



America Forward Policy Platform on Economic Mobility

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Introduction

While the demand for skilled workers continues to grow in the U.S., millions of individuals still face systemic barriers to employment, particularly in rural and other historically under-resourced communities. Our nation must do more to harness and expand the immense potential of our diverse talent pool. At the same time, as technology such as automation and artificial intelligence reshapes nearly every sector of the economy, economic mobility strategies must explicitly address access to digital skills, technology-enabled roles, and industry-recognized credentials, and ensure that individuals from all communities can achieve secure, well-compensated careers.

We call for policymakers to prioritize actions that will improve economic mobility for all people across our nation. Policies that create innovative pathways into the workforce and reimagine workforce development systems will increase opportunity and enable people to thrive, strengthen families and communities, and contribute to a better economy nationwide. To ensure a cohesive, effective approach that will foster economic mobility for all, policymakers must collaborate with community-driven social innovation organizations, workers, businesses, and workforce boards to build practical solutions that span multiple domains – from workforce development to public benefits to education.

America Forward is a national nonpartisan policy and advocacy organization that unites social entrepreneurs with policymakers to promote a public policy agenda that fosters innovation, rewards results, and catalyzes cross-sector partnerships. America Forward leads the America Forward Coalition, a network of 100+ of the nation's most impactful and innovative non-governmental organizations that develop and advocate for more effective public policies to advance opportunity and move all of America forward. Our Coalition members are at the forefront of delivering high-quality economic mobility services, ranging from evidence-based workforce development programs to performance-focused technical assistance, in communities around the nation.

The America Forward Coalition urges policymakers to pursue transformative economic mobility reforms addressing critical programs and policies through legislation such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the Farm Bill, the National Apprenticeship Act, the Higher Education Act (HEA), and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, all of which are awaiting reauthorization; annual appropriations bills; and the array of actions available to federal agencies, including administrative data improvements, grant priorities, and implementation of legislation such as WIOA. Specifically, we call for the adoption of community-driven, innovative, and effective reforms and urge policymakers to:

- 1) Invest in Community-Based Innovation
- 2) Strengthen Data and Performance Systems to Support Improvement
- 3) Break Down Administrative Barriers to Success

1) Invest in Community-Based Innovation

Policymakers should restructure federal funding streams to ensure that they support innovative, effective, community-focused approaches that expand economic mobility. For too long, these programs have been under-resourced, limiting their sustainability, scope, and impact. Actionable and strategic policy solutions focused on investing in community-based approaches could unleash tremendous untapped potential across our nation. We must ensure that community-focused social innovation organizations have the funding and resources they need to design, implement, and sustain strategies aimed at expanding workforce access, alignment, and opportunity.

First, over the past twenty-five years, social innovators have developed a growing array of evidence-based programs that enable workers to build their skills and thrive in sustainable careers. But current federal funding systems do not prioritize the most effective, high-quality programs, or provide the necessary capacity-building support to scale programs that have been proven to yield results. At the same time, innovative social entrepreneurs lack sufficient support to build, refine, and test new models to meet the varying workforce needs of both workers and employers across the country. Federal policymakers should:

- **Invest in evidence funds to support practitioner-led innovation, learning, and scale-up.** We call on policymakers to invest in funding streams that support the development and expansion of evidence-based approaches that lead to economic mobility. Federal evidence fund models have supported practitioner-led innovation, learning, and scale-up of high-impact social programs since 2009. Policymakers should increase investment in existing evidence funds like the Perkins Innovation and Modernization program and the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program, as well as increase investments in new models, like the Workforce Development Innovation Fund proposed in the Better Jobs Through Evidence and Innovation Act. Policymakers should also ensure that these programs are accessible to a range of applicants; include targeted support for early-stage program development; emphasize cost-effective, scalable strategies; and support long-term growth, sustainability, and ongoing learning.¹
- **Encourage both evidence use and ongoing evidence-building.** Policymakers should include priorities and incentives for the use of evidence, and evidence-building, across federal funding streams in order to drive dollars to high-impact, community-focused models. One such notable model is the Re-Employment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) program. As authorized in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018, RESEA requires states to use an increasing portion of funds for either evidence-based strategies or approaches under rigorous evaluation. America Forward has also championed the RESET for America's Future Act, which would leverage new investment to encourage the use of evidence-based, innovative, performance-driven approaches in the billion-dollar Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training (E&T).

