services to workers – for example, from 2007-2010, Michigan’s No Worker Left Behind (NWLB) program provided nearly 150,000 workers with training and supports to reenter employment during the Great Recession. At the federal level, the Trade Adjustment Assistance Program is a proven model that provides workers with access to training, income support and even financial support for relocation to enter employment. Yet it is a comparatively tiny program. In 2019, it served fewer than 30,000 participants *nationwide*.³³

But most workers don’t have access to robust programs like TAAP or Michigan’s NWLB. Across the U.S., unemployment and workforce systems are too disjointed and underfunded to adequately provide those services. On average, prior to the current health and economic crisis, almost two million people were laid off or discharged from their jobs each month. Only about half that many filed for unemployment insurance, about 225,000 workers a week; perhaps in part because only about 40 percent of all workers are eligible for unemployment benefits. Far fewer — *less than 100,000 people a year* — receive training through our nation’s public workforce system to help them find new, good jobs.

That means that as currently structured, the nation’s workforce and unemployment system only provides – at most – one out of every twenty workers who lost their jobs with both income support during their unemployment and training to help them access a new job.

²⁹ Michele Evermore, In case of a downturn: Extended unemployment insurance is an economic lifeline. <https://www.nelp.org/blog/in-case-of-a-downturn-extended-unemployment-insurance-is-an-economic-lifeline/>

³⁰ <http://ftp.iza.org/dp4670.pdf>

³¹ <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.20150528>

³² https://research.upjohn.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1276&context=up_press

³³ Trade Adjustment Assistance Annual Report (2019)

<https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/tradeact/pdfs/AnnualReport19.pdf>

The federal government owes more to the workers at the backbone of our economy – the men and women keeping the internet and other critical utilities up and running, driving trucks and working in logistics and manufacturing. The federal government owes more to the hundreds of thousands of people risking their own health as they work in hospitals doing behind-the-scenes jobs like sanitizing and preparing rooms and equipment, and those working as medical assistants, phlebotomists, or technicians.

Up until now, we have failed 95 percent of the workers who have lost jobs before and during this pandemic. The Biden Administration can change that.

- **Eliminate restrictions to accessing unemployment benefits for people in training.** The Department should issue a series of guidance and provide continued technical assistance to states directing state workforce agencies to ensure that UI benefits are available to workers in job training programs. In many states, workers are ineligible for UI benefits while in job training programs, as their participation in a training program is evidence of their intent *not* to reenter the workforce until that training program is complete. The Department should issue guidance to states on models to waive this requirement to ensure workers can access both training for a new career and critical income support.
- **Direct states to expand UI Dependent Care Allocations.** Several states allow UI beneficiaries to access increased UI weekly benefits to cover dependent care costs. The Department should issue guidance directing states on allowability of spending federal UI investments, including future pandemic UI funding, through increased benefits to cover dependent care costs for workers. Parents make up a third of the workforce, and more than two-thirds of low-income participants in job-training programs have children under the age of six. Access to affordable dependent care can be the key to workers' success in both training and new employment.
- **Develop a Reemployment Accord pilot program,** working with 10 states to develop strategies³⁴ designed to expedite the reemployment of workers who have lost their jobs by improving access to skills training for more workers. The pilot should provide targeted investments in the public workforce system and alignment with community and technical and adult education systems at the Department of Education. Pilots should include a specific focus on maximizing eligibility for and access to other support services under federal programs under DOL jurisdiction, including participants in apprenticeship programs, Job Corps, and youth programming.

³⁴ https://www.ssa.gov/OP_Home/ssact/title03/0305.htm

- **Adequately track how well public investments meet need of dislocated workers.** DOL should track and release reporting on the number of workers. Tracking should be broken down by demographics such as who served through our unemployment and workforce systems, the training to which workers are eligible and in which they participate, and the outcomes of this training.
- **Pilot programs, in 10 states, to provide comprehensive reemployment services to a representative sample of UI recipients:** Work with 10 states to pilot programs that would provide a representative sample of UI recipients with comprehensive career services, including access to WIOA-funded training. States participating in the pilot should track long-term employment and wage outcomes in order to evaluate impact on UI recipients.
- **Prioritize a Reemployment Accord legislative strategy,** through both the Fiscal Year 2021 budget process and as components of future stimulus and recovery bills, that support a 21st century reemployment accord – a commitment to all workers that when facing job loss, they will have access to training and income supports necessary to reenter the workforce.

