

BRIDGING THE GAP

Advancing Equity and Access to Quality
Jobs through California's
Workforce Development System



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INTRODUCTION


This report, conducted by New Ways to Work, a leading non-profit consulting firm specializing in workforce development, aims to address a critical question:

What prevents Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs) and their partners from focusing on quality jobs within their own organizations and for customers and communities that have been historically underserved or failed by multiple systems, and where can flexible funding help mitigate these barriers?

To provide a comprehensive answer to this question, it is essential to understand the factors that both inhibit and facilitate an effective public workforce development system. Research indicates that fragmented funding streams are a significant barrier. Public workforce development programs often suffer from constrained budgets and strict regulations, which limit their ability to implement comprehensive and responsive services. The Urban Institute highlights that the rigidity of public funding can stifle innovation and hinder the development of integrated service delivery models. Additionally, bureaucratic inefficiencies and administrative burdens pose significant challenges. Complex regulatory requirements and slow decision-making processes can delay program implementation and reduce the responsiveness of workforce development initiatives, as noted by the Brookings Institution.

Another critical factor is the lack of employer engagement. Without strong partnerships with employers, workforce development boards struggle to align training programs with industry needs, resulting in a mismatch between job seekers' skills and job market demands. The Aspen Institute's Workforce Strategies Initiative emphasizes the necessity of active employer involvement for the success of workforce development efforts. Moreover, systemic barriers and inequities, including racial and gender discrimination, perpetuate disparities in the workforce development system.






These barriers prevent underserved populations from accessing quality jobs and advancing in their careers, as emphasized by the National Skills Coalition. Insufficient support services, such as childcare, transportation, and mental health services, further impede individuals' ability to participate in workforce development programs. The National Association of Workforce Boards (NAWB) highlights that these support services are essential for helping job seekers overcome barriers to employment and achieve long-term success.

Conversely, several factors facilitate a more effective public workforce development system. Integrated service delivery models that combine education, training, and support services are particularly effective in addressing the diverse needs of job seekers. Programs offering holistic support, including wraparound services, are better equipped to help individuals overcome barriers to employment. Research by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) underscores the success of these integrated models in improving employment outcomes. Flexible funding also plays a crucial role. Philanthropic investments often provide the flexibility needed to allocate resources based on local needs and priorities, enabling workforce boards to pilot innovative programs and respond to emerging challenges.

Strong partnerships with employers are essential for aligning workforce development programs with industry needs. Employer engagement ensures that training programs are relevant and that job seekers are equipped with the skills required in the labor market. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) underscores the importance of employer involvement in workforce development efforts. Community-based approaches involving local organizations and stakeholders in designing and delivering workforce development programs can enhance their impact. These approaches ensure that programs are culturally and contextually relevant and address the specific needs of local populations. The Urban Institute's research demonstrates the effectiveness of community-based workforce development initiatives. Furthermore, using data to inform program design and decision-making processes can significantly improve the effectiveness of workforce development programs. Data-driven approaches enable workforce boards to identify labor market trends, assess program outcomes, and make informed adjustments to improve service delivery. The National Skills Coalition advocates for data-driven strategies to enhance workforce development efforts.



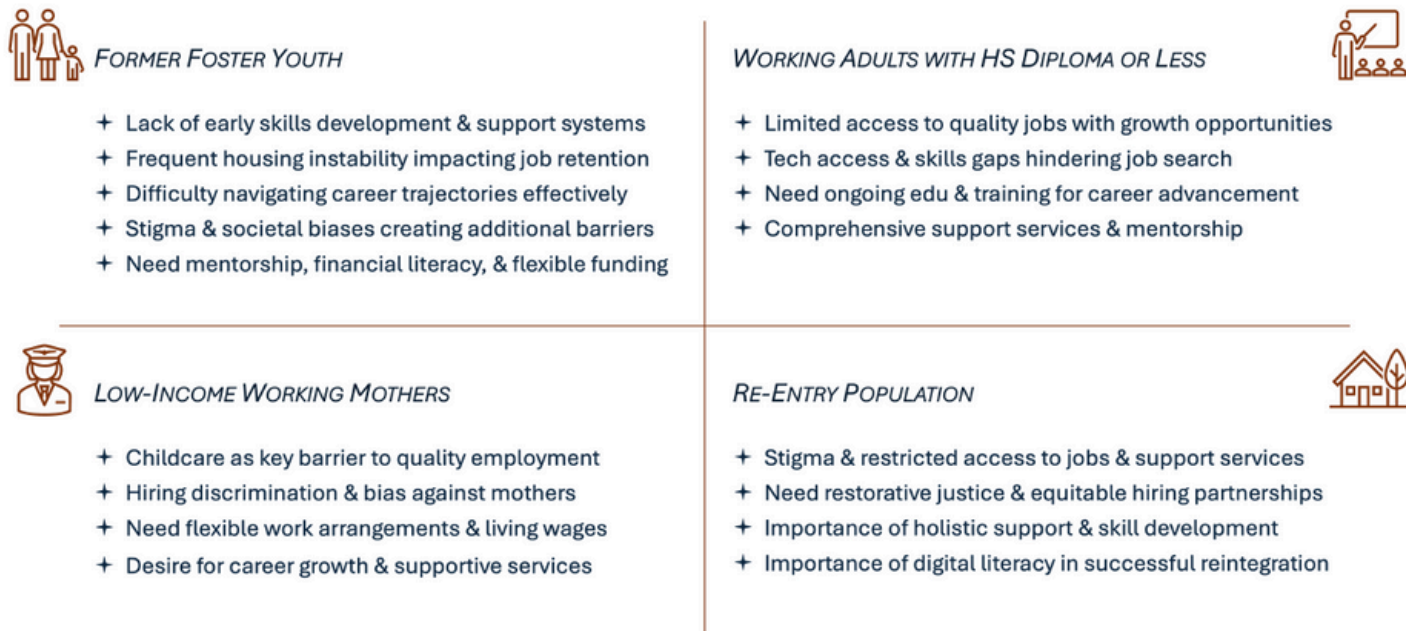
To gather the necessary insights for this report, New Ways to Work conducted a comprehensive qualitative research project across four distinct local workforce development areas in California: the City of Los Angeles, Merced County, Riverside County, and Contra Costa County. The four local workforce development areas – City of Los Angeles, Contra Costa County, Merced County, and Riverside County – were selected for the following reasons:

