CLASP

Policy solutions that work for low-income people

Statement of Kisha Bird
Testimony Before the Committee on Education and Labor United States House of Representatives

"Eliminating Barriers to Employment: Opening Doors to Opportunity"

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Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Foxx, and Members of the Committee, thank you so much for the opportunity to testify about *Eliminating Barriers to Employment: Opening Doors to Opportunity*.

I am Kisha Bird, the director of youth policy of the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), an anti-poverty organization that promotes effective federal, state, and local policies for low-income families and individuals. In my role at CLASP, I lead a team of experts focused on economic justice, criminal justice reform, and mental health policy as they relate to youth and young adults, with a particular focus on low-income young people, Opportunity Youth, and youth of color. I work both nationally and with states and communities all over the country, bringing my experience leading a statewide youth system change effort in Pennsylvania and working in community programs in Philadelphia and Atlanta.

Today, you've asked me to address barriers and solutions that affect young people, people affected by the criminal justice system, and other low-income workers, parents, and students. In my testimony, I draw both on my own expertise, the knowledge of my colleagues at CLASP, including nationally recognized experts on child care, postsecondary education, the low-wage labor market, and our state and local partners, including young people themselves.

In my testimony, I'd like to make four intersecting points:

1. The economy is leaving too many people out -- including youth and young adults, individuals impacted by the criminal justice system, low-income adult learners, families with children, and low-wage workers.
2. Barriers to employment are structural and arise from systems and policies—like discrimination, segregation, unstable and low-quality jobs, and the lack of investment in education, child care, and other crucial supports—not individual choices.
3. The federal government is crucial to addressing barriers to employment—in partnership with states, communities, and business.
4. We know what works and where to make investments.

1. The economy is leaving too many people out.

Today's economy is leaving too many people out—including youth and young adults, individuals impacted by the criminal justice system, and low-income adult learners, families with children, and low-wage workers. This is true even though, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, we have reached the lowest unemployment rate in five decades. Unemployment rates for particular groups are far above the national average and changes in the labor market mean that many low-income people are working, not unemployed, yet still cannot make ends meet.

The most recent unemployment rate for adults ages 25 and older was 2.7 percent.[1] However, the adage that "a rising tide lifts all boats" is certainly not playing out for the millions of would-be workers who are still locked out

of the labor market and looking for work and workers in low-wage jobs. For example:

- The unemployment rate for young people (ages 16 to 24) of 7.4 percent is more than double the national rate;
- Adults without a high school credential have an unemployment rate of 5.2 percent.[2]
- People impacted by the criminal justice system fare even worse. Formerly incarcerated individuals face an array of collateral consequences[3] and systemic barriers to employment. According to the Prison Policy Institute, they are unemployed at a rate of over 27 percent. For Black men and women who have returned from incarceration, the unemployment rate is 35.2 percent and 43.6 percent, respectively. [4]
- More than two-thirds of poor children—70 percent—live with at least one working parent but their families struggle with low wages, intermittent work, and inadequate hours.
- CLASP analysis show that 9.6 percent of poor parents are working part-time involuntarily meaning they would prefer full-time employment but are unable to find it or get enough hours from their employer. [5]

Millions of workers are stuck in jobs with low pay.

Low-income workers are piecing together multiple jobs just to earn enough income to make ends meet. Despite employment gains since the Great Recession, wages have remained low[6] and have not kept pace with productivity.[7] For example, "while a full-time minimum-wage worker in 1968 would have earned $20,600 a year (in 2017 dollars), a worker paid the federal minimum wage in 2017 could only earn $15,080 working full time." [8] Jobs that pay low wages offer few, if any benefits, and limited opportunities for advancement or career growth.

Now I'd like to focus on particular groups of people who are left out: youth and young adults—America's future—including Opportunity Youth; individuals impacted by the criminal justice system; and low-income parents and adult learners. Across all these groups, people of color are acutely left out and face barriers to employment.

