



Essential In Deed state technical assistance project:
Frequently Asked Questions
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Contents

Q1: What is this project about?..... 1

Q2: Why focus on these workers and businesses? 2

Q3: How will states measure the success of this project? 3

Q4: What will selected states receive as part of this project? 3

Q5: What kinds of policy changes can states receive assistance with? 3

Q6: What about legislative changes? 4

Q7: What is the timeline for this project? 5

Q8: Is there funding available to states via this project? 5

Q9: Can states broaden or narrow the scope of workers and businesses targeted?..... 5

Q10: Can states incorporate this TA project into an existing state initiative or strategy?..... 5

Q11: Is this TA project similar to National Skills Coalition’s previous Policy Academies? 5

Q12: Will states that previously participated in other NSC projects be more likely to be selected for this project?..... 5

Q13: How can states get answers to additional questions about this project? 6

Q1: What is this project about?

The Covid-19 pandemic introduced Americans to a new term: **Essential Workers**. But despite a significant wave of public attention and media coverage, the widespread *awareness* of this population of workers and industries has not translated into widespread *action* – particularly when it comes to public workforce development policies.

This technical assistance project will help state government officials to think creatively about what kinds of administrative or other policy changes can help them *upskill more essential workers*, particularly those working in frontline jobs for *small businesses*. Better upskilling policies can help workers adapt to new demands for *digital skills* and can help states *close racial equity gaps*.

States selected to participate in this year-long project will receive new, state-specific qualitative and quantitative data analyses to help them identify potential policy interventions, as well as expert technical assistance (TA) in designing and advancing a relevant policy solution.

Examples of the policy changes that states can receive TA with are listed under Question 5 below. States that have previously enacted policies that in some way target the upskilling of frontline workers include Michigan's Futures for Frontliners program, Washington's Upskill/Backfill initiative, and Minnesota's Low Income Worker Training Program, among many others.

Q2: Why focus on these workers and businesses?

Even before the pandemic, frontline essential workers often had far less access (compared to other workers) to upskilling opportunities that would help them advance in their careers and earn higher wages. In recent months, states' understandable preoccupation with tackling the challenges facing *unemployed* workers has reduced the attention available for essential workers who have *stayed employed* throughout the pandemic. While some of these incumbent essential workers have switched employers over the past year and a half, preliminary evidence suggests that they have largely remained in the same type of entry-level occupations.

Frontline essential workers also face [significant racial equity gaps](#) in employment, wage gains, and other measures – including [access to training](#). While [skills training alone cannot erase barriers caused by structural racism](#), it is one important element in reducing inequities faced by workers of color. Because public policies initially created these inequities, policies are also a vital part of the *solution*.

Small businesses in essential industries similarly face administrative and other [challenges in accessing state incumbent worker training funds](#) and other potential sources of upskilling support for their employees. Today, as these businesses focus their energy on economic survival and recovery, they have even less time to research various public workforce development resources – making it especially urgent for states to effectively target and connect with them.

In addition, over the last 18 months, many frontline jobs have transformed overnight to require new and different skills, [particularly digital skills](#). Unlike large companies, small and mid-sized businesses often have limited capacity to provide in-house training

programs for digital and other skills, making public policies that support their partnership with education and training providers even more important.

The bottom line: By enacting better and more responsive policies, states can improve frontline essential workers' and small businesses' access to upskilling.

Q3: How will states measure the success of this project?

The *overall* measure of success for this project is whether frontline essential workers and small businesses (especially those in essential industries) have increased participation and improved outcomes in state upskilling programs, helping to close racial equity gaps.

However, each individual state selected for this project will identify its own *specific* outcomes (and related measures) in collaboration with NSC staff. For example, a state might seek to increase the percentage of small businesses that receive state Incumbent Worker Training grants, or to increase the participation of Latinas in work-based learning programs in essential industries.

States will be asked to identify *potential* outcomes in their application to participate in this technical assistance project, but will not need to *finalize* their outcomes until after states are selected and the project has begun. States will likely wish to draw on the qualitative and quantitative data provided through this project (see Question 4 below) to inform their decisionmaking about what outcomes they are working toward and how policy change can help to achieve them.

Q4: What will selected states receive as part of this project?

