



America Forward on Economic Mobility

Introduction

Improving economic mobility for everyone is essential to strengthening families, communities, and our nation. But even as the demand for workers continues to grow, millions of people across the country still face systemic barriers to employment and economic opportunity, especially people in historically under-resourced communities. Providing new, innovative pathways into the workforce and reimagining outdated workforce development systems are critical to advancing economic mobility for all, thereby enabling people to thrive and building a stronger, more equitable economy.

It is imperative that federal policymakers prioritize innovative solutions that bridge the gap between the needs of our economy and the opportunities available to people today. To design and implement these solutions, policymakers must work in partnership with community-focused social innovation organizations, local workforce boards, businesses, and workers themselves. And effective solutions must be reflected across domains – from the workforce development system to public benefits to our education system.

Over the next two years, the America Forward Coalition urges policymakers to pursue transformative reforms through vehicles such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the Farm Bill, and the Higher Education Act (HEA), all of which are awaiting reauthorization; annual appropriations bills; and the array of actions available to federal agencies, including ongoing administrative data improvements, ongoing grant priorities, and implementation of legislation such as the major infrastructure bills passed in the last Congress. We call for the adoption of community-driven, innovative, equitable, and effective economic mobility reforms in four areas:

- 1) Support Community-Focused Innovation and Scale What Works
- 2) Invest in Data and Evaluation
- 3) Center Equity and Outcomes in Performance
- 4) Reorient Rules to Support Partnerships, Equity, and Innovation

1) Support Community-Focused Innovation and Scale What Works

We must ensure that community-focused social innovation organizations and proximate leaders with lived experiences in the communities they serve have the resources they need to bring their expertise to bear to design, implement, and sustain strategies aimed at expanding workforce access, alignment, and opportunity.¹

The America Forward Coalition has championed programs and incentives to build evidence, scale what works, and support social innovation organizations in their continued growth and capacity-building. Over the past decade, social innovators have developed a growing array of evidence-based economic

¹ For more detail on the need to engage proximate leaders, see https://ssir.org/articles/entry/effective_change_requires_proximate_leaders

mobility programs that enable workers to build their skills and achieve sustainable careers—but present funding systems do not target funding for the most effective, high-quality programs or provide the necessary capacity-building support to scale programs that have been proven to work. At the same time, we lack sufficient support for innovative social entrepreneurs to build, refine, and test new models to meet the varying workforce needs across the nation, for both workers and employers.

- **Create a workforce innovation fund.** We call for policymakers to reintroduce the bipartisan Expanding Pathways to Employment Act to advance the development and scaling of evidence-based strategies in both workforce and postsecondary programs. We also strongly support the creation of the Workforce Development Innovation Fund (WDIF) in the WIOA reauthorization bill this Congress, which is based on the Expanding Pathways bill and which passed the House of Representatives in May 2022 as part of last year’s WIOA reauthorization bill. Both bills advance a tiered model that incentivizes innovation – ranging from early-stage organizations to experienced providers that are ready to scale nationwide – along with providing the essential capacity-building support that innovative organizations need to develop their models and expand their scope and impact.
- **Expand support for innovation and effective strategies in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training (E&T).** As Congress considers reauthorizing the Farm Bill, we call for legislators to incorporate the bipartisan RESET for America’s Future Act.² RESET encourages states to prioritize effective, innovative, and performance-driven activities in SNAP E&T by making evidence-based approaches, approaches under evaluation, and approaches leveraging outcomes-based contracting structures 100 percent reimbursable, supported by an additional \$100 million annual investment. The RESET Act will build on reforms in the past two Farm Bill reauthorizations – including the 10 E&T pilots from 2014 – to support states’ and community organizations’ efforts to fully realize the potential of the E&T program.
- **Expand the Perkins Innovation and Modernization Program.** The 2018 Perkins Act reauthorization incorporated a new program, championed by America Forward, to identify, support, and rigorously evaluate evidence-based, innovative programs in career and technical education (CTE). We support efforts to build on the lessons learned from the initial round of grants and continue to expand the program moving forward.
- **Evidence priorities.** Policymakers should include priorities and incentives for the use of evidence across federal funding streams. In the next WIOA reauthorization, for example, Congress should require states to gradually increase the percentage of WIOA Title I funds spent on evidence-based practices, building on the model in the Re-Employment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) program.
- **Higher education dollars for high-quality programs.** We support the use of Title IV Higher Education Act grant and loan dollars to support credential attainment, including Pell Grants for short-term programs. Qualifying programs should incorporate career navigation support and meet rigorous outcome standards to ensure they provide sustained economic gains to participants.

