

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 Latino workers, who represent the fastest-growing segment of the labor force. 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.

Improve access to workforce development programs for individuals with low educational and English language attainment.

- **Utilize a transparent, regression-based model for determining performance goals.** Currently, states' negotiated performance goals do not adequately take into account the specific characteristics and needs of local populations. Faced with steep performance goals, many states choose to focus resources on individuals most likely to be quickly placed in a job, leaving individuals in need of more time-intensive services left out and likely to face continuing low and stagnant wages. Holding states and local areas accountable for serving the needs of their populations will improve services for those with barriers to employment.
- **Replace the priority of service provision with negotiated targets for intensive services and training for low-income individuals and public assistance recipients.** Current WIA legislation emphasizes that in the case of limited resources, states should focus services on those most in need of help gaining traction in the labor market. Yet the guidance is rarely followed: In 2008, only 44% of adults receiving intensive or training services were low-income. To ensure that services reach those most in need, states should be held to targets for providing services to low-income individuals, which would be negotiated based on population characteristics.
- **Include limited-English-proficient (LEP) individuals in the list of hard-to-serve populations.** Although more than 18 million working-age Americans speak English less than very well, only 4.9% of individuals served by WIA have limited English proficiency. Without explicit inclusion of those with limited English skills as a priority population, workforce investment boards (WIBs) have little incentive to reach out to and serve those in need of customized and time-intensive language instruction.
- **Enforce and strengthen provisions to encourage WIBs to contract with community-based organizations (CBOs).** Many WIBs and one-stop career centers have found significantly improved results through contracts with CBOs, which can offer customized, accessible, and culturally and linguistically appropriate services to populations with barriers to employment. Many WIBs, however, have been reluctant to contract with CBOs, leaving many Latino and other communities virtually ignored by their one-stop systems. Incentives to encourage the use of CBOs as service providers would ensure that more WIBs offer services that reach underserved communities.

Improve access to training.

- **Remove the sequence of services provision.** A one-size-fits-all approach to assessing workers and allocating workforce services results in blocking many workers who need skill upgrades from training. Rather than receiving a rigid sequence of services, workers should be individually assessed and services allocated based on individuals' potential to benefit.
- **Establish that a minimum percentage of WIA funds be spent on training or other worker services.** A work-first orientation has resulted in WIBs focusing services on short-term and light-touch services, and treating training as the service of last resort. In order to ensure that workers not only gain labor market experience but also the skills that employers demand, WIBs must be encouraged to place a much greater emphasis on training and skill acquisition.

Improve the integration of basic education and workforce development.

- **Reward states for increasing co-enrollment in Title I and Title II of WIA, and streamline performance measures for co-enrolled participants.** For low-skill and low-income individuals, basic education and English-as-a-second-language classes are essential components of their workforce preparation, and academic and career goals are inseparable. Although services for adult education and workforce development operate under separate authorities, states should be able to count either work or academic progress for co-enrolled participants toward their negotiated performance goals.
- **Target funding for integrated training that combines job skills training and language acquisition or basic skills.** One model that has proven successful in promoting simultaneous basic skill and technical skill acquisition for low-skill or LEP adults is integrated training, yet the siloed funding of Title I and Title II makes these programs difficult to establish and sustain. Funding should be made available for integrated training programs that prepare workers with basic and occupation-specific skills for high-growth industries experiencing labor shortages.

Fully invest in youth-serving systems.

- **Expand access to meaningful workforce development services for Latino and other vulnerable youth.** Latino youth are less likely than their peers to graduate from high school and enter higher education, and more likely to work in low-wage jobs throughout adulthood. Youth development programs that give young people exposure to work and careers, and offer academic and career counseling, can successfully help young people at risk of dropping out of school or the labor market get back on track. Resources should be dedicated to ensure that youth development programs target vulnerable youth with services that link academic and career preparation.