

Background

The pending reauthorization of the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) comes at a pivotal moment: as the nation struggles through an economic recession, policymakers must rise to the challenge of restoring competitiveness to the American workforce. The stakes are especially high for the nation's 22 million Latino¹ workers, who represent the fastest-growing segment of the labor force.² The current WIA system has failed to adequately serve Latinos, who continue to be more likely than any other group to earn low wages, remain without health insurance and retirement plans, and die from a work-related injury. The following principles should guide efforts to design WIA reauthorization policies.

Principles

Improve access to and quality of workforce development programs for limited-English-proficient (LEP) individuals.

More than 18 million working-age Americans speak English less than "very well."³ Latinos, in particular, face immense barriers to employment because of language; 13.4% of native-born and 73.0% of foreign-born Hispanics of working age speak English less than "very well."⁴ Despite a vast need for language and job-skills training, only 4.9% of individuals served by WIA are LEP.⁵ Organizations in regions with significant LEP populations should be granted the flexibility to meet the needs of individuals and jobseekers with culturally and linguistically appropriate services. Wraparound services, including case management, child care, transportation, and job placement, should be fundable components of workforce programs.

Increase financial and technical assistance for community-based organizations that serve minority and LEP workers.

Community-based organizations (CBOs) play a unique role in minority and immigrant communities; they are more accessible to disadvantaged workers, delivering services and advocating for policies that positively impact their constituencies. Many CBOs are leaders of innovation in workforce development programs.⁶ Yet, CBOs in minority and immigrant neighborhoods are often locked out of the current WIA system. The needs of CBOs in areas with high LEP populations are not accounted for in the distribution of adult basic education (ABE) funds.⁷

Incorporate flexibility and adaptability into the workforce development system.

Under the current WIA structure, entities face disincentives to serve individuals with multiple barriers to employment, including low levels of formal education, limited English proficiency, and low literacy. A rigid sequence of services and inflexible performance measures result in many Latinos being blocked from receiving training. Individual assessment and curriculum benchmarks that measure gains would expand access to job training for Latinos.

Target funding for integrated training that combines job-skills training and language acquisition for LEP adults.

One model that has proven successful in promoting upward economic mobility for LEP adults is integrated training.⁸ Adults in integrated programs increase multiple skill sets concurrently through English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes, academic coursework, and occupational skills

acquisition. This model is most effective when tailored to local needs, based on careful analyses of regional labor markets and gaps in training programs for LEP adults.

Authorize a national youth program that promotes upward economic mobility for Latinos and other minority youth. Latinos and Blacks are significantly less likely than their White peers to complete high school. In 2005, the high school graduation rate was only 58% for Hispanic students and 55% for Black students, compared to 78% for White students.⁹ Hispanic and Black high school students are also less likely than Whites to be enrolled in advanced mathematics and science classes, limiting their employment options later in life.¹⁰ Preliminary data show that youth who are enrolled in programs that promote higher educational attainment, career planning, and access to information about well-paying careers are better positioned to succeed in the labor force.¹¹

Endnotes

¹ The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. Furthermore, unless otherwise noted, estimates in this document do not include the 3.9 million residents of Puerto Rico.

² As the Hispanic workforce continues to grow, their labor market status becomes increasingly important to the workforce as a whole; by the year 2050, it is expected that one in three working Americans will be Latino. Jeffrey S. Passel and D’Vera Cohn, U.S. Population Projections: 2005-2050 (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2008), <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/85.pdf> (accessed March 2008). Not all working-age adults are in the labor force.

³ NCLR calculation using U.S. Bureau of the Census, *2005-2007 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates*, Conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. Washington, DC, 2008, Table B16004, http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-ds_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_&-lang=en&-_caller=geoselect&-state=dt&-format=&-mt_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G2000_B16004, (accessed December 2008).

⁴ *Statistical Portrait of Hispanics in the United States, 2006*, Table 19. Language Spoken at Home and English-Speaking Ability by Age, Race and Ethnicity: 2006 (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2008), <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/hispanics2006/Table-19.pdf> (accessed January 2008).

⁵ Allegra Baider, *Congressional Action Needed to Ensure Low-Income Adults Receive Critical Employment and Training Services under the Workforce Investment Act* (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2008), http://www.clasp.org/publications/action_needed_for_wia_final.pdf (accessed September 2008).

⁶ For example, several CBOs in NCLR’s Affiliate Network operate programs that enable LEP workers with little to no formal education to acquire relevant skills that prepare them for higher-paying jobs in high-growth sectors such as health care, retail, and customer service. For more information, please visit <http://www.nclr.org/content/topics/detail/482/>.

⁷ A survey of NCLR Affiliates indicated that the majority of clients served by CBOs do not access the federally funded workforce system. Sean Thomas-Breitfeld and Sue Liu, *Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Reauthorization: Building a Better Job Training System for Hispanic Workers* (Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, 2003), <http://www.nclr.org/content/publications/detail/921/> (accessed January 2008).

⁸ Integrated training is a core component of several successful CBO job training and adult education programs. Three outstanding examples are *Carreras en Salud* (Health Care Career Pathways Partnership) in Illinois, Integrated Basic Skills and Skills Training (I-BEST) in Washington, and Pathways to Advancement Initiative in Oregon.

⁹ *Diplomas Count 2008: School to College: Can State P-16 Councils Ease the Transition?* (Bethesda, MD: Education Week, 2008).

¹⁰ *The Nation's Report Card: America's High School Graduates* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2007), <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2007467.pdf> (accessed March 2009), Figures 26 and 27.

¹¹ NCLR Escalera Program: Taking Steps to Success (Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, 2008), <http://www.nclr.org/File/Escalera/NCLR%20Escalera%20Program%20-%20Phase%20III%20Evaluation%20Early%20Findings%20Report.pdf> (accessed January 2009).