² See <https://www.americaforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Accelerating-SNAP-ET-Innovation-and-Effectiveness-RESET-for-Americas-Future-Act-Oct.-2022.pdf>.

- **Expand access for programs led by proximate leaders.** Federal agencies must conduct broad outreach to share information on funding opportunities, ensure application materials are easily accessible, and provide direct support wherever possible. America Forward’s work with a recent Peer Learning and Action Community of workforce organizations, led by predominantly BIPOC proximate leaders, identified that, too often, grants and contracting processes are difficult to access for new potential grantees—and especially proximate organizations with limited experience in such processes. For example, we strongly encourage federal agencies, including the Departments of Labor, Commerce, Education, and Transportation, and AmeriCorps to prioritize engagement with proximate leaders during the implementation of infrastructure spending bills with workforce development components. More broadly, we support efforts to build a more inclusive lending and financing system to support the development and sustainability of social innovation organizations, particularly those operated in underserved communities and without established access to credit.
- **Outcomes-focused technical assistance.** Federal agencies must provide effective technical assistance to enable States, local agencies, and partners to develop, identify, adopt, and scale innovative and effective practices. This should be a top priority for agencies to ensure funding is used effectively and equitably.

We also call on policymakers to expand direct support to an array of proven economic mobility approaches and programs, and substantially increase support for our under-resourced workforce system. In addition to congressional action, we call on federal agencies to prioritize these efforts in implementing current legislation, including the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, CHIPS and Science Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act.

- **Scale sectoral employment programs.** We support efforts to provide direct funding to sectoral employment programs. An array of research has demonstrated that these programs, which train job seekers for careers in high-opportunity industries – generally in direct partnership with employers – can provide a pathway to quality jobs for workers who may face barriers to employment.³ Many of the most impactful sectoral employment programs could readily scale to many more participants and communities nationwide with direct federal investment.
- **Invest in employment social enterprises (ESEs).** ESEs are an invaluable way to help young people and adults with limited work experience or those facing barriers to employment step into the workforce. ESEs offer work-based learning that provides real job experience (with income) while providing training and support, ranging from mental health services to English language learning opportunities. Moving forward, policymakers should embrace a clear definition of ESEs, collect data on their impact, ensure ESEs are eligible for funding from sources such as the Small Business Administration and the Department of Commerce, and increase capital and direct funding for such programs.
- **Expand the federal YouthBuild program to full scale.** YouthBuild engages under-resourced opportunity youth ages 16-24 in comprehensive, full-time education, job training, and

³ See https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/publication/Evidence-Review_Sectoral-Employment_2222022_0.pdf

community service programming. The program allows young people to earn their high school credentials while learning job skills by building affordable green housing, or through training for healthcare or technology careers in their communities. We recommend Congress dedicate more funding for YouthBuild and dedicate more resources to training and support for opportunity youth, generally. We also recommend that the Department of Labor (DOL) reassess their 2018 letter which prohibited using DOL resources, including YouthBuild, for AmeriCorps matching funds, in order to build a foundation for successfully braiding resources across DOL and AmeriCorps, thereby enabling YouthBuild programs to grow and serve more opportunity youth.