Focus on Youth and Young Adults, including Opportunity Youth

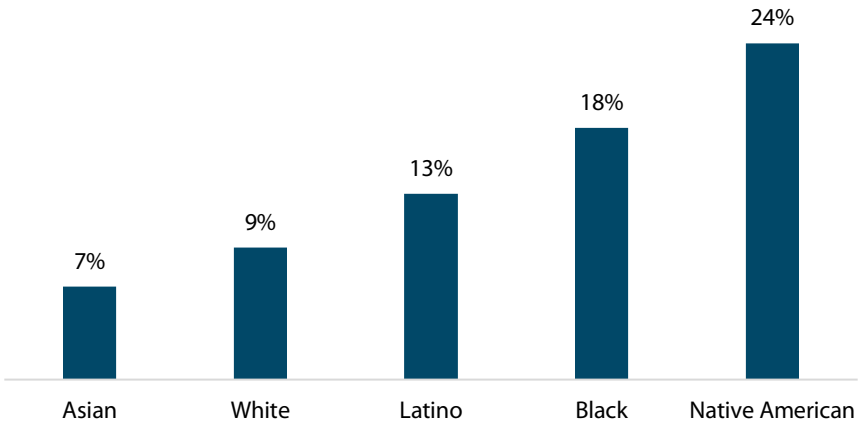
The millennial and post-millennial generation comprise over 40 percent of the current labor force.[9] That's why the overall economic viability of the nation depends on what happens to youth and young adults and their access to strong educational pathways, early work experience, and jobs that allow them to earn, learn, and progress. So, the high levels of unemployment described above for youth and young adults—driven both by involuntary disconnection from work and low wages and inadequate hours when they are working—is harmful to the nation.

Young people need early work experience—whether through summer jobs, college work-study, entry-level jobs out of high school, working at family-owned businesses, or volunteering—to gain readiness for future jobs and explore careers.

The youth disconnection rate now stands at 11.5 percent, a marked improvement since 2010 when the post-recession level was 14.7 percent.[10] Nevertheless, approximately 4.5 million young people ages 16 to 24 are not participating in school or work. This cohort of young people are known as "Opportunity Youth" because they are seeking opportunity and they offer the nation a chance to invest in them, so they can be at the forefront of rebuilding their communities and lives.[11] Opportunity Youth report a range of factors for leaving high school prematurely or not going on to postsecondary education after earning a high school diploma or equivalent. For example, factors include being pushed out of school by harsh and sometimes discriminatory suspension and expulsion policies; loss of a parent or caregiver; unstable housing; and financial strain.

Opportunity Youth are eager to work and continue their education but struggle to find jobs and programs that help them build better lives for themselves and their families. Youth disconnection impacts all regions of the country—urban, suburban, and rural. West Virginia has the highest rate (17.0 percent), followed by New Mexico (16.5 percent), and Mississippi (16.4 percent). And while Native American and Black American teens and young adults have the highest rates of youth disconnection, Latino/Hispanic, and white and Asian youth also find themselves out of school and work and seeking pathways to opportunity.[12]

Youth disconnection rate by race/ethnicity



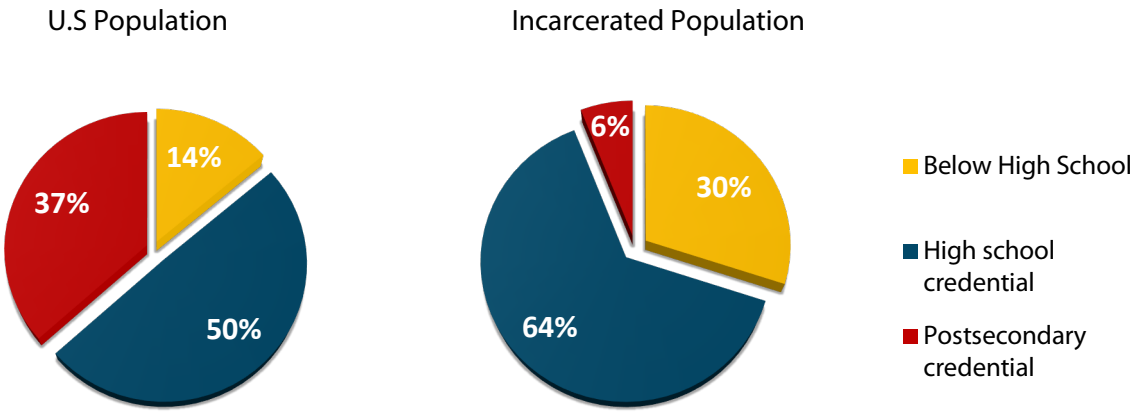
Source: Kristen Lewis, ***Making the Connection: Transportation and Youth Disconnection, Measure of America**, Social Science Research Council, April 2019*