¹ For more information on the impact of evidence funds, see Sackett, Covell, and Lopez (2023), *America Forward, Unlocking Innovation*, <https://www.americaforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/America-Forward-Unlocking-Innovation-in-Evidence-Funds-October-2023.pdf>.

- **Strengthen support for foundational research.** As a critical complement to practitioner-driven strategies, we also encourage policymakers to expand investments in foundational research that sets the stage for groundbreaking economic mobility approaches. For example, we join our partners at Results for America in advocating for agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), to set aside at least one percent of funds for evaluation, and strongly encourage federal agencies to deeply engage with social innovation organizations, practitioners, and communities as they develop their learning agendas. In addition, agencies should explicitly clarify that research and evaluation are allowable costs under federal grants.
- **Implement Workforce Pell effectively for high-quality programs.** In 2025, Congress authorized Workforce Pell Grants and addressed a persistent gap in federal law that prevented students from leveraging Pell Grants to participate in postsecondary programs that are 8 to 15 weeks long, even when these programs are proven to boost students’ economic outcomes. Expanding the applicability of Pell Grants to help cover the cost of high-quality, short-term job training programs, including apprenticeships, holds enormous potential to make evidence-based education and training programs more accessible for millions of people in America. We urge federal officials to ensure Workforce Pell is implemented effectively, including by leveraging high-quality administrative data to assess outcomes and reduce burden and providing strong transparency into program participation and results. Program rules should also ensure that proven non-institutional providers can accessibly partner with colleges and universities and not create undue barriers to participation (e.g., accreditation process, unduly low cap on participation by external providers), as well as provide a pathway for such providers to directly access Workforce Pell if they meet quality standards.
- **Expand access to federal funding for new grantees.** Building on the 2024 revisions to the federal Uniform Grants Guidance, federal agencies must conduct broad outreach to share information on funding opportunities, ensure application materials are easily accessible, and provide direct support wherever possible. However, far too often, grants and contracting opportunities are still difficult to access for a range of new potential grantees.

In addition, we call for deeper investment in our nation’s workforce development and public benefits programs responsive to the significant needs in today’s economy.² Federal policymakers should prioritize new funding for an array of evidence-based approaches and programs and:

- **Scale sectoral employment programs.** We support efforts to provide direct funding to scale sectoral employment programs. Compelling research has demonstrated that sectoral employment programs that train job seekers for careers in high-opportunity industries – often in direct partnership with employers – can provide a pathway to quality jobs for workers who may face barriers to employment.³ Many sectoral programs operate in technology-enabled fields such as IT, cybersecurity, and healthcare, in which skills-based hiring and non-degree pathways

² See Holzer (2023), “Should the federal government spend more on workforce development?,” Brookings Institution, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/should-the-federal-government-spend-more-on-workforce-development/>.

³ See J-PAL North America (2022), *Sectoral Employment Programs as a Path to Quality Jobs*, https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/publication/Evidence-Review_Sectoral-Employment_222022_0.pdf.

can expand access while meeting urgent employer demand. Many of the most impactful sectoral employment programs could be readily scaled to serve more participants and communities nationwide with direct federal investment.