- **Support bridges to employment.** In addition to directly supporting ESEs and YouthBuild, policymakers should act to expand support for programs that offer a critical bridge to employment for populations including opportunity youth, people who have been involved with criminal legal systems, people with disabilities, immigrants, English learners, and people who are unhoused or housing-insecure. These programs include transitional jobs, subsidized jobs, and re-entry programs. In addition, DOL should discontinue waiving the WIOA requirement that youth funding stream resources be directed to opportunity youth.
- **Strengthen workforce-based learning opportunities.** We support efforts to equitably expand opportunities for work-based learning and career and technical education in K-12 programs, as well as bridge-building initiatives that provide work experience through social enterprises, internships, and national service.
- **Expand the scope of apprenticeship programs.** We recommend leveraging apprenticeship programs to target nontraditional industries and engage the 4.6 million opportunity youth in our nation, as well as the millions of non-metropolitan and rural area adults who have endured chronic unemployment and underemployment since the Great Recession but are often left out of apprenticeship programs. For example, federal agencies have major opportunities to expand apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship pipelines – including through partnerships with national service programs – to build onramps into climate resilience and clean energy jobs with Inflation Reduction Act resources. Similarly, opportunity also exists to enhance national service programs’ ability to shepherd national service participants into teaching apprenticeship programs. Interagency coordination between DOL and AmeriCorps could help to make apprenticeship pathways accessible to those who may face barriers.
- **Support and expand re-employment services.** In 2018, Congress authorized the Re-Employment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) grants program, incorporating outcomes-based and evidence-based funding provisions that the America Forward Coalition championed. We support efforts to expand funding for these services, which evidence has shown can substantially improve outcomes for unemployed workers while reducing costs to the public, and to support states in strengthening their quality in implementation.

We also call for policymakers to invest in key services that are essential to advancing economic mobility, such as:

- **Expanding access to supportive services.** There is substantial and increasing evidence that supportive services such as childcare, food, housing, and transportation support can improve outcomes for education and training participants. These services are a core feature of some of

the most impactful workforce development models. However, too often, these services are difficult to fund through federal funding streams. We support a variety of solutions to expand access to supportive services, including directly expanding access under WIOA, fully reimbursing for such services under SNAP E&T (as the RESET for America's Future Act provides), and directly funding models such as permanent supportive housing alongside workforce programs.

- **Strengthen career assessment and navigation services.** State and local workforce systems must offer accessible, effective career assessment and career navigation services for workers and job seekers – including for adults who have learning disabilities and/or who may struggle in text heavy environments. These services should include facilitating prior learning assessments for workers and job seekers to verify their mastered competencies and, thus, speed and reduce the costs of acquiring post-secondary credentials required by local employers. Policymakers should clarify that federal workforce development funding can be used for career navigation – as is not always the case under WIOA – and ensure that such navigation takes advantage of high-quality labor market information.

2) Invest in Data and Research

To advance equity and improve outcomes, we must first have a clearer picture of economic mobility challenges and opportunities. This starts by making robust investments in the research and data infrastructure necessary to identify current gaps and measure the impact of solutions. Today, it is far too difficult for stakeholders across the workforce system to access even basic information about workforce development programs and participant outcomes, including long-term labor market outcomes. This persistent challenge has frustrated informed decision-making by workers, providers, career navigators, and policymakers at every level of government, and makes it more difficult to help participants achieve sustained economic mobility. We call for the following improvements:

- **Authorize and expand support for administrative data capacity.** As a starting point, policymakers must enhance support for data capacity at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as among the partners and providers that contribute to and leverage that data for improvement. We have advocated, for example, to dramatically expand investment in the Workforce Data Quality Initiative (WDQI) program, which has consistently lagged the companion State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) Grant Program, focused on education data; at our last count, 11 states have never received WDQI funding. We also strongly support incentives for states and localities to leverage other funding streams to improve data capacity; the bipartisan RESET for America's Future Act would provide such incentives in the SNAP Employment & Training (E&T) program.
- **Create a national employment metrics system.** Ultimately, we believe a federal-state workforce data partnership is necessary to identify the most locally relevant solutions, harness national employment and outcomes data and economies of scale, and reduce burden.⁴ We believe providing national infrastructure can enable far more states to publish locally-relevant scorecards, such as linking program opportunities to local labor market needs. And it is essential to provide social innovation organizations with privacy-protected, secure access to linked data

⁴ See <https://www.americaforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/America-Forward-Coalition-DOL-2022-Open-Data-RFI-Response-National-Employment-Metrics-System.pdf>.

to support continuous improvement and evaluation. The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) should partner with other federal agencies and stakeholders to help jurisdictions access national labor market outcomes data and provide a common technical framework, including the use of accessible common standards, that frees states from reinventing the wheel in each jurisdiction.