Focus on Individuals Impacted by the Criminal Justice System

Incarceration's negative lifelong impacts on employment, earnings, and health affect a large number of Americans. According to the Prison Policy Institute, the unemployment rate for formerly incarcerated people is nearly five times greater than the general population.[13] Approximately 12 million people live under the supervision of the criminal justice system directly, over 600,000 return home from incarceration annually, and countless family members of these individuals face their own consequences. These people who are directly and indirectly affected are parents, siblings, friends, and neighbors who are vital to our communities.

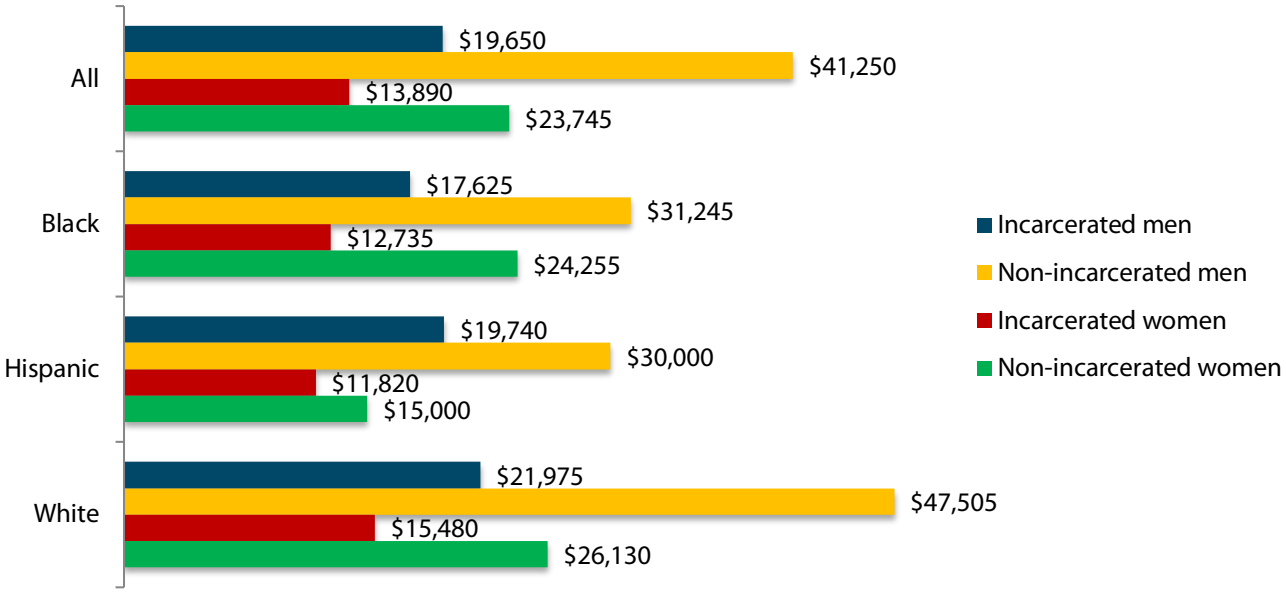
Furthermore, it is well documented that the criminal justice system disproportionately targets low-income communities and communities of color. Black people are incarcerated at five times the rate of white people, while Hispanic people are incarcerated nearly twice as frequently as whites.[14] Across all races, incarcerated people are more likely to come from low-income communities.[15] And they're less likely to have a postsecondary education.[16]