- **Diversity of Population and Geographic Representation:** These areas represent a mix of large urban (City of LA), suburban (Contra Costa County), and rural (Merced County) regions, which could provide insights into how different types of communities address workforce development challenges for high-barrier populations.
- **Variation in Economic and Labor Market Conditions:** The regions experience different economic conditions, such as high job growth in certain sectors (e.g., Riverside's logistics industry, LA's entertainment and tech) or struggling sectors (e.g., Merced's agriculture), which can highlight different strategies and barriers to creating quality jobs.
- **Existing Workforce Development Efforts:** These areas are already engaged in significant workforce development activities or pilot programs focusing on high-barrier populations, making them ideal candidates for studying challenges and successes in implementing quality job placements.
- **Statewide and Regional Influence:** The City of Los Angeles and Riverside County are among the largest local workforce areas in California, potentially serving as influential models for other areas. Contra Costa County is part of the economically diverse Bay Area, and Merced County, in the Central Valley, reflects more rural dynamics, which could provide a statewide balance in insights.

The research involved a series of interviews, listening sessions, and focus groups with key stakeholders, including LWDB executive directors, board members, administrators, frontline staff from community-based organizations (CBOs), and customers representing four target populations: low-income working mothers, re-entry individuals, former foster youth, and working adults with a high school diploma or less. Over 200 individuals participated in these sessions.

These populations face unique barriers to employment, as shown below in Figure 1. By including their perspectives, the study aimed to capture a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in promoting equitable access to quality jobs. These populations face unique barriers to employment, such as:

Figure 1: Common Barriers Experienced by Target Populations



By focusing on these four target populations, the study provides valuable insights into the specific needs and challenges of groups that are often underrepresented in workforce development research and programs. This focus also helps to inform the development of tailored strategies and recommendations for promoting equitable access to quality jobs.



FINDINGS

The comprehensive research conducted by New Ways to Work across four distinct local workforce development areas in California the City of Los Angeles, Merced County, Riverside County, and Contra Costa County has yielded valuable insights into the challenges, opportunities, and promising practices for serving target populations and promoting equitable access to quality jobs. This section presents the key findings from the sessions with workforce development board executive directors, board members, administrators, frontline staff at community-based organizations (CBOs), and customers representing four target populations: low-income working mothers, re-entry individuals, former foster youth, and working adults with a high school diploma or less. Additional detail on the key themes emerging from the research participants can be found in Appendix B.


LWDBs' Understanding of "Quality Jobs"

The sessions with workforce development board leadership revealed a growing awareness of the need to address systemic barriers and racial inequities within the workforce development system. Participants acknowledged the political environment impacting immigrant labor and the presence of structural racism within county governments. There is an increasing commitment to promoting diversity and representation within LWDB leadership and adopting a more holistic, human-centered approach to service delivery.

LWDBs are focusing on high-growth sectors and engaging with employers to create economic opportunities for target populations. They are also prioritizing healthcare and apprenticeships as key areas for promoting job quality and economic mobility. However, there may be a need for more clarity on how to operationalize these goals and overcome challenges in prioritizing job quality and economic outcomes.

Integrating Learnings from across Sessions

The findings from the sessions with workforce development board leadership, frontline staff at CBOs, and customers from target populations reveal a complex interplay of challenges, opportunities, and promising practices in promoting equitable access to quality jobs. While each group offered unique perspectives and experiences, several cross-cutting themes emerged that highlight the need for a comprehensive, collaborative, and customer-centered approach to workforce development.



Across all stakeholder groups, there was a recognition of the systemic barriers and inequities that impact the ability of target populations to access quality employment opportunities, including discrimination, lack of affordable childcare, limited access to education and training, criminal background stigma, and housing instability. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that combines targeted programs, flexible funding, comprehensive support services, and strategic partnerships.

Workforce development board leadership emphasized the importance of tailoring programs and services to meet the specific needs of each target population while also promoting inclusivity and accessibility. Frontline staff at CBOs provided valuable insights into effective engagement strategies and promising practices, such as offering wraparound services, leveraging word-of-mouth referrals, providing tailored support, and celebrating success.

Customers from target populations shared their lived experiences and the challenges they face in accessing quality employment opportunities, highlighting the need for affordable childcare, flexible work arrangements, restorative justice practices, fair hiring, early skill development, mentorship, and empathetic employers.

Across all groups, there was a clear call for a more holistic, human-centered approach to workforce development that prioritizes flexibility, responsiveness, and continuous improvement. This requires a shift in organizational culture, funding priorities, and performance metrics to align with the goals of equity, inclusion, and economic mobility, as well as a commitment to authentic community engagement, data-driven decision-making, and ongoing learning and adaptation.

To synthesize the insights gathered from these sessions and provide a framework for action, the following section presents an Integrated Framework for Quality Jobs and Equity. This framework incorporates the key learnings from the research and offers a roadmap for transforming the workforce development system to better serve those who have been historically marginalized and excluded, while also highlighting the critical role that philanthropic organizations can play in supporting this transformation.