- **Strengthen reporting on participant outcomes.** Current reporting by programs such as WIOA Title I and SNAP E&T is too limited to offer participants and other stakeholders a complete picture of programs' long-term outcomes. Publicly reported employment outcomes should include longer-term measures of earnings and employment; placement and retention in appropriate post-secondary education; and measures of job quality, such as benefits, potential for career advancement, stable scheduling, and a safe working environment. DOL should also coordinate with other federal partners to develop a uniform measure of job placement rates.
- **Expand reporting on participant demographics.** Enhanced data systems must provide stronger public reporting on workforce programs' demographics, including gender, race, ethnicity, criminal legal-system involvement, household income, and other metrics related to systemic barriers. Given widespread concerns about "creaming" participants in workforce development programs, policymakers must provide stronger public data to understand which programs are equitably reaching and serving eligible participants, as well as to assess programs' outcomes in the context of the populations they serve.
- **Strengthen support for foundational research.** We also encourage policymakers to expand investments in foundational research that facilitates community-driven innovation and identifies more effective policies. For example, we join our partners at Results for America in advocating for DOL to set aside one percent of funds for evaluation, and for legislators to set a floor of at least 0.5 percent. We strongly encourage agencies, including the DOL, the Department of Education, the Department of Commerce, AmeriCorps, and the Department of Health and Human Services, to deeply engage with social innovation organizations and proximate leaders as they develop their learning agendas, in order to create the strategy for research investments moving forward.

3) Center Equity and Outcomes in Performance

Current economic challenges disproportionately impact communities of color, low-income people, immigrants, people with disabilities, English learners, and other historically under-resourced communities. Inclusive, sustainable solutions that improve the health of our economy must center the proximate voices and expertise of those closest to economic challenges. Government should leverage performance measures to incentivize services for populations that are "hard to serve," while ensuring that dollars flow to programs that prioritize meaningful outcomes from these populations, as well as workforce participants more broadly.

We call on policymakers to support the expansion of pay for success methods that leverage government funding to improve outcomes with a focus on equity. These strategies can empower state and local agencies, as well as social innovation organizations and other third-party providers. For example, performance-based contracting methods enable workforce boards and providers to shift their focus from quick turnaround job placement to more effective, evidence-based training and upskilling to support in-demand employer needs and address needs among vulnerable populations. These strategies

also offer a critical way to prioritize key populations that may be perceived as “hard to serve.” The northern Virginia workforce development board, for instance, saw foster-involved youth participation rise from five to seven percent up to 30 percent after implementing performance-based contracting. Moving forward, we urge policymakers to:

- **Expand eligibility for pay-for-success.** Across workforce programs – ranging from formula to discretionary grants – policymakers should formally authorize eligibility for the use of funds under pay-for-success models. While state and local governments are generally able to leverage performance-based contracting under existing law, formal authorization that offers governments certainty is essential to dramatically expanding the adoption of these practices. The America Forward Coalition championed the inclusion of such authorities in the WIOA reauthorization in 2014, which enabled workforce boards to use “pay-for-performance” authority to link payments to outcomes past two years, and the Perkins Act in 2015.
- **Clarify pay-for-success provisions.** In WIOA and other legislation, legislators and regulators should make it clear that states and localities may use performance-based contracts to pay for longer-term outcomes occurring past the typical one-to-three-year spending window for grants – providing incentives for sustained long-term results – and that governments have the ability to reallocate funding for contract goals that are not met. Similarly, policymakers should define key terms such as “performance rate cards,” which set common standards and processes to benchmark costs. This clarity is essential: DOL’s delay in implementing Congress’s landmark pay-for-performance provision in the 2014 WIOA reauthorization was a serious impediment to boards’ use of the provision, despite widespread adoption. DOL’s 2020 pay-for-performance guidance also left key questions unanswered, such as which outcomes measures could be used.
- **Provide incentives, not deterrents, for adoption of outcomes-focused practices.** Policymakers should incorporate provisions to support and encourage governments to use outcomes-focused practices, such as offering bonus dollars and enhanced matching provisions. The RESET for America’s Future Act, for example, would offer additional funding to states that leverage performance-based contracting, evidence-based practices, or rigorous evaluation to improve outcomes among SNAP E&T programs. And policymakers should not add unnecessary restrictions on innovative efforts to use these practices. For instance, the 2014 WIOA reauthorization capped use of pay-for-performance funding for longer-term outcomes at only 10 percent of agencies’ funds, complicating implementation in the field. Legislators should remove this cap and instead offer bonus funding and other incentives for agencies that use such methods.
- **Provide effective technical assistance for pay-for-success practices.** Successfully implementing performance-based contracting requires effective technical assistance as workforce agencies weigh various measures and undergo a broader culture shift around their interactions with providers. Even when they are interested, local agencies typically do not have the capacity or funding to utilize performance-based contracting as a tool to provide targeted services to vulnerable populations. In WIOA, for example, Congress should set aside funding from national activities dollars to support pay-for-performance contracting nationally. DOL should also maintain the availability of the 15 percent Governor’s reserve for pay-for-performance contracting implementation, as well as allow those funds to be directly used for incentives for local boards that institute performance-based contracting models. WIOA should ensure that