Educational attainment of incarcerated individuals compared to the overall U.S. Population



Source: Highlights from the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults, 2014

Pre-incarceration income levels of incarcerated Americans in comparison to non-incarcerated Americans by race and gender



Source: *Prisons of Poverty: Uncovering the pre-incarceration incomes of the imprisoned*, Prison Policy Initiative

One study found that the "American prison system is bursting at the seams with people who have been shut out of the economy and who had neither a quality education nor access to good jobs."[17] People who are incarcerated must be recognized as a talent pipeline to restore vibrancy to our nation's most marginalized communities.

Roughly two-thirds of the 650,000 individuals who are released from the criminal justice system every year are rearrested within three years. Providing quality education and training pathways to those who are incarcerated—and continuing those pathways when individuals reenter society—is a proven way to break this

cycle. While correctional education and training is not a panacea, it's shown to increase employment post-release and is linked to lower recidivism.[18]

Focus on Low-Income Parents and Adult Learners

In addition to the specific groups that I've described in detail above—youth and young adults, particularly Opportunity Youth, and people affected by mass incarceration—striking numbers of parents, students, and workers are struggling with low incomes and barriers to steady employment. Many of these low-income parents, students, and workers have jobs—but jobs that don't pay enough, don't offer steady or regular hours, and/or with schedules too rigid to combine with caregiving and school responsibilities.

A significant number of young adult parents live in poverty.

Among parents 18-24, more than a quarter (27.8 percent) live at or below the poverty level,[19] and among all adult parents under 30, more than one in five (20.5 percent) are living in poverty. Young parents raising children in poverty struggle with economic stability to meet their children's basic needs while juggling caregiving needs.[20] They are facing the intersection of low wages, transient and rigid jobs that do not offer them the flexibility they need for caregiving, the absence of policy supports like child care and paid family and medical leave, and—often—the difficulty of combining work, caregiving, and further schooling that could improve their employment options over time. These parents matter because they are raising the next generation and will increasingly comprise a majority of the workforce.

What's more, Americans need more skills.

According to the Survey of Adult Skills, a product of the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), 30 percent of U.S. adults face significant literacy and/or numeracy challenges, scoring low in the PIACC assessment. This is higher than the OECD average of 26.3 percent in other developed nations.[21] PIACC also revealed that U.S. millennials are struggling with skill deficits, including using technology for problem solving. U.S. millennials ranked dead last out of 19 countries tested on these skills.[22]

2. Barriers to employment are structural and arise from systems and policies—like discrimination, segregation, unstable and low-quality jobs, and the lack of investment in education, child care, and other crucial supports—not individual choices.

Many structural and systemic factors contribute to individuals' barriers to work. These include mass incarceration and the implicit biases in the criminal justice system; racism and discrimination; segregation and isolation; policy and investment failures in the K-12 and postsecondary systems; and major gaps in access and in investment in crucial supports for work, including child care, health, and behavioral health.

These factors have their roots in systems of power. Systems of power are the beliefs, practices, and cultural norms on which individual lives and institutions are built. They are rooted in social constructions of race and gender and are embedded in history (colonization, slavery, migration, immigration, and genocide) as well as present-day policies and practice.[23] While it is impractical to summarize the whole research literature on these barriers in just a few pages, I've highlighted key points that are particularly relevant to the groups just described.

Mass incarceration.