REORIENTING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK FOR QUALITY JOBS AND EQUITY

The re-orientation of local workforce development systems toward quality jobs is not merely a shift in focus but a fundamental transformation in how these systems operate. Quality jobs – those offering fair wages, benefits, career growth, and stability – are vital for fostering economic mobility and enhancing the overall well-being of individuals and communities. Several factors, however, prevent LWDBs from moving beyond traditional job placement metrics toward a more holistic, quality-focused approach.

The integrated framework presented in this report addresses these challenges by offering a comprehensive guide for assessing and improving practices across multiple dimensions. It recognizes that the obstacles LWDBs face are multifaceted, ranging from rigid performance metrics that prioritize rapid job placement over job quality, to funding structures that lack the flexibility necessary for long-term investments in career development. Additionally, systemic issues such as limited employer engagement, capacity constraints, and coordination difficulties further complicate the adoption of a quality jobs orientation.

By addressing these obstacles, the framework aims to support LWDBs in their efforts to create workforce development systems that are not only responsive to immediate employment needs but also aligned with the goal of connecting individuals from diverse backgrounds with employment opportunities that genuinely support economic mobility, well-being, and long-term success. This includes establishing a clear, adaptable definition of job quality, understanding the unique barriers faced by target populations, implementing best practices for service delivery, and fostering strategic employer partnerships.

The following sections delve into some of the major challenges hindering this transition, providing concrete examples and insights into their impact. By proactively addressing these challenges, LWDBs can better align their programs with the needs of both job seekers and employers, ensuring that workforce development efforts contribute to a stronger, more resilient economy and a better quality of life for all participants. This integrated framework serves as a strategic tool for LWDBs to operationalize their commitment to quality jobs and equitable access, ultimately transforming the workforce development system into one that prioritizes equity, inclusion, and shared prosperity.

KEY CHALLENGES IN RE-ORIENTING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Local Workforce Development Boards often face numerous challenges when attempting to shift from a focus on quantity – placing as many customers as possible into available jobs – to a focus on quality, which involves ensuring that placements are in roles with opportunities for growth, stability, and fair compensation. This transition requires addressing several systemic, structural, and operational obstacles that constrain the shift from the status quo to a focus on quality jobs. Seven of these obstacles are presented below.

Performance Metrics & Funding Constraints

1. WIOA Performance Metrics: The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) mandates specific performance metrics, such as employment rates and median earnings. These metrics, while useful for tracking immediate employment outcomes, often emphasize rapid job placement over the quality and sustainability of those placements. As a result, LWDBs may feel pressured to prioritize quick job placements, even if the jobs do not offer long-term stability or growth opportunities.

2. Funding Limitations: Most funding streams available to LWDBs are tied to meeting these performance metrics. This creates a misalignment between the available resources and the goal of promoting quality employment. For example, the lack of flexible funding limits the ability to invest in strategies such as sector partnerships, apprenticeships, or work-based learning programs, which require longer-term financial commitments but can lead to more sustainable employment outcomes.

Lack of Clear Definitions & Standards for Job Quality

3. Undefined Job Quality: Without a clear, shared definition of what constitutes a “quality job,” it is challenging for LWDBs to set goals, measure success, and advocate for better employment standards. For example, while some may define a quality job as one that offers a living wage, others may prioritize benefits, job security, or opportunities for advancement. This lack of consensus can lead to inconsistent messaging and difficulty in setting priorities.

4. Varied Employer Practices: Different employers may have varying standards for job quality, which complicates efforts to establish consistent benchmarks. For instance, some employers may offer competitive wages but lack career advancement opportunities or work-life balance, making it difficult to evaluate the overall quality of the employment opportunities available to customers.

Employer Engagement & Relationships

5. Limited Employer Buy-In: Many employers may prioritize filling positions quickly and cost-effectively, rather than investing in higher wages, benefits, or career pathways. Convincing employers to embrace a quality jobs orientation often requires a cultural shift and a clear demonstration of the value these practices bring to their business. For example, an employer may need evidence that investing in employee development leads to reduced turnover and higher productivity.

6. Fragmented Relationships: In many cases, LWDBs do not have strong, sustained relationships with a diverse range of employers. This fragmentation can limit their ability to advocate for quality employment or negotiate better terms for their customers. Building these relationships takes time, and requires ongoing communication, trust-building, and alignment of goals between LWDBs and employers across different industries.

Systemic & Structural Challenges

7. Economic and Labor Market Conditions: In areas with limited economic opportunities or a high concentration of low-wage industries, finding quality jobs can be inherently difficult. For example, in rural regions or economically distressed urban areas, the lack of high-quality job opportunities may make it challenging for LWDBs to connect customers with roles that meet quality job standards, regardless of their efforts.

8. Historical Focus on Rapid Employment: Workforce development systems have traditionally prioritized quick placements, especially for adult and dislocated workers. This historical focus, driven by both policy and funding structures, creates resistance to change. Shifting to a quality jobs focus requires not only changing practices but also addressing the underlying policies and performance measures that have shaped the system's priorities.





Capacity & Staff Training

9. Resource Allocation: Providing high-quality job placement and career development services requires a significant investment in staff time and resources. LWDBs often lack the capacity to deliver these more intensive services due to limited staffing and funding. For example, effective career counseling, job coaching, and follow-up support are essential for connecting individuals with quality jobs, but these services are resource intensive.

10. Training and Mindset: Shifting from an “any job” to a “quality job” mindset requires staff to be equipped with new skills and knowledge. This includes understanding labor market trends, engaging employers effectively, and advocating for job quality. Without adequate training and professional development, staff may struggle to support customers in securing quality employment and navigating career pathways.