The American public supports these changes

In recent national polling, 75 percent of voters want the U.S. to expand support for unemployed workers to include not just income replacement, but also automatic health care coverage, training, and reemployment services.³⁵

A Biden Administration’s focus on better connecting workforce, unemployment and education systems in our country is a critical foundation to ensuring an inclusive economic recovery for workers hit the hardest by the economic impacts of our current crisis.³⁶

³⁵ On behalf of NSC, ALG research conducted a nationwide online survey of N=800 likely 2020 general election voters between May 21-25, 2020.

³⁶ These recommendations are geared towards administrative recommendations that the Department of Labor could prioritize. There are also important recommendations being discussed about restructuring the UI system to be administered by the Social Security Administration in partnership with states or removing the state role altogether, with the goal of enabling broader access to UI funds. The recommendations in this memo are critical – regardless of the administrating entity or entities – to ensure unemployed workers have access to evidence-based reemployment services and support. *See* Steve Wandner, *An Illustrated Case for Unemployment Insurance Reform* (2020) https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3525097

For further information regarding these recommendations, please contact Katie Spiker, National Skills Coalition's Director of Government Affairs, at katies@nationalskillscoalition.org.

Building a People-Centered Infrastructure Plan for the 21st Century

- A transition plan for the Department of Transportation (DOT), in partnership Departments of Energy, Commerce, and Army Corps of Engineers, should champion a people-centered infrastructure plan that encourages job creation *and* ensures all workers have access to skills training necessary to fill those newly created jobs.
- A people-centered infrastructure plan would ensure federal funding prioritizes investments that modernize our infrastructure and help upskill and reskill workers like women and people of color – workers both most impacted by the current crisis and those historically excluded from good infrastructure jobs.

Prior to COVID-19, our nation’s patchwork infrastructure posed a challenge to our nation’s economic standing. The current crisis only emphasizes the need for infrastructure investments³⁷ and made it even more clear: a strong infrastructure is not just about the economy; it is about people. It is about people’s health and safety tied to our ability to quickly move medical supplies, sanitation equipment, and food across our roads and bridges. It is about people’s equitable access to safe jobs and uninterrupted education through nationally available broadband in a socially distanced world.

In the face of these stark realities and the historic unemployment that is disproportionately impacting Black, Latino and other communities of color, there is renewed momentum for a federal investment in our nation’s infrastructure that meets the scope and scale of our needs. Indeed, a significant investment in our roads and bridges and expanded broadband could create thousands of jobs. But these investments must be anchored by investments in the skills of local people.

Previous infrastructure bills have been heralded as being job creators and vehicles of economic stimulus during recessions. The Obama Administration championed increased infrastructure investments under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) as one component of a strategy to spur economic growth during a downturn.³⁸ A recent analysis by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce found that a \$1 trillion investment in infrastructure could create up to eleven million new jobs.³⁹ Workforce challenges have been acknowledged as having a significant impact on our country’s infrastructure in reauthorizations of the laws that govern our surface transportation, energy, water and aviation systems.⁴⁰

³⁷ <https://www.infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COVID-19-Infrastructure-Status-Report.pdf>

³⁸ <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/fastact/factsheets/workforcedbefs.cfm>

³⁹ https://www.faa.gov/about/office_org/headquarters_offices/ang/grants/awd/technical/

⁴⁰ <https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-announces-water-workforce-initiative-help-recruit-and-prepare-next-generation-clean>

Past efforts, however, have failed to connect the critical link between jobs being created **and preparing workers for those jobs.**

Businesses in infrastructure industries were already facing a stark need for more workers, with as many as 50 percent of workers in some infrastructure industries eligible for retirement over the next 5 years.⁴¹ Investments in our aging infrastructure are critical. Investments in a workforce to repair and rebuild it are just as much so.