- **Support bridges to economic mobility, including employment social enterprises (ESEs), YouthBuild, and an improved Job Corps.** Policymakers should expand support for transitional jobs, subsidized employment, reentry programs, and comprehensive support services that offer a critical bridge to economic mobility for an array of populations – including opportunity youth, current and former foster youth, people who have been involved with the criminal legal system, people with disabilities, refugees and asylees, English learners, people who are unhoused or housing-insecure, survivors of domestic violence and trafficking, and people with mental health and substance use challenges. Policymakers should also increase direct funding, access to capital, and support for ESEs: purpose-driven businesses that help young people and adults with limited work experience, or those facing barriers to employment, step into the workforce by offering work-based learning and support that provides real job experience and meaningful income. Congress should also expand funding for the proven YouthBuild program that supports opportunity youth, as well as eliminate barriers to align workforce development programs like YouthBuild with AmeriCorps funding. In addition, policymakers should prioritize strengthening outcomes in the Job Corps program by supporting innovation, engaging new providers, and leveraging evidence-based strategies like sectoral programs.
- **Strengthen workforce-based learning opportunities.** We support efforts to expand opportunities for work-based learning and career and technical education in K-12 programs, as well as initiatives that provide work experience through social enterprises, internships, and national service. We also encourage policymakers to invest in research and evaluation that develops, refines, evaluates, and validates key work-based learning, such as experiential learning, capstone projects, and apprenticeships as proxies for work experience, particularly for learners from nontraditional backgrounds, to help address the paradox of entry-level jobs that require multiple years of prior employment.
- **Expand the scope of apprenticeship programs.** We recommend leveraging apprenticeship programs to target nontraditional industries and engage our nation’s five million opportunity youth, 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. One particularly promising avenue is the use of pay-for-success approaches, for which Congress has expressed support and in which DOL has recently begun to invest.⁴ Similarly, we support enhancing national service programs’ ability to prepare national service participants to enter into teaching apprenticeship programs. Policymakers should also expand support for pre-apprenticeships as a means to broaden accessibility among workers who are primed to benefit from apprenticeships, in particular by incentivizing programs that enable workers to ultimately complete an apprenticeship and secure stable employment. Finally, policymakers should reduce red tape and complexity around registered apprenticeship rules and

⁴ See America Forward’s recommendations on pay-for-success apprenticeships in partnership with Apprenticeships for America here: Sackett and Leech (2026), *Pay-for-Success Apprenticeship Pilots: A Framework for Outcomes-Focused Expansion*, <https://www.americaforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/AMFW-and-AFA-PFS-Apprenticeships-Policy-Brief-January-2026.pdf>.

processes to minimize burden on employers and ease barriers to participation while emphasizing quality.

We also call for policymakers to make related investments that are essential to advancing economic mobility. We urge policymakers to:

- **Expand access to supportive services.** Evidence shows that supportive services, such as childcare, food, housing, transportation, and financial literacy coaching, can improve outcomes for education and training participants. These services are a core feature of some of the most impactful workforce development models. However, these services are often difficult to fund through federal funding streams. We support expanding access to supportive services by directly expanding access under WIOA (including post-exit support to assist with retention and longer-term career success), fully reimbursing such services under SNAP E&T (as the RESET for America’s Future Act provides), and directly funding resources like permanent supportive housing as part of federal workforce funding streams.
- **Expand direct financial assistance and access to critical resources.** A growing body of research demonstrates the power of direct financial assistance as a critical financial security and poverty alleviation strategy. We support the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC), including increased refundability to ensure lower-earning households can access these key resources; protecting and increasing access to income support programs, such as SNAP and TANF; and continued piloting and support for innovative strategies like guaranteed income. Similarly, we support efforts to expand vulnerable households’ access to critical resources like food in collaboration with private and public partners.
- **Strengthen career assessment and navigation services.** State and local workforce systems must fund and support accessible, effective career assessment and navigation services for workers and job seekers with diverse needs. These services should include facilitating prior learning assessments for workers and job seekers to verify their mastered competencies and help them more quickly acquire high-value credentials.