DOL offers direct, intensive technical assistance to interested States and local workforce development boards, in addition to generalized technical assistance such as webinars.

We also call for policymakers to revisit the existing federal performance measures for workforce programs. We are deeply concerned that the current performance measures in the workforce system have failed to strengthen equity and outcomes and, in fact, provide persistent pressure for governments and providers to “cream” participants perceived as more “career-ready.” Updated measures should incorporate more effective and inclusive measures of performance. We call on policymakers to:

- **Improve outcomes measurement.** The 2014 WIOA reauthorization incorporated a statistical adjustment model to guide DOL’s negotiations with states – and states’ with local boards – with the goal of promoting better performance while accounting for differences in economic conditions between states and, critically, the characteristics of participants entering WIOA programs. However, we remain concerned that this structure continues to promote creaming, and there is only limited data available regarding DOL’s methodology. Congress should require DOL to publish its full methodology, require DOL to fund independent research evaluating the methodology, and ultimately incorporate more effective provisions to ensure this structure does not disincentivize serving participants perceived as needing more intensive services. In addition, we propose that DOL pilot value-added measures for program and state performance, building on recent advances in methodology, that better contextualize programs’ outcomes relative to the barriers their participants experience.
- **Strengthen core performance measures.** We call for programs like WIOA to incorporate longer-term measures of earnings and employment – including earnings up to 5 years post-exit – to provide stronger measures of programs’ sustained impacts. We also propose adding measures of job quality, including benefits, potential for career advancement, stable scheduling, and a safe working environment, as core measures.
- **Review Eligible Training Provider List standards.** Under WIOA, Eligible Training Provider Lists (ETPLs) serve as a gateway for providers to receive individual training account (ITA) funding. Today, state standards for ETPLs vary dramatically, and the field does not perceive them as an effective measure for quality, with little ongoing performance assessment once providers are on the lists. We encourage Congress to require DOL to evaluate and assess state standards moving forward, and to consider stronger national standards that enable and support nontraditional providers and organizations proximate to priority populations to join the lists, as well as incentivize providers to seek out and proactively serve those with the highest barriers to employment.
- **Consider new performance requirements in benefits programs.** We propose that policymakers consider the adoption of more effective performance measures to ensure that states implementing public benefits programs – such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program – are properly incentivized to advance effective and equitable strategies to promote participants’ economic mobility.

4) Reorient Rules to Support Partnerships, Equity, and Innovation

Despite increased efforts from Congress and federal agencies over the past decade, efforts to coordinate service provision and provide for innovative strategies across federally-funded workforce programs remain far too difficult. Too often, overly-complex rules have stifled efforts by innovative, equity-focused providers with a focus on compliance alone, as opposed to outcomes. In addition, policymakers have not taken full advantage of opportunities to align efforts across programs and facilitate new, innovative partnerships.