- **Work with the White House on an Executive Order directing all agencies with components of an infrastructure package to allocate grant funds to support training workers for in-demand occupations.** As Congress makes progress on a set of bills that will ultimately comprise an infrastructure package, the Secretary of Transportation should work with the White House to ensure grant programs under the Secretary’s jurisdiction, and those under the jurisdictions of Commerce, Army Corps of Engineers, Energy, and Environmental Protection Agency, include preferences or set aside funding to train workers for jobs in relevant industries. Grants should include those administered by the Federal Highway Administration; the Federal Transit Administration; the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration; Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration; Federal Railroad Administration; Federal Aviation Administration; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; the National Telecommunications and Information Administration; the Department of Energy, Housing and Urban Development; and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.
- **Apply priority—under the Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (TIFIA)—to projects that address, in proposals, how the project will support workforce development for workers within the project area.** The Secretary should require any project funded under TIFIA to describe their workforce development plan to train workers within the zip codes encompassed by the project. Under the existing Secretarial authority, to prioritize projects that “anchor transformative, positive, and long-lasting changes that will result in increased investment in the economic competitiveness of the neighborhood and region,” the Department should prioritize those applicants who can demonstrate the impact their projects will have on access to skills for workers in the communities in which the projects are being built.⁴²
- **Launch a pilot program on Local Labor Hiring,** building on the Obama-era Geographic-based hiring preference program.⁴³ The Secretary should reissue guidance that allows for hiring preference in targeted local areas. This new pilot program

⁴¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2014/07/02/americas-infrastructure-needs-the-next-generation-of-workers/>

⁴² <https://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2020-02/Chapter%203.pdf>

⁴³ <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/construction/cqit/sep14local.cfm>

should include connections to long-term education and training pathways for participants in the programs and dedicated technical assistance on connecting workers with on-the-job learning and access to training that leads to in-demand credentials. The department should also provide technical assistance to ensure contractors are connected to local workforce development boards and economic development resources that can support deliverance of on-the-job learning, through registered apprenticeship programs.

- **Issue guidance to states on effective use of on-the-job training supportive services (OJT/SS) program funds.** The Secretary should issue guidance to states on accessing federal funds available under 23 U.S.C. 140(b) (OJT/SS funds) for workforce training and publicize this guidance to encourage all 50 states to access the formula funding. Annually, about \$6 million is used to fund the OJT/SS Program, intended to support state highway agencies' training programs and increase opportunities for women and people of color who are underrepresented in those agencies' workforce.
- **Measure and track demographic information on hiring and training by states and contractors.** The Department should track all trainee participants in OJT/SS or other training programs run by DOT. States and contractors should be required to enter demographic, employment, wage and certification attainment information into a federal database to facilitate better tracking and targeting of future investments.
- **Encourage states to use surface transportation training funds.** Under 23 U.S.C. 504(e) states can draw down funds from the five core surface transportation programs to support 100 percent federal funding of education, training or workforce development programs to expand the surface transportation workforce. Several states have legislated the use of 504(e) funds, but they are largely underutilized. The Secretary should collect data on states' usage of these funds to develop a benchmark by which to gauge increased usage. The Secretary should also issue guidance encouraging states to better utilize these funds.
- **Support the creation or expansion of transportation sector partnerships in at least 10 states.** The Secretary should build on the work of the National Network for the Transportation Workforce and Regional Surface Transportation Workforce Centers, housed at the Federal Highway Administration, to establish transportation sector partnerships in at least 10 states, corresponding with upcoming megaprojects.

America supports these proposals

In public opinion polling commissioned in spring of 2020, 86 percent of voters want new public investment in infrastructure and 89 percent of voters want any infrastructure investment to include training so local residents can access these jobs.⁴⁴

As part of any efforts to repair and maintain U.S. infrastructure, the Biden Department of Transportation, and other related agencies, should prioritize connections to education and training opportunities for all workers.