Coordination & Collaboration Challenges

11. Fragmented Services: Effective workforce development requires coordination between multiple service providers, including community colleges, community-based organizations (CBOs), and employers. However, these services are often siloed, leading to fragmented delivery and difficulty in creating comprehensive, seamless pathways to quality jobs. For example, customers may face challenges accessing necessary training or support services due to lack of coordination among providers.

12. Limited Partnerships: Building partnerships with organizations that prioritize job quality, such as labor unions, advocacy groups, and industry associations, can enhance the effectiveness of workforce development efforts. However, establishing and maintaining these partnerships can be challenging, particularly in regions where these organizations have limited presence or influence.

Short-Term Focus of Customers

13. Immediate Needs of Customers: Many adult customers have pressing financial needs that make it difficult to engage in longer-term training programs that lead to quality jobs. For instance, low-income working parents may need immediate income to support their families and cannot afford to participate in multi-year apprenticeships or other programs that could lead to higher-quality employment. This short-term focus can limit the effectiveness of efforts to promote long-term career development and economic mobility.

Addressing these barriers requires a multi-faceted strategy that includes advocating for changes to performance metrics and funding models, establishing clear definitions of job quality, investing in staff training, and building stronger employer relationships. A successful re-orientation towards quality jobs also necessitates systemic change at the state and federal levels to support and incentivize these efforts. By tackling these barriers head-on, LWDBs can transform the workforce development system to better serve their customers and promote economic prosperity and well-being for all.



INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK: STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

The integrated framework detailed in this report serves as a strategic response to the complex factors that impede LWDBs from adopting a quality jobs orientation. By addressing these factors, the framework provides a comprehensive roadmap to guide LWDBs in reshaping their service delivery and partnerships to prioritize equitable access to quality employment for all customers, especially those facing systemic barriers to economic mobility.

Figure 2: Integrated Framework



As shown above, the framework consists of four interconnected components, each designed to tackle specific challenges and promote a holistic approach to workforce development:

1. Defining Quality Jobs: Establishing a clear, flexible definition of what constitutes a quality job is essential for setting benchmarks and goals that go beyond traditional metrics like job placement rates and median wages. This component encourages LWDBs to adopt a multi-dimensional view of job quality, encompassing elements such as fair compensation, benefits, job security, career growth opportunities, and a healthy work-life balance. A well-defined quality jobs framework enables LWDBs to advocate for and facilitate placements that truly support the long-term economic mobility and well-being of their customers.

2. Understanding and Serving Target Populations: Recognizing and addressing the unique challenges faced by different demographic groups, such as low-income working mothers, re-entry individuals, former foster youth, and adults with limited formal education, is critical for effective service delivery. This component involves conducting comprehensive needs assessments and developing tailored programs that provide the necessary support services, training, and resources to help these populations access and succeed in quality jobs. By doing so, LWDBs can ensure that their efforts are inclusive and equitable, meeting the diverse needs of their communities.

3. Implementing Best Practices for Service Delivery: Adopting a human-centered approach that combines individualized training, comprehensive support services, and continuous career guidance is key to supporting customers' journeys toward quality employment. This component emphasizes the importance of integrating best practices such as sector-based training programs, wraparound services, and innovative job-matching strategies to enhance the effectiveness of workforce development efforts. By prioritizing holistic service delivery, LWDBs can better support individuals in overcoming barriers, developing in-demand skills, and securing sustainable employment.

4. Engaging Employers as Strategic Partners: Building strong, strategic partnerships with employers is crucial for creating pathways to quality jobs. This component focuses on fostering collaborative relationships with businesses to promote inclusive hiring practices, support career advancement opportunities, and develop sector-specific training programs. By engaging employers as active partners in the workforce development system, LWDBs can align their efforts with industry needs and advocate for job quality standards that benefit both employees and employers.

Together, these components form a cohesive framework that empowers LWDBs to re-orient their systems toward quality jobs. By strategically addressing the factors that hinder this transition, LWDBs can move beyond traditional job placement metrics and create a workforce development system that is not only effective but also equitable and transformative. This framework serves as a blueprint for LWDBs to operationalize their commitment to quality employment and inclusive economic growth, ultimately contributing to a more resilient and just workforce ecosystem.

COMPONENT 1: DEFINING QUALITY JOBS — ESTABLISHING BENCHMARKS FOR FAIR COMPENSATION, BENEFITS, AND GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

This section provides a definition of quality jobs that emphasizing fair wages, comprehensive benefits, predictable schedules, work-life balance, safety, and opportunities for growth. By establishing clear benchmarks, Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs) can align worker needs with employer expectations, creating a shared understanding of job quality.

At the heart of this framework lies a multi-dimensional definition of quality jobs that extends beyond basic employment. LWDBs must adopt a flexible approach that recognizes the diverse and evolving needs of the populations they serve. This definition incorporates traditional metrics such as fair wages and benefits, while also addressing less tangible factors like work-life balance, job security, and professional growth opportunities. By taking a holistic view of service delivery that moves beyond simple job placement, LWDBs can help individuals achieve long-term career aspirations while ensuring equitable access to quality employment.

The key elements of a quality job include:

- **Fair compensation:** Wages that meet or exceed local living wage standards
- **Comprehensive benefits:** Access to health insurance, retirement plans, and paid leave
- **Stable and predictable work hours:** Schedules that enable work-life balance
- **Safe and healthy working conditions:** Environments that prioritize employee well-being
- **Opportunities for growth and advancement:** Clear career pathways and skill development
- **Worker voice and representation:** Mechanisms for employees to influence their working conditions

It is essential to recognize that the definition of a quality job varies between individuals and evolves over time. For example, a re-entry worker may prioritize stability and support services, while an experienced professional may seek advancement opportunities. This framework acknowledges the need for flexibility, enabling LWDBs to tailor job quality standards to individual circumstances and career stages. By addressing these nuanced and shifting needs, workforce systems can create equitable pathways to meaningful and sustainable employment.