Research has shown that Black and Hispanic people are more likely to be arrested, sentenced, and punished more severely for the same crimes as whites.[24] In concert with "law-and-order" policies, systems of power have led the United States to incarcerate people, the majority of whom are people of color, at a higher rate than any other developed nation.[25] This mass incarceration is having devastating and perpetual consequences on employment, education, and health for those incarcerated and the communities they come from.[26] Individuals with justice system involvement often face insurmountable discriminatory barriers to employment. For example, research indicates that between 60 and 75 percent of people who are formerly incarcerated face persistent unemployment up to a year after their release.[27] This is due, in part, to the discrimination they face when reentering the workforce. From gaps in their work history to licensing bans, having a record leaves too many on the wrong side of opportunity.

Racism, employer discrimination, and perceptions.

In addition, discriminatory hiring practices against people of color and young people can make finding work an uphill battle.

> *A 2019 study from the Federal Reserve System concluded "despite 40 years of data showing a wide black-white unemployment gap, researchers have struggled to explain fully the cause of the gap, and policymakers have struggled to implement policies to close it. Recent research suggests that the gap is partially driven by higher rates of job loss among black workers than white workers. Black workers also experience longer periods of unemployment and lower labor force participation."*[29]

- Your race and ethnicity greatly influence your chances of gaining employment. A persistent history of employment discrimination, along with segregation, has kept people of color, and in particular African Americans, either out of the labor market entirely, trapped in low-wage jobs, or reliant on informal economies. Recent studies confirm that hiring discrimination against Blacks and Latinos has remained virtually unchanged in the last 25 years. People of color are less likely to get callbacks and interviews and therefore are less likely to have face time with potential employers despite education and qualifications.[28]
- Employers often view younger workers as less dependable and hardworking than older workers. A study of employer perceptions by the Commonwealth Corporation and the Drexel University Center for Labor Markets and Policy found that employers perceive teens' work behaviors, such as attendance, punctuality, and quit rates, as inferior. They report that this is a major factor and barrier to hiring teens.[30]

Residential and geographical segregation and isolation.

From inner city neighborhoods to isolated rural regions of the country, geography and spatial proximity to work make a difference. People living in socio-economically distressed communities with high rates of poverty and unemployment are regularly confined to spaces that impede their closeness to social capital and networks that afford them access to jobs in traditional business and industry sectors. For example, researchers in one study found that young men of color tend to live in low-income, racially segregated neighborhoods as a result of income inequality and housing discrimination. This social isolation exacerbates their job prospects partly by limiting their "social capital" for labor markets.[31] Those living in Appalachia face similar challenges. Due to limited job opportunities in the area's rural communities and increased participation in the informal, barter economy, many residents there are also not included in traditional economies.[32]

Challenges facing American Indian and Native Youth

A large share of American Indian reservation communities are "located in harsh, remote and sparsely populated areas" where transportation, access to health care and employment are among the many challenges.[33] Along with high rates of youth disconnection, about two-thirds of the 27 counties with a majority American Indian and Alaskan Native populations had unemployment rates above the national average.[34]

Inadequate investments in K–12 schooling impacts student preparedness for postsecondary education, and affordability impedes postsecondary access.

According to predictions by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, "jobs will return, but not everyone will be ready for them." Despite the debate around the value of postsecondary education, "employers are still willing to pay more for college education…workers with a postsecondary education earn 74 percent more than workers with a high school diploma or less."[35] Two thirds of all jobs created since the Great Recession have gone to workers with some postsecondary training. Without postsecondary credentials, people seeking work opportunities and career advancement will continue to face barriers in accessing the labor market.

And as a nation we are facing a crisis of being unable to meet this demand. Adult learners, students from low-income backgrounds, and students of color are all in need of increased support to achieve postsecondary access and attainment. And when youth and adults do enter postsecondary institutions they are not prepared, and affordability poses a challenge. Sixty-eight percent of community college students require at least some developmental education.[36] As Bunker Hills Community College President Pam Eddinger testified to Congress recently, this developmental education churn is exceedingly harmful. The longer students stay in developmental education, the less likely they are to achieve any academic award.[37]

Low-wage jobs that hold people back rather than help them move up.