For further information regarding these recommendations, please contact Katie Spiker, National Skills Coalition's Director of Government Affairs, at katies@nationalskillscoalition.org.

⁴⁴ On behalf of NSC, ALG research conducted a nationwide online survey of N=800 likely 2020 general election voters between May 21-25, 2020.

Make the Economic Recovery Work for All Americans with Better Public Data and Accountability

How the Biden Administration Can Measure an Inclusive Economic Recovery

- **Our recovery from the deepest and most abrupt recession in history requires better data and data systems to hold skills policies accountable to equitable outcomes**
- **Now is the time for immediate executive action to boldly lay out a vision for public data and accountability to build back a stronger American economy for individuals, families, and businesses**

Our recovery must invest in those first who have been hurt the most

The pandemic threatened the lives and livelihoods of American workers, families, and communities. It reinforced long-standing injustices and structural barriers faced by Black, Latino American, Native American, and all people of color. Our recovery from this global health crisis and the deepest and most abrupt economic recession on record⁴⁵, is an opportunity to directly confront and dismantle structural racism, including the labor market and educational inequities that led to workers of color facing higher rates of job losses and economic uncertainty. This is a moral and economic imperative.

It is time for a new call to ensure that our full array of skills investments works well for *all* Americans – from the education and workforce training programs which directly prepare individuals for meaningful employment to the social services programs that work to maintain stability for individuals and families as they strive for economic prosperity.

While we are rich in collecting data, we are poor in harnessing it to drive the change we need. Over seventy million individuals annually engage in our nation's education, workforce, and social services systems. Yet without common measures across federal program investments, we cannot begin to evaluate the success or failure of our economic recovery efforts on those who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic recession. Nor can we begin to leverage the interventions, administrative changes, and new policies that will ensure an

⁴⁵ <https://www.ilr.cornell.edu/work-and-coronavirus/work-and-jobs/how-job-losses-during-covid-19-recession-compare-past-recessions>

inclusive economic recovery.⁴⁶ We cannot show the American people the effects of our federal investments to rebuild the economic livelihood of their families and communities.

This pandemic also laid bare the inadequate data system infrastructure needed to support an unprecedented sixty-five million Americans seeking employment assistance since mid-March. Not only were state Unemployment Insurance systems unable to process and activate critical income supports as workers waited for safe conditions to return to their jobs, but many more millions of eligible workers are estimated to not even have tried to apply.⁴⁷ Data systems that support these workers who now qualify for federal reemployment support and training will now be taxed to meet the increased demand for their services. The American public deserves functional and modern data systems, and policymakers need efficient data systems that can produce timely, actionable information.

The White House should take immediate action

Creating and implementing an effective data and accountability policy will require a strong, clear vision from federal leadership. The Biden administration can articulate this vision – one that says policymakers must invest in modern data systems and robust reporting in order to maximize the impact of their investments, set targets to achieve desired outcomes, and augment policies to ensure that *all* can benefit and be successful. This vision would build on President-Elect Biden’s previous leadership in this area; in 2014, Vice President Biden led President Obama’s call for an across-the-board review of America’s job training programs to make them more job-driven, engaging employers, and improving information on employment results so we know what’s working well and what’s not.⁴⁸

Here are specific actions that could be taken:

- Under the direction of a proposed White House Interagency Sub-Taskforce on Skills for an Inclusive Economic Recovery, create a Data Working Group cooperatively led by the Departments of Education, Labor, and Commerce with participation from federal agency leadership overseeing American education, workforce, and safety net programs, including Higher Education Act, Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA; e.g. six core titles spanning the Departments of Education and Labor); other Department of Labor (DOL) programs that include occupational

⁴⁶ <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/NSC-Skills-for-an-Inclusive-Economic-Recovery-web-Sept-2020.pdf>

⁴⁷ <https://www.epi.org/blog/unemployment-filing-failures-new-survey-confirms-that-millions-of-jobless-were-unable-to-file-an-unemployment-insurance-claim/>

⁴⁸ https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/skills_report.pdf

skills training; and Department of Commerce programs that serve small businesses, disadvantaged, and minority-owned businesses.