COMPONENT 2: UNDERSTANDING AND SERVING TARGET POPULATIONS – TAILORING SERVICES FOR EQUITY AND ACCESS

Recognizing the unique challenges faced by underserved populations, this section focuses on tailoring workforce services to meet their specific needs. By addressing systemic barriers and inequities, Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs) can design inclusive programs that prioritize equity and expand access to quality jobs.

Each target population – low-income working mothers, re-entry individuals, former foster youth, and adults with a high school diploma or less – faces distinct barriers to employment. These include childcare responsibilities, criminal record stigma, housing instability, limited job skills, and lack of access to training programs. Understanding and addressing these challenges is essential for creating pathways to equitable and sustainable employment.

Key barriers for each group include:

- **Low-Income Working Mothers:** Difficulty accessing affordable childcare, bias in hiring practices, and the need for flexible work arrangements
- **Re-Entry Individuals:** Stigma associated with criminal records, employment gaps, and limited access to support services
- **Former Foster Youth:** Lack of family support, unstable housing, and limited exposure to career opportunities
- **Working Adults with High School Diplomas or Less:** Technology skills gaps, limited access to advancement opportunities, and difficulty competing for entry-level jobs

Given these barriers, workforce services must be tailored to address both immediate and long-term needs. For some, immediate access to stable employment may take precedence over job quality considerations. For others, access to training, mentorship, and wraparound support can help them advance toward sustainable, quality jobs.

LWDBs play a crucial role in bridging these gaps by designing equity-driven programs. This includes integrating trauma-informed approaches, providing holistic support services, and partnering with community organizations to better serve these populations. Tailored interventions ensure that all individuals, regardless of their starting point, can access opportunities that align with their goals and potential.

COMPONENT 3: IMPLEMENTING BEST PRACTICES FOR SERVICE DELIVERY — KEY INSIGHTS FROM WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARDS AND CBO FRONTLINE STAFF

This section captures lessons learned from workforce development practitioners and community-based organization (CBO) staff, emphasizing strategies that prioritize human-centered practices. By delivering tailored training, comprehensive support services, and career guidance, Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs) can create impactful programs that benefit both job seekers and employers.

Frontline staff play a critical role in bridging the gap between job seekers and employment opportunities. Their insights reveal the importance of addressing systemic barriers, fostering collaboration, and tailoring services to meet diverse needs. Effective practices include offering wraparound support, leveraging sector-specific strategies, and prioritizing data-driven approaches to improve program outcomes.

Key strategies for successful service delivery include:

- **Program Design and Adaptability:** Tailor programs to specific population needs, continuously adapting to changing circumstances such as shifting labor market demands or increased reliance on remote services.
- **Access and Outreach:** Partner with community organizations to expand reach and implement strategies like mobile services or online document submission to reduce barriers.
- **Support Services and Resources:** Provide flexible funding to address individual needs such as childcare or transportation while integrating wraparound support.
- **Employer Engagement and Job Quality:** Collaborate with employers to create targeted opportunities that emphasize inclusivity and quality job standards.
- **Feedback and Continuous Improvement:** Use feedback mechanisms and labor market data to refine program design, ensuring it remains relevant and effective.

Implementing these best practices requires a commitment to collaboration, innovation, and adaptability. By integrating these strategies into service delivery, LWDBs and their partners can better address the unique needs of job seekers, build stronger employer relationships, and foster equitable access to quality jobs. Ultimately, these practices lay the foundation for a more responsive and inclusive workforce development system.

COMPONENT 4: ENGAGING EMPLOYERS AS STRATEGIC PARTNERS — BUILDING PATHWAYS TO QUALITY JOBS

This section emphasizes the critical role employers play in workforce development as strategic partners in creating pathways to quality jobs. By collaborating with employers, Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs) can align training programs with industry needs, advocate for inclusive hiring practices, and promote opportunities that support economic mobility for job seekers.

Effective employer engagement involves building trust, demonstrating the value of workforce programs, and aligning efforts to meet both business needs and equity goals. These partnerships enable LWDBs to equip job seekers with in-demand skills while employers benefit from a well-prepared and diverse talent pool.

Key strategies for engaging employers include:

- Collaborative Program Design: Partner with employers to co-develop training programs that address skill gaps and meet industry standards, ensuring job seekers are prepared for in-demand roles.
- Inclusive Hiring Practices: Advocate for policies and practices that foster diversity, equity, and inclusion, such as fair hiring policies and expanded opportunities for underrepresented populations.
- Sector-Based Partnerships: Build industry-specific collaborations that address workforce needs in high-growth sectors such as healthcare, manufacturing, and green energy.
- Employer Education: Provide employers with resources and training on the benefits of investing in quality jobs, including reduced turnover and increased productivity.
- Ongoing Feedback and Adaptation: Establish mechanisms for employers to offer continuous input on workforce programs, ensuring they remain relevant to labor market demands.

By positioning employers as active partners in the workforce system, LWDBs can create sustainable pathways to quality jobs while advancing shared goals of equity and economic growth. These partnerships not only enhance job outcomes for workers but also strengthen regional economies by fostering innovation and collaboration between public and private sectors.

While the preceding action plan outlines strategies to improve services for target populations, it is essential to address two key aspects that underpin the entire workforce development ecosystem. First, the quality of jobs for those delivering these vital services must be examined. Second, the complexity inherent in defining job quality across diverse populations and circumstances must be acknowledged. The following sections explore these foundational considerations.