Across the board, innovative, effective, and equity-focused providers face far too many barriers to participation in federally-funded workforce programs that can make a meaningful impact on economic mobility. We encourage policymakers to engage directly with social innovation organizations and other proximate leaders with deep experience working with communities most affected to cut red tape. We propose:

- **Promoting the use of administrative flexibilities and waivers.** We encourage policymakers to support expanded use of waivers to encourage innovation, equity, and effectiveness. At DOL, for example, we encourage the department to actively pursue opportunities to use existing waiver authority to promote outcomes-driven activities, including for opportunity youth, and to promote innovation and improved performance in the Jobs Corp program. We also support efforts to build on lessons from the Performance Partnerships Pilots, which provided flexibility for states, localities, and innovation organizations to better coordinate across federal funding streams to serve opportunity youth. While the pilots supported an array of promising models, the final implementation study emphasized the importance of stronger technical assistance, intentional planning time, and accessible data sharing and performance metrics to enable more robust, effective initiatives moving forward.
- **Streamlining eligibility determinations.** WIOA eligibility processes, which require participants to first meet with a local one-stop operator before enrolling in workforce development programs, are incredibly burdensome both for job seekers and for providers. Drawn-out eligibility determinations also create serious challenges for cohort-based providers – for instance, sectoral training organizations – that may hold sessions with only two or three start times over the course of the year. While it is important to ensure that funds are used properly, the current system creates far too much red tape. We propose streamlining this process, including by enabling local workforce boards to delegate these determinations to providers.
- **Accelerating Eligible Training Provider List (ETPL) determinations.** The process of an ETPL determination, with long and inconsistent timelines for review, is often a major barrier to offering innovative services, even when local boards are fully engaged with a provider. We support efforts to accelerate these determinations while ensuring these processes are rigorous and advance equity goals, including setting a clear, appropriate timeline for states to review and respond to ETPL applications nominated by local boards.
- **National direct funding.** We support the establishment of “national direct” options in federal workforce and education programs, similar to the national direct grants in AmeriCorps, to allow nonprofit organizations operating in more than one state to compete for funding for multiple sites. This system would reduce administrative costs and leverage the quality controls found in high quality national programs.

- **Encouraging effective state planning.** We encourage policymakers to actively support the use of consolidated state planning across funding streams, as provided for in the 2014 WIOA reauthorization. We strongly support initiatives to expand community engagement, including by social innovation organizations and proximate leaders, and efforts by federal agencies such as DOL to offer technical assistance to facilitate effective planning processes.

We also support broader efforts to better align efforts across programs aimed at improving economic mobility, as well as other key funding streams and policy domains, including to:

- **Facilitate alignment between K-12, higher education, and workforce programs.** We strongly encourage policymakers to pursue opportunities to align effort across K-12, higher education, and workforce programs. For example, it is essential to ensure that the Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants program is fully integrated with career navigation and counseling sponsored by local workforce boards – focused on the regional skills demands they identify – in order to target grant resources to those most in need of upskilling. We also support initiatives to develop micro-credentials, which document individual skills or practice, and credentials offered outside of traditional school settings that serve as evidence of learning through internships, service year programs, and other experiences.
- **Leverage infrastructure spending for workforce programs.** We are heartened by the Biden Administration’s efforts to prioritize workforce investments through new infrastructure spending, including DOL’s visionary Building Pathways to Infrastructure Jobs grant program and the Department of Commerce’s CHIPS Act program. In both of these programs, federal agencies have embraced opportunities to support equity-focused, innovative programs and to scale models that have proven effective. Similarly, the Inflation Reduction Act invests in talent pipeline opportunities, especially in the climate and clean energy sector, and offers opportunities for effective workforce development investment. We encourage policymakers to continue similar investments and look forward to supporting the implementation of these models moving forward.
- **Align national service and workforce policy.** National service has historically played an important role in developing America’s workforce by providing tangible work experience and career on-ramps to youth and young adults, providing a reliable employment pathway to the nonprofit and other sectors, and building the supply of volunteers available to assist others in preparing for and finding employment. However, too often, national service policies have not been designed to fully leverage this intersection with workforce policy and most effectively advance equity. Moving forward, we call for national service policies to align with workforce policies, including aligning expansion of AmeriCorps with workforce needs – such as prioritizing funding for programs that offer participants clear paths to attainment of a valuable credential – as well as tracking and reporting corps member workforce outcomes. To successfully track corps member outcomes and support their career pathways post-service, we recommend that AmeriCorps also release AmeriCorps member alumni information to partners offering alumni services, which corps members can opt-in to receive as they are completing their term of service. We also advocate for expanding funding for national service programs and opportunities for participation, including passing and fully funding ACTION for National Service, assuring federal college work-study includes service programs, and reducing barriers for training in AmeriCorps. Finally, as WIOA reauthorization conversations continue, policymakers should

consider how to better incorporate national service into workforce development dialogues and strategic planning at the federal and state level.⁵