- Charge the Data Working Group with establishing a set of measures would center those most impacted by the pandemic to show progress towards an inclusive economic recovery. Measures should show improved self-sufficiency for individuals who receive skills training and obtain quality credentials and for businesses who participate in sector partnerships and invest in publicly subsidized on-the-job training, work-based learning, and upskilling for workers without a four-year degree. These measures should populate a public dashboard to track the aggregate progress of individuals and businesses benefiting from recovery efforts. The dashboard must disaggregate outcome measures for individuals by race, ethnicity, English language proficiency, gender, and age, whenever possible, to reveal disparate outcomes when they become apparent.⁴⁹
- The Data Working Group should review the baseline economic outcome measures and recommend targets that can be reviewed quarterly for equity or other structural gaps that would trigger corrective responses from agencies and administrations. Corrective actions could include administrative changes to existing policy, the issuance of individual, departmental, or joint guidance, and/or opportunities for technical assistance to states to encourage or incentivize action to closing outcomes gaps.
- The Data Working Group should also estimate the investments needed to modernize the data systems which support federal education and training programs and provide technical assistance to states who want to prioritize or must upgrade their data systems before another economic shock causes catastrophic system failure. The Employment and Training Administration (ETA) at the DOL has begun this work; it should be supported and extended.
- Finally, the Departments of Labor and Education should make administrative changes to serve the data needs of an inclusive economic recovery, including:
 - Adapt the WIOA Title I Statistical Adjustment Model (SAM) to the conditions of a recession economy to strengthen and encourage states to use the SAM to better serve historically marginalized worker populations who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

⁴⁹ https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/Racial-Equity-Report_6x9_web.pdf

- Capitalize on the historic cross-agency system and state partnership of the State Wage Interchange System (SWIS) agreement that makes available state administrative wage data collected from businesses by expanding SWIS access to all education and workforce training programs to ensure that complete and accurate employment and wage outcomes of all future stimulus investments are streamlined.

The American public supports these changes

Seven out of ten voters support collecting and publicly reporting data on which groups of people are and are not benefiting from stimulus and recovery efforts, including investments in skills training. Better data, increased transparency, and more efficient data systems are important to broad-based groups of state and local officials eager to understand the successes and failures of workforce programs serving their constituents, worker-advocacy groups, community-based organizations, racial justice and civil rights champions, and anti-poverty groups.

The time for bold action is now

We cannot simply return the economy to the way it was pre-pandemic, with structural inequities and an uneven playing field for some workers. This moment in time represents an opportunity for the Biden Administration to fully welcome Black and Latino Americans, Native Americans, immigrants, and women as equal participants of this economic recovery.

Measuring the impact of skills interventions through data transparency is essential to ensure this recovery is investing in those who have been disproportionately impacted and to eliminate structural racism that contributed to those inequities before and during the pandemic.

This pandemic has magnified the need for timely, accurate and complete data, as well as data systems that are agile enough to get actionable information into the hands of policymakers to build a stronger American economy for individuals, families, and businesses.

For further information regarding these recommendations, please contact Katie Spiker, National Skills Coalition's Director of Government Affairs, at katies@nationalskillscoalition.org.

Reforming Welfare Reform: Moving Past “Work-First,” Focusing on What Works Best

- **Reverse Trump Administration’s ineffective policies expanding work requirements on safety net participants.**
- **Chart a new course that focuses on investments in skills training to support meaningful transitions to well-paying jobs and careers.**

The current economic crisis has highlighted the importance of our nation’s safety net programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which saw a 16 percent increase in enrollment between March and April of 2020,⁵⁰ and Medicaid, which saw an increase of 2.3 million enrollees between February and May 2020.⁵¹ However, many of the low-income adults who are participating in these programs are potentially on borrowed time: the Trump Administration has taken steps over the past four years to reduce eligibility for SNAP, Medicaid and other safety net programs through more stringent work requirements,⁵² including by encouraging states to impose arbitrary new work requirements on Medicaid recipients⁵³ and through a new rule that restricts state and local flexibility to waive work requirements for certain SNAP recipients when economic conditions make it hard to find good jobs.⁵⁴ While Congress and the courts have provided temporary suspension of some of these requirements,⁵⁵ thousands of US workers and their families have already lost access to benefits due to these misguided efforts, and more are likely to lose critical health and other services without immediate administrative action.