JOB QUALITY FOR FRONTLINE STAFF

Given the focus on equitable access to quality jobs, it is crucial to consider the job quality of frontline staff at organizations delivering education, training, and employment-related services. Case managers and job developers in community-based organizations often face very high workloads, experience significant stress, and receive relatively low wages. Any discussion or re-orientation towards job quality must take into account both the customers and the frontline CBO staff who provide services to them.

This consideration is foundational because the effectiveness of any public workforce development system is directly tied to the well-being and capacity of those delivering its services. Ensuring quality jobs for frontline staff is not just an ethical imperative but a practical necessity for achieving the system's goals. Strategies to improve job quality for these crucial workers may include:

- **Manageable caseloads and workload distribution**
- **Competitive compensation and benefits**
- **Supportive work environments that prioritize staff well-being**
- **Regular assessment and improvement of working conditions**

By prioritizing job quality for frontline staff, workforce development systems can enhance service delivery, reduce turnover, and ultimately provide better outcomes for the populations they serve.



COMPLEXITY IN DEFINING QUALITY JOBS

This integrative framework acknowledges the importance and inherent complexity of defining quality jobs. It's crucial to recognize that the concept of job quality is not monolithic, but rather varies significantly both between individuals and within a single person's career trajectory.

What constitutes a quality job for one individual may not meet the standards for another. This variability is influenced by a multitude of factors, including but not limited to:

- Personal needs and circumstances
- Job readiness and skill level
- Career stage and goals
- Family responsibilities
- Health and well-being considerations
- Cultural and community context

Moreover, an individual's definition of a quality job is likely to evolve over time. What may be considered a quality job at the outset of one's career might not meet the same individual's criteria five years later as their skills, experience, and life circumstances change.

This complexity was evident in the sessions conducted with the four target populations. A significant finding was that for many individuals, particularly former foster youth or those re-entering society, the concept of a "quality job" may not be immediately relevant. These individuals often face more pressing needs that require immediate attention, such as securing stable housing, addressing mental health or substance abuse issues, obtaining basic education or skills training, reunifying with family or establishing support systems, or meeting parole or probation requirements.

By incorporating this nuanced understanding of job quality into the framework, workforce development systems can develop more flexible, personalized, and ultimately more successful strategies. This approach recognizes that the path to quality employment is not linear, but rather a dynamic process that must adapt to the changing needs and circumstances of each individual served by the workforce development system. Such a perspective allows for the creation of interventions that are responsive to the evolving definitions of job quality throughout an individual's career journey, ensuring that workforce development efforts remain relevant and impactful over time.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations presented in this report are designed to support Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs) and their partners in addressing the complex challenges of promoting equitable access to quality jobs. These strategies are informed by research findings and best practices and are tailored to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of workforce development systems. By implementing these recommendations, LWDBs can not only improve service delivery and employment outcomes but also contribute to building a more resilient and equitable labor market. The recommendations are organized into two primary areas: strategies for LWDBs to promote equitable access to quality jobs and recommendations for strengthening partnerships between LWDBs, community-based organizations (CBOs), and employers. Each set of recommendations provides targeted actions to help LWDBs and their partners address systemic barriers, foster collaboration, and drive systemic change in the workforce development system.

Strategies for LWDBs to Promote Equitable Access to Quality Jobs

This set of recommendations focuses on strategic actions that LWDBs can take to enhance their capacity to connect job seekers—especially those from historically underserved communities—with quality employment opportunities. By prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, engaging in community outreach, and redesigning programs to address systemic barriers, LWDBs can create a more inclusive and effective workforce development system. These strategies also emphasize the importance of advocating for policies that support job quality and economic mobility, designing holistic programs that integrate education and support services, and utilizing data to drive decision-making and continuous improvement. Through these targeted actions, LWDBs can ensure that their services are accessible, responsive, and aligned with the evolving needs of the communities they serve.



1. Defining Quality Jobs

Advocate for Policies that Promote Job Quality & Economic Mobility

- **Support Local and State Initiatives:** Advocate for local and state policies that raise minimum wages, improve working conditions, and promote job quality standards. These initiatives can help ensure that all jobs provide a livable wage and safe working conditions.
- **Collaborate with Employers:** Work with employers to develop and promote job quality standards. Encourage practices that provide fair wages, benefits, and opportunities for career advancement.
- **Increase Funding for Workforce Programs:** Advocate for increased funding for workforce development programs that prioritize job quality. This funding can support the expansion of high-quality training programs and services.
- **Support Access to Essential Services:** Advocate for policies that provide access to affordable childcare, healthcare, and housing. These services are essential for enabling individuals to participate fully in the workforce and achieve economic mobility.

2. Understanding and Serving Target Populations

Prioritize Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI) Initiatives

- **Conduct Comprehensive DEI Assessment:** Begin by conducting a thorough DEI assessment to identify existing gaps and areas for improvement within the organization and its programs. This assessment will provide a baseline understanding of the current state and inform the development of targeted strategies.
- **Develop and Implement DEI Plan:** Create an actionable DEI plan with clear, measurable goals and timelines. This plan should outline specific initiatives and steps to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion at all levels of the organization.
- **Ongoing DEI Training:** Provide continuous DEI training for staff, leadership, and board members to ensure that everyone is equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to foster an inclusive environment. This training should cover topics such as unconscious bias, cultural competency, and inclusive leadership.
- **Incorporate DEI Metrics:** Integrate DEI metrics into performance evaluations and decision-making processes. This ensures accountability and highlights the importance of DEI in achieving organizational goals.