2) Strengthen Data and Performance Systems to Support Improvement

Our nation's current data and performance systems too often serve as obstacles to progress instead of driving improvements in workforce development, public benefits, and other career-focused programs. It is far too difficult for stakeholders across the workforce system to access basic information about workforce development programs and participant outcomes, including long-term labor market outcomes. This persistent challenge can impede informed decision-making by workers, providers, career navigators, and policymakers at every level of government, and make it more difficult to help participants achieve sustained economic mobility. We call for the following improvements:

- **Authorize and expand support for administrative data capacity.** 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. This includes dramatically expanding investment in the federal Workforce Data Quality Initiative (WDQI) program at the U.S. Department of Labor and the Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) Grant Program at the U.S. Department of Education. We also strongly support incentives for

states and localities to leverage funding streams to improve data capacity as, for example, the SNAP E&T Data and Technical Assistance (DATA) Act would provide in the SNAP Employment & Training program.

- **Create a national employment metrics system.** 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.⁵ Providing national infrastructure can enable far more states to publish locally-relevant scorecards and link program opportunities to local labor market needs. In addition, governments should provide social innovation organizations with privacy-protected, secure access to linked data to support continuous improvement and evaluation. The Department of Labor 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 and demographics.** 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, more accurate measures of earnings and employment (including data on earnings growth); 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. In addition, to advance open participation and services, policymakers must ensure these data are available across key demographics, including gender, race, ethnicity, criminal legal-system involvement, and household income.

We also call for policymakers to revisit the existing federal performance measures for workforce programs. The current performance measures in the workforce system have failed to strengthen outcomes and have provided persistent incentives for governments and providers to “cream” participants perceived as more “career-ready.” Updated measures should incorporate more effective and inclusive performance metrics that incentivize high-quality services for populations facing greater barriers, while also providing greater flexibility for governments and providers to leverage an array of tools to achieve success – including supportive services that often facilitate program retention and wage progression. We call on policymakers to:

- **Improve outcomes measurement.** We support reforms that would improve the transparency and effectiveness of the performance measures that govern participation in federally-funded economic mobility programs. For example, many states' WIOA eligible training provider list (ETPLs) standards are ineffective and offer limited incentives to support sustained economic mobility. Similarly, the TANF program's work participation rate (WPR) measure has done relatively little to drive the implementation of more effective strategies. We encourage

⁵ See America Forward (2022), <https://www.americaforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/America-Forward-Coalition-DOL-2022-Open-Data-RFI-Response-National-Employment-Metrics-System.pdf>.

policymakers to engage social innovation organizations to reform these systems by leveraging outcomes-based success metrics, such as long-term earnings gains, and leverage lessons learned on the ground.

- **Invest in and support pay-for-success.** We call on policymakers to support the expansion of pay-for-success methods that leverage government funding to improve outcomes, with a focus on accessibility. These strategies can empower governments and their private partners to pursue sustained economic gains, incentivize serving high-priority under-resourced populations, and break down barriers to leveraging an array of tools to improve outcomes.⁶ Policymakers should address deterrents to the use of pay-for-success practices, including unclear guidance and unnecessary restrictions, such as caps on use of performance-based financing, and instead provide incentives such as bonus funding and enhanced matching provisions.
- **Outcomes-focused technical assistance.** Federal agencies must provide effective technical assistance to enable states, local agencies, and partners to strengthen their performance systems, and develop, identify, adopt, and scale innovative and proven economic mobility practices, including through pay-for-success strategies. This support should be a top priority for agencies to ensure funding is used effectively.

3) Break Down Administrative Barriers to Success

Despite increased efforts from Congress and federal agencies over the past decade, efforts to coordinate service provision and support innovative strategies across federally-funded workforce programs remain far too difficult. Overly-complex rules continue to stifle efforts by innovative providers by focusing 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.