Work is important, but work *requirements* are counterproductive

The research on work requirements is clear: **they don’t work.**⁵⁶ They can trap workers in a cycle of low-wage jobs that don’t lead to sustainable long-term employment, and create negative incentives for states to push vulnerable individuals to take the first available job – regardless of

⁵⁰ <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/29SNAPcurrPP-7.pdf>

⁵¹ <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/analysis-of-recent-national-trends-in-medicaid-and-chip-enrollment/>

⁵² <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2018/04/13/2018-07874/reducing-poverty-in-america-by-promoting-opportunity-and-economic-mobility>

⁵³ <https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/understanding-the-intersection-of-medicaid-and-work-what-does-the-data-say/>

⁵⁴ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/fr-120419>

⁵⁵ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/ffcra-impact-time-limit-abawds>. The current suspension applies until the lifting of the current public health emergency declaration, which means that it may precede any return to economic normalcy.

⁵⁶ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/work-requirements-dont-cut-poverty-evidence-shows>

quality – as a condition of eligibility. And we know that public attitudes about work requirements and public assistance programs more broadly have often reflected racist perceptions of workers of color, perpetuating structural racism and creating unnecessary and harmful barriers to economic success.⁵⁷

Eliminating work requirements doesn't mean that work isn't important for low-income individuals who find themselves in need of temporary support. On the contrary, many adults participating in public assistance programs *do* work⁵⁸, but often in unstable and low-paying jobs. One particular challenge for moving these individuals into more sustainable jobs is a lack of formal education: more than 90 percent of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participants lack education or training beyond the high school level,⁵⁹ and half of all long-term SNAP recipients lack even a high school diploma.

Investing in proven workforce and education strategies for safety net participants – including career pathways programs at community colleges and registered apprenticeship programs – can not only support rapid reattachment to the labor market, it can ensure that individuals transition into careers that make it more likely that they won't have to return to public benefits during the next economic downturn. It can also reduce racial equity gaps by removing punitive and racially motivated rules that assume that public assistance recipients are unwilling to work, and instead focusing on their real needs.

There is bipartisan support for investing in skill-building rather than punishing workers

The good news is that there is growing bipartisan support for a new direction that focuses on investing in skills rather than punitive work requirements. In reauthorizing the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress explicitly rejected proposals from House Republicans to expand work requirements under SNAP, and instead increased state formula grants for the SNAP Employment & Training (SNAP E&T) program.⁶⁰

Also in 2018, the Republican-led House Ways and Means Committee approved a bill that would have taken modest steps towards reorienting TANF towards a new set of metrics focused on outcomes like employment, earnings, and credential attainment (a bipartisan Senate reauthorization bill introduced in December 2018 would have made similar changes, albeit on a pilot basis).⁶¹ These efforts indicate that lawmakers are beginning to recognize the outdated assumptions and failed outcomes that have characterized our “work-first” approach to public

⁵⁷ <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Racist-Roots-of-Work-Requirements-CSSP-1.pdf>

⁵⁸ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/most-working-age-snap-participants-work-but-often-in-unstable-jobs>

⁵⁹ <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/NSC-TANF-FINAL-6.24.19-MED-RES-pdf.pdf>

⁶⁰ <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/news/blog/house-senate-leaders-release-farm-bill-compromise-rejects-harsh-work-requirements-and-increases-training-funding>

⁶¹ <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/NSC-TANF-FINAL-6.24.19-MED-RES-pdf.pdf>

assistance programs, and are ready to begin a conversation about how we can better assist low-income individuals in charting their own path to prosperity.