Redesign Programs & Services to Address Systemic Barriers

- **Review Existing Programs:** Conduct a comprehensive review of existing programs and services to identify and address systemic barriers that hinder equitable access. This review should focus on understanding the root causes of these barriers.
- **Develop Targeted Interventions:** Design targeted interventions that address the unique needs of each target population. These interventions should be informed by data and community feedback.
- **Implement Trauma-Informed Approaches:** Adopt trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches to service delivery. These approaches recognize the impact of trauma and cultural differences on individuals' experiences and outcomes.
- **Provide Wraparound Services:** Ensure access to comprehensive wraparound services, including childcare, transportation, and housing assistance. These supports are crucial for helping individuals overcome barriers to employment and achieve stability.

3. Implementing Best Practices and Engaging Employers

Employer Engagement

- **Build Strong Partnerships:** Establish strong partnerships with employers to align training programs with industry needs. Incentivize employers to hire and train individuals from underserved populations through initiatives like on-the-job training programs, wage reimbursements, and tax credits.
- **Career Pathways:** Collaborate with employers to create clear career pathways and advancement opportunities. Ensure that training programs are relevant and equip job seekers with the skills required in the labor market.

Holistic Program Design

- **Integrated Service Delivery Models:** Develop integrated service delivery models that combine education, training, and comprehensive support services. Tailor programs to meet the unique needs of target populations, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility.
- **Responsive Program Design:** Continuously adapt programs to respond to changing needs. This includes transitioning to remote services and leveraging technology to enhance service delivery.

Flexible and Innovative Funding

- **Pilot Innovative Programs:** Utilize flexible funding to pilot innovative programs and respond to emerging workforce challenges. Philanthropic investments can provide the necessary resources to fill gaps in public funding and support comprehensive, responsive services.

4. Continuous Improvement and Systemic Change

Engage in Community Outreach & Trust-Building

- **Partner with Community-Based Organizations:** Collaborate with trusted community-based organizations to effectively reach and engage underserved populations. These partnerships can help bridge gaps and build trust within the community.
- **Conduct Listening Sessions:** Organize listening sessions and focus groups to gather input from target populations. This feedback is essential for understanding their unique needs and challenges.
- **Involve Community Members:** Involve community members in the design, implementation, and evaluation of workforce programs. This participatory approach ensures that programs are relevant and responsive to the community's needs.
- **Establish Advisory Boards:** Create community advisory boards to guide workforce development efforts. These boards can provide valuable insights and help ensure that initiatives are aligned with community priorities.

Community-Based Approaches

- **Engage Local Stakeholders:** Involve local organizations and stakeholders in the design and delivery of workforce development programs. Ensure that programs are culturally and contextually relevant, addressing the specific needs of local populations.
- **Enhance Service Delivery:** Foster community partnerships to enhance service delivery and support. These partnerships can help create a more integrated and effective workforce development system.

Data-Driven Decision Making

- **Inform Program Design:** Use data to inform program design and measure outcomes. Analyze labor market trends and feedback from participants to identify needs and make informed adjustments.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Develop metrics to track progress towards equitable access and quality jobs. Use these metrics to continuously improve service delivery and achieve better outcomes.

Professional Development & Capacity Building

- Invest in Workforce Staff: Provide training and resources to enhance the capacity of workforce development staff. Strengthen their ability to deliver high-quality services through continuous learning and development.
- Support Innovation: Encourage staff to innovate and adapt to changing workforce needs. Invest in professional development opportunities that promote new approaches and best practices.

Client-Centered Services

- Personalized Support: Adopt a client-centered approach that prioritizes the individual needs and goals of job seekers. Provide personalized support through career coaches and case managers who offer tailored guidance and resources.
- Flexible Services: Ensure that services are flexible and responsive to the evolving circumstances of participants. Tailor support to meet the specific needs of each individual.

By adopting these recommendations, LWDBs can build a more responsive and inclusive workforce development system that not only connects individuals to employment but also supports their long-term career growth and economic stability. These strategies lay the foundation for a workforce system that actively champions quality jobs, fosters community resilience, and advances shared prosperity for all.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN LWDBS, CBOs, AND EMPLOYERS

Building strong, collaborative partnerships between LWDBs, CBOs, and employers is essential for creating a workforce development system that effectively meets the needs of both job seekers and local industries. This set of recommendations offers strategies to enhance communication, coordination, and joint planning efforts among these partners. It emphasizes the importance of developing clear partnership agreements, leveraging the unique strengths of each organization, and co-developing training programs that align with industry standards and workforce needs. Additionally, these recommendations highlight the value of engaging the broader community, providing comprehensive support services, and continuously evaluating partnership efforts to ensure they are effective and impactful. By fostering these collaborative relationships, LWDBs, CBOs, and employers can work together to design and deliver programs that not only support job seekers in securing meaningful employment but also contribute to the economic vitality of their communities.

1. Defining Quality Jobs

Strengthen Employer Engagement

- **Employer Advisory Councils:** Establish employer advisory councils to provide ongoing feedback and guidance on workforce development initiatives. These councils help ensure that programs are aligned with industry needs.
- **Incentive Programs:** Create incentive programs that encourage employers to participate in workforce development efforts. Incentives such as tax credits, wage subsidies, and recognition awards can motivate employers to engage more actively.

Co-Develop Training Programs

- **Employer-Led Training Initiatives:** Engage employers in the development of training programs to ensure that they meet industry standards and address skill gaps. Employer input helps to create relevant and practical training opportunities.
- **Customized Training Solutions:** Develop customized training solutions that cater to the specific needs of employers and job seekers. Tailoring training programs enhances their relevance and effectiveness.

2. Understanding and Serving Target Populations

Implement Comprehensive Support Services

- **Holistic Service Provision:** Offer comprehensive support services that address the various barriers to employment, such as childcare, transportation, and housing assistance. Collaborative efforts can ensure that these services are integrated and accessible.
- **Wraparound Services:** Coordinate wraparound services that provide continuous support to job seekers throughout their employment journey. This approach helps to address ongoing needs and improve retention rates.