States that are selected to participate in this TA project will receive:

1. A quantitative, state-specific **data snapshot** (developed in collaboration with NSC's consulting partner, [CREC: The Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness](#)).
2. A memo synthesizing qualitative data findings from two state-specific **focus groups** – one comprised of essential workers, and one with small businesses – conducted as part of this project.
3. Expert **technical assistance** in identifying and enacting policy change(s) that can be made in response to the data findings and the state's overall workforce strategy and goals.

Q5: What kinds of policy changes can states receive assistance with?

Administrative changes that meaningfully increase frontline essential workers' and small businesses' access to upskilling. States will work with NSC staff to analyze data (see *above*) and pursue relevant policy interventions that will help them achieve strategic goals. These may include changes to employer-facing upskilling programs or incentives, worker-facing training programs, or both.

For example, states might receive technical assistance in:

- Identifying and collaborating with other state government stakeholders to advance a shared upskilling policy goal (e.g., as part of a governor's office Future of Work strategy, racial equity/DEI work, economic development incentive program, or other efforts that target similar worker/business populations)
- Connecting with peers in other states to "stress test" or brainstorm potential upskilling policy changes and their implications
- Designing new data disaggregation, analysis, and reporting processes to better understand racial equity gaps and opportunities for improving outcomes
- Improving workers' access to quality non-degree credentials (NDCs) through upskilling programs, especially by [setting or strengthening NDC standards](#)
- Drafting or revising policy memoranda, guidance, or regulations for upskilling programs (drawing on examples of best practices from other states as appropriate)
- Writing or revising a Request for Proposals or other grant application materials for incumbent worker training or other upskilling programs
- Developing an internal strategy, process, and/or a job description (for providing a point person) to aid small businesses attempting to access state upskilling resources
- Developing new standards or guidelines for digital skill-building as part of upskilling programs

Q6: What about legislative changes?

Due to the relatively short timeline of this project, legislative changes are not the primary focus. However, states are welcome to identify a legislative change as *one* of their goals. NSC technical assistance staff will be available to answer questions related to model legislative language, strategy development, and related issues.

Q7: What is the timeline for this project?

The application form for this project will be released in mid-September 2021. States must submit their applications by October 22, 2021, and will be notified of selection by mid-November 2021. Five (5) selected states will participate in the project from November 2021-January 2023 (14 months).

Q8: Is there funding available to states via this project?

No, there is no funding provided to states as part of this project.

Q9: Can states broaden or narrow the scope of workers and businesses targeted?

Yes, within reasonable limits. For example, a state might decide to focus more narrowly on frontline essential workers within the healthcare field, or those living in rural areas. Or a state might decide to expand the focus from businesses of fewer than 500 employees to businesses of up to 1,000 employees. However, states are **not** allowed to expand the scope of this project to all workers or to high school students, for example.

Q10: Can states incorporate this TA project into an existing state initiative or strategy?

Yes! States are strongly encouraged to draw connections between this project and already-existing efforts underway through their governor's offices, labor or education departments, human services agencies, higher education coordinating boards, or other state agencies.

For example, a state might incorporate this work as part of a Future of Work initiative focused on preparing workers and businesses for digital transformation, or as part of a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion effort to close racial equity gaps in the workforce. States might also design this project to fit within a postsecondary credential attainment initiative or tuition assistance program.

Q11: Is this TA project similar to National Skills Coalition's previous Policy Academies?

Somewhat. This is a smaller-scale project that will last a shorter period of time (14 months) and involve fewer cross-state meetings, among other differences.

Q12: Will states that previously participated in other NSC projects be more likely to be selected for this project?

Not necessarily. State selection for this project will be primarily based on whether the state's application is well aligned with the project's goals. NSC is eager to work with

states where we have relatively few existing relationships, as well as those where we have more established connections.

Q13: How can states get answers to additional questions about this project?

Two ways:

- Attend the informational event for this project on **September 22, 2021** from 1:00-2:30 Eastern Time ([register here](#); states can send up to 6 staff members). *Registrants will receive the state TA project application form in advance of this event to allow time for review.*
- Contact NSC Senior Fellow **Amanda Bergson-Shilcock** directly, at amandabs@nationalskillscoalition.org or 215-285-2860 (mobile; calls taken 9am-7pm Eastern).