The President can make immediate changes while also laying the foundation for legislative action

In our recent publication [Skills for an Inclusive Economic Recovery](#), National Skills Coalition has proposed a number of specific legislative changes to safety net programs to strengthen investments in skills, including proposals to permanently eliminate work requirements under TANF and SNAP, and replace those requirements with outcomes-based models that reward states for employment and earnings outcomes for participants; eliminating current rules that limit participation in education and training activities for safety net recipients; increasing dedicated funding for education and training under both TANF and SNAP; and modernizing the Work Opportunity Tax Credit to support employer investments in skills training for workers who are also receiving public benefits.

We think a Biden Administration should take a leadership role in promoting these important legislative changes, and sending a clear signal that “welfare reform” – especially as embodied in the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) – is an outdated approach that doesn’t reflect current knowledge about what actually helps low-income people succeed.

But the new Administration can also take critical administrative steps in the first 100 days in office that would help move the ball forward immediately and lay the foundation for future Congressional actions. Specifically, we urge the President-elect to:

- Rescind President Trump’s Executive Order⁶² calling for stricter work requirements in safety net programs, and issue a new Executive Order that calls for reinvesting in skills for public assistance recipients as a new national priority. The Executive Order should require all agencies with responsibility for administration of public assistance programs to evaluate how well those programs are currently connecting individuals to education and training that leads to family-supporting employment, and should require those agencies to identify strategies to address barriers to education and training, with a particular focus on ensuring that workers of color, women, and individuals without a high school diploma have meaningful opportunities to connect to career pathways.
- Rescind current Department of Health and Human Services guidance⁶³ allowing states to propose work requirements for Medicaid recipients, and issue new guidance to states that provides information on how Medicaid recipients can better access

⁶² <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/news/blog/trump-releases-executive-order-calling-for-work-requirements-elimination-of-workforce-programs>

⁶³ <https://www.medicaid.gov/federal-policy-guidance/downloads/smd18002.pdf>

workforce and education programs that lead to good jobs without jeopardizing their eligibility for health benefits.

- Begin the process of rescinding SNAP regulations⁶⁴ that restrict state eligibility to waive time limits for certain adult recipients, and issue new guidance that encourages states to establish or expand voluntary SNAP E&T programs that help workers gain skills and credentials without the threat of punitive sanctions.
- Reissue guidance first proposed under the Obama Administration that enabled states to propose alternatives to work participation requirements under the TANF program where states propose innovative strategies to improve employment outcomes for TANF participants⁶⁵
- Require the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Agriculture to issue joint guidance to states on how to expand opportunities for public assistance recipients to participate in postsecondary education through TANF and SNAP E&T, as well as taking advantage of Pell Grant eligibility through the “ability to benefit” provision for students without a high school diploma.
- Require a newly established Sub-Taskforce on Skills for an Inclusive Economic Recovery (as part of a broader Economic Recovery Task Force out of the White House) to evaluate the legacy of the 1996 PRWORA after the past 25 years, and to propose a new vision for how to support the employment and career goals of public assistance participants.

The American public supports these changes

National Skills Coalition (NSC) polling indicates that **85 percent of voters want it to be easier for safety net participants to gain access to skills training for a career**, creating an opportunity for the Biden Administration to transform our approach to how we help those who are most in need. As our country embarks on an inclusive economic recovery that addresses not just the immediate impacts of COVID-19 pandemic but also the longstanding structural racism and other barriers that have limited opportunities for millions of hard-working people, the Biden Administration can send the clear message that it won’t repeat the mistakes of the past and will make investing in *all* Americans a priority and key component of “building back better.”

For further information regarding these recommendations, please contact Katie Spiker, National Skills Coalition’s Director of Government Affairs, at katies@nationalskillscoalition.org.

⁶⁴ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/fr-120419>

⁶⁵ <https://wayback.archive-it.org/8654/20170430194357/https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/resource/policy/im-ofa/2012/im201203/im201203>