Foster Community Engagement

- **Community Outreach:** Conduct outreach activities to engage the broader community and raise awareness about workforce development programs. Partnering with local organizations and media can help to reach a wider audience.
- **Public Forums:** Host public forums and town hall meetings to gather input from community members and stakeholders. These events provide valuable insights and help build community support for workforce development initiatives.

3. Implementing Best Practices and Engaging Employers

Develop Clear Partnership Agreements

- **Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs):** Establish MOUs that outline the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of each partner. These agreements ensure clarity and alignment of goals, which are critical for successful collaboration.
- **Shared Goals and Objectives:** Define and agree on shared goals and objectives to create a unified vision for the partnership. This alignment helps to focus efforts and resources on achieving common outcomes.

Enhance Communication & Coordination

- **Regular Meetings:** Schedule regular meetings between LWDBs, CBOs, and employers to discuss progress, address challenges, and share updates. These meetings foster open communication and strengthen relationships.
- **Communication Channels:** Establish effective communication channels, such as newsletters, online platforms, and coordination committees, to facilitate ongoing dialogue and information sharing.

Joint Planning & Decision Making

- Collaborative Planning Sessions: Conduct joint planning sessions to co-create programs and initiatives. Involving all partners in the planning process ensures that programs are designed to meet the needs of job seekers and employers.
- Inclusive Decision-Making Processes: Implement inclusive decision-making processes that involve representatives from LWDBs, CBOs, and employers. This approach ensures that diverse perspectives are considered and that decisions are made collaboratively.

4. Continuous Improvement and Systemic Change

Leverage Complementary Strengths

- Utilize Expertise: Recognize and leverage the unique strengths and expertise of each partner. LWDBs can provide labor market data and strategic oversight, CBOs can offer community-based services and outreach, and employers can offer job opportunities and industry insights.
- Resource Sharing: Share resources such as training facilities, staff expertise, and funding to maximize the impact of workforce development programs. Collaborative resource utilization can enhance program effectiveness and efficiency.

Evaluate & Improve Partnership Efforts

- Continuous Evaluation: Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of partnerships through surveys, feedback sessions, and performance metrics. Use this data to identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments.
- Best Practices Sharing: Share best practices and success stories among partners to promote learning and continuous improvement. Highlighting effective strategies can inspire and inform future initiatives.





Invest in Capacity Building

- **Training and Development:** Invest in the training and development of staff across LWDBs, CBOs, and employers. Providing professional development opportunities enhances the skills and capabilities of all partners.
- **Technical Assistance:** Offer technical assistance and support to help partners implement best practices and innovative approaches. This assistance can include workshops, webinars, and on-site consultations.

By adopting these strategies, LWDBs, CBOs, and employers can forge stronger, more cohesive partnerships that elevate the effectiveness of workforce development initiatives. This collaborative approach not only ensures better alignment of resources and goals but also fosters a more inclusive and supportive environment for job seekers. Ultimately, these enhanced partnerships will contribute to more robust employment pathways, increased access to quality jobs, and improved economic mobility for individuals from historically underserved communities.

CONCLUSION

This report, conducted by New Ways to Work, has provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs) in promoting equitable access to quality jobs for historically underserved populations. Through a comprehensive qualitative research process involving interviews, focus groups, and listening sessions with key stakeholders across four distinct workforce development areas in California, the study has identified promising practices, strategies, and recommendations for aligning workforce development efforts with the goal of equitable economic mobility.

Key findings from the research include the need for LWDBs to adopt a holistic, human-centered approach to workforce development that prioritizes the unique needs and aspirations of target populations, including low-income working mothers, re-entry individuals, former foster youth, and working adults with a high school diploma or less. The report also highlights the importance of collaboration among LWDBs, community-based organizations, and employers in creating comprehensive and sustainable workforce development solutions.

To promote equitable access to quality jobs, the report suggests that LWDBs focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, engage in community outreach and trust-building, redesign programs and services to overcome systemic barriers, and advocate for policies that support job quality and economic mobility. Additionally, the report offers recommendations for strengthening partnerships between LWDBs, CBOs, and employers, including establishing formal partnership agreements, fostering open communication and trust, aligning programs and services, and engaging employers as strategic partners.





Call to Action for Philanthropic Organizations, LWDBs, and Other Stakeholders

The findings and recommendations presented in this report serve as a call to action for LWDBs, and other stakeholders committed to advancing equity and economic mobility through workforce development. It is imperative that these entities work together to prioritize the needs of underserved populations and drive systemic change in the workforce development system.

For LWDBs, this call-to-action means committing to diversity, equity, and inclusion and taking tangible steps to advance equitable access to quality jobs. This requires a willingness to engage in honest self-assessment, listen to the voices of underserved communities, and adapt programs and services to better meet the needs of target populations. It also means working collaboratively with CBOs and employers to create more effective and responsive workforce development solutions.

Other stakeholders, including policymakers, employers, educational institutions, and community leaders, also have critical roles to play in this collective effort. By working together to dismantle systemic barriers, promote inclusive hiring practices, and invest in the skills and talents of all individuals, these stakeholders can contribute to a more equitable and prosperous future for all Californians.

Ultimately, the success of this endeavor will require sustained commitment, collaboration, and investment from all partners. It is only through a shared vision and a willingness to take bold action that we can create a workforce development system that truly works for everyone, regardless of their background or circumstances. The time for action is now, and the stakes could not be higher. By heeding this call and working together to implement the recommendations outlined in this report, we can build a more just, equitable, and inclusive economy that leaves no one behind.

Appendices available [here](#)

NEW WAYS BUILDS POWERFUL PARTNERSHIPS TO IMPROVE EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION, AND WELL-BEING OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG ADULTS.



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