At the same time, innovative, effective 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 leaders with deep experience working with communities to cut red tape. We urge policymakers to:

- **Eliminate red tape for participation.** Policymakers should prioritize reducing unnecessary red tape that inhibits providers and participants from fully accessing federally-funded programs that advance economic mobility. For example, WIOA state eligible training provider list (ETPL) determinations have often involved long and inconsistent processes and timelines for review, while WIOA participants' eligibility processes frequently involve cumbersome communications that create particular challenges for cohort-based providers: standardized, strong, responsive processes nationwide would be ideal. We similarly support efforts to streamline application processes and simplify eligibility for benefits programs that provide a critical path to economic mobility, such as SNAP, TANF, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

⁶ See, e.g., Prapath (2024), "Incentivizing Outcomes: How the New WIOA Reauthorization Bill Could Better Serve Diverse Working People," Third Sector, <https://americaforward.medium.com/incentivizing-outcomes-how-the-new-wioa-reauthorization-bill-could-better-serve-diverse-working-53cd78039252>.

- **Leverage national service and workforce policy.** National service has historically played an important role in expanding employment opportunities and bolstering capacity for workforce development programs. Policymakers should continue to align these national service and economic mobility policies, including coordinating expansion of AmeriCorps with economic mobility goals and strengthening reporting on Corps members’ workforce outcomes. The Youth Mental Health Corps is a particularly strong model of an AmeriCorps program that both responds to community mental health needs and helps provide on-ramps into behavioral health careers for Corps members.⁷ We also support expanding funding for national service programs; broadening opportunities for participation; advancing the ACTION for National Service Act; assuring federal college work-study includes service programs; and reducing barriers for training in AmeriCorps.

Finally, we strongly encourage policymakers to review entrenched policies that can impose unnecessary barriers on participants in workforce programs and unnecessary burdens on the workforce more generally. We call on policymakers to:

- **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 that program rules, including income rules, do not disincentivize the provision of such programs and provide participants with a sufficient transition period as they achieve higher earnings. For example, the RESET for America’s Future Act would address 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.
- **Revise work requirements for benefits programs.** Work requirements in benefits programs, including TANF, SNAP, and Medicaid, have created serious consequences for vulnerable people without providing a pathway to sustained economic mobility. In many cases, these requirements exclude working people who are otherwise eligible but struggle to navigate confusing eligibility bureaucracies. These requirements are also administratively burdensome for states and localities, distracting from these programs’ aims to provide basic benefits and paths to quality jobs. We encourage policymakers to revisit these requirements with a focus on both outcomes and accessibility, including ensuring that allowable work activities include the full scope of education and training programs.
- **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 impediments to re-entering the workforce, including policies that contribute to persistent opportunity gaps. To address this challenge, policymakers should eliminate the SNAP and TANF felony drug ban and remove barriers to entrepreneurship associated with accessing capital.
- **Advance skills-based hiring policies and revisit occupational licensing requirements.** We support efforts to encourage skills-based hiring across government agencies, among government contractors, and in the private sector. In addition, we urge policymakers to address

⁷ See more information at <https://www.youthmentalhealthcorps.org/>.

overly broad occupational licensing requirements that can stifle participation in a range of fields without meaningfully benefiting the public, including encouraging reciprocal agreements that maintain quality standards.

Conclusion

Looking forward, we see enormous opportunities for policymakers to advance strategies and investments that will eliminate barriers to full employment, empower workers, and safeguard the health of our economy for the long-term. By encouraging innovation, strengthening data and evaluation infrastructure, centering proven outcomes for all workers, and expanding effective partnerships, policymakers can make our workforce development system stronger and more effective, while improving 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 unites social entrepreneurs with policymakers to promote a public policy agenda that fosters innovation, rewards results, and catalyzes cross-sector partnerships. America Forward leads the America Forward Coalition, a network of 100+ of the nation's most impactful and innovative non-governmental organizations that develop and advocate for more effective public policies to advance opportunity and move all of America forward.

America Forward Coalition members achieve high impact, measurable outcomes in more than 15,000 communities nationwide, touching the lives of over 9 million Americans each year, and driving progress in early child care and learning, K-12 and post-secondary education, youth mental health and wellbeing, economic mobility and workforce development, evidence-based policy, social innovation, national service, and civic participation. Since 2007, America Forward's community of entrepreneurs has played a leading role in driving the national dialogue on social innovation policy and impact.