Finally, we strongly encourage policymakers to review policies that may impose unfair, inequitable barriers and requirements on participants in workforce programs and create unnecessary burdens in the workforce in general. These include:

- **Fix benefits cliffs.** Federal rules have inadvertently created barriers for providers and participants in programs that encourage economic mobility, such as transitional jobs programs. Policymakers must ensure program rules, including income rules, do not disincentivize the provision of such programs. For example, the bipartisan RESET for America's Future Act addresses the "benefits cliff" in the SNAP E&T program by enabling E&T participants to complete their training when they would otherwise "income out," a major concern for programs that involve earn-and-learn models.
- **Revisit work requirements for benefits programs.** We are concerned that work requirements in benefits programs, including the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program and SNAP, have created serious consequences for vulnerable people without supporting sustained economic mobility. These requirements are also administratively burdensome for states and localities, distracting from these programs' aims to provide basic benefits and a path to economic mobility. We strongly encourage policymakers to revisit these requirements with a focus on both outcomes and equity, alongside enhancements to these programs' core services and performance measures.
- **Revise laws and regulations creating barriers to those with criminal legal system involvement.** Individuals with past criminal legal system involvement, including those who are formerly incarcerated, face unique hurdles to re-entering the workforce, including policies that contribute to persistent, destructive opportunity gaps. To address this challenge, the federal government should eliminate such unfair barriers, including by revising legislatively mandated criminal background check requirements for programs such as AmeriCorps; enacting automatic expungement of juvenile records after a period of time; and removing barriers to entrepreneurship, like accessing capital.
- **Address occupational licensing and skills-based hiring.** We are concerned that overly-broad occupational licensing requirements have stifled participation in a range of fields, causing serious implications for equity without providing complementary gains for the public in terms of health, safety, and performance. For example, immigrants oftentimes are not able to translate their experiences and in demand skills from their country of origin to the US workforce on account of occupational licensing policies.⁶ We support bipartisan efforts to review and revise such requirements. In addition, we support efforts to encourage skills-based hiring across government agencies and among government contractors.

⁵ See

https://www.serviceyearalliance.org/america_s_service_commissions_service_year_alliance_joint_recommendations_regarding_national_service_for_wioa

⁶ See <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-brain-waste-analysis-june2021-final.pdf>

Conclusion

Looking forward, we see enormous opportunities for policymakers to advance strategies and direct resources that will eliminate barriers to full employment, empower workers, and safeguard the health of our economy for the long-term. By supporting innovation, building stronger data and evaluation infrastructure, centering equity and outcomes, and expanding effective partnerships, policymakers can make our workforce development system stronger, more inclusive, and more effective – for every worker – and can improve prospects for long-term economic mobility. We look forward to working alongside our Coalition members, partners, and policymakers to make this vision a reality.

About America Forward

America Forward is the Washington, D.C.-based nonpartisan policy initiative of New Profit, a pioneering national venture philanthropy organization that invests in a portfolio of breakthrough social entrepreneurs and systems-change initiatives, catalyzes and builds their impact, and transforms how government and philanthropy pursue social change to ensure that all people can thrive.

America Forward leads a Coalition of more than 100 social innovation organizations across the country. Every day, these organizations are working in 15,000 communities nationwide, impacting more than 9 million lives every year.

Together, America Forward Coalition members advocate for public policies that foster innovation, identify effective solutions, reward results, catalyze cross-sector partnerships, and advance equity in workforce development, education, early childhood, and poverty alleviation. Since 2007, our Coalition organizations have successfully advocated for lasting policy change; leveraged \$1.7 billion for social innovation; and driven millions of federal resources toward programs that are achieving measurable results for those who need them most.