As noted earlier, changes in the labor market also have created barriers to stable employment and to improved earnings over a career. The fissuring of the labor market means that low-wage workers today too often face unstable hours, transient jobs, no paid leave for illness or caregiving, and the possibility of being fired if child care, school, or a second job conflicts with a schedule provided with just days of notice. Jobs like these can actually make it far harder to obtain steady and family-supporting employment, because they destabilize workers' and families' lives and prevent them from seizing the opportunity to gain education and additional work experience.

3. The federal government is critical to addressing barriers to employment—in partnership with states, communities, and business.

The federal government is central to dismantling systemic barriers and enabling everyone to work, achieve economic stability for themselves and their families, and contribute to the nation's future. While states, communities, and private business have crucial roles, they cannot do it alone.

Here's why:

The federal government can ensure that everyone in the United States, wherever they live, can have access to the basics of life, like the food, health care, and stable housing they need to live, work, and thrive.

> *"We as the workforce system are here to remove barriers to employment. We are here to include youth and adults, rather than exclude… There always needs to be a voice at the table to make sure Opportunity Youth are a priority and a focus of citywide efforts. And I try to be that voice."*
>
> *–Ernest Dorsey, Assistant Director, Mayor's Office of Employment Development, City of Baltimore, Communities Collaborating to Reconnect Youth Network Member and National Youth Employment Coalition Board Member*

Federal investments are critical to work because they help those who live in poverty gain the stability they need to support their families, get and keep a good job, and advance in a career. Basic needs programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, rental assistance, and cash assistance help people meet immediate needs and have positive long-term impacts. Research shows that safe, quality housing; nutritious food; access to health care; and having cash helps workers become economically secure and children reach their potential. For example, SNAP participation can improve elementary school children's reading and math skills and increase high school students' likelihood of graduating.[38] These aren't just short-term patches but rather fundamental building blocks that help people succeed throughout life.[39]

The federal government has a central role in dismantling barriers based on race, gender, and geography in public policies and incentivizing state and local systems change and behavior.

Equity is not a process; it is an outcome. It's not a special initiative or special box that you check off but a set of values that should be embedded in public policies and the institutional culture of public agencies, education entities, nonprofits and the private sector.[40] By explicitly focusing on equity, Congress can send an important message to states and localities about its priorities and bake in policy provisions that incentivize services to left-out populations and enhance accountability for state and local systems leaders.

The federal government can ensure that workers don't have to "win the boss lottery" or move to a different state in order to have basic work protections like paid sick days, paid family and medical leave, and fair and flexible schedules.

When there is no federal guarantee of these core work protections, young workers, workers of color, and parents are particularly likely to have jobs that do not offer them—which in turn leads to being pushed out of the labor force when a worker needs to care for a family member or take a sick day.

The federal government has the unique opportunity to scale up effective investments and spread innovation across states and communities—building on learning and innovation from around the country.

To illustrate why the federal role is so important, let's take some examples from federal policies on workforce development and higher education.

Federal education and workforce development funds are investments in equity.

While federal funds are not the lion's share of overall spending, for youth, adult working learners, and returning citizens, they ARE the funds that build the equity framework by focusing on effective interventions and focusing on individuals with barriers to employment. For example, the first purpose of the bipartisan Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is:

> *(1) To increase, for individuals in the United States, particularly those individuals with barriers to employment, access to and opportunities for the employment, education, training, and support services they need to succeed in the labor market. [Sec 2(1)]*

WIOA's extensive definition of 'individuals with barriers to employment[41] has helped state and local partners

think strategically about the implications of the barriers and solutions to mitigate them. For example, the California Workforce Development Board has used WIOA to focus policy and resources on English language learners after identifying that only 3.7 percent of those exiting WIOA title I training services were foreign born in program year 2014, despite over one-third of California's workforce being foreign born.[42] The Washington State Training and Education Board used the WIOA list of barriers to dive deep into the nature of the barriers themselves, the implications of the barriers, and solutions our public systems can offer to mitigate them.[43]

Yet, based on the most recent available administrative data, we still have work to do (see Appendix I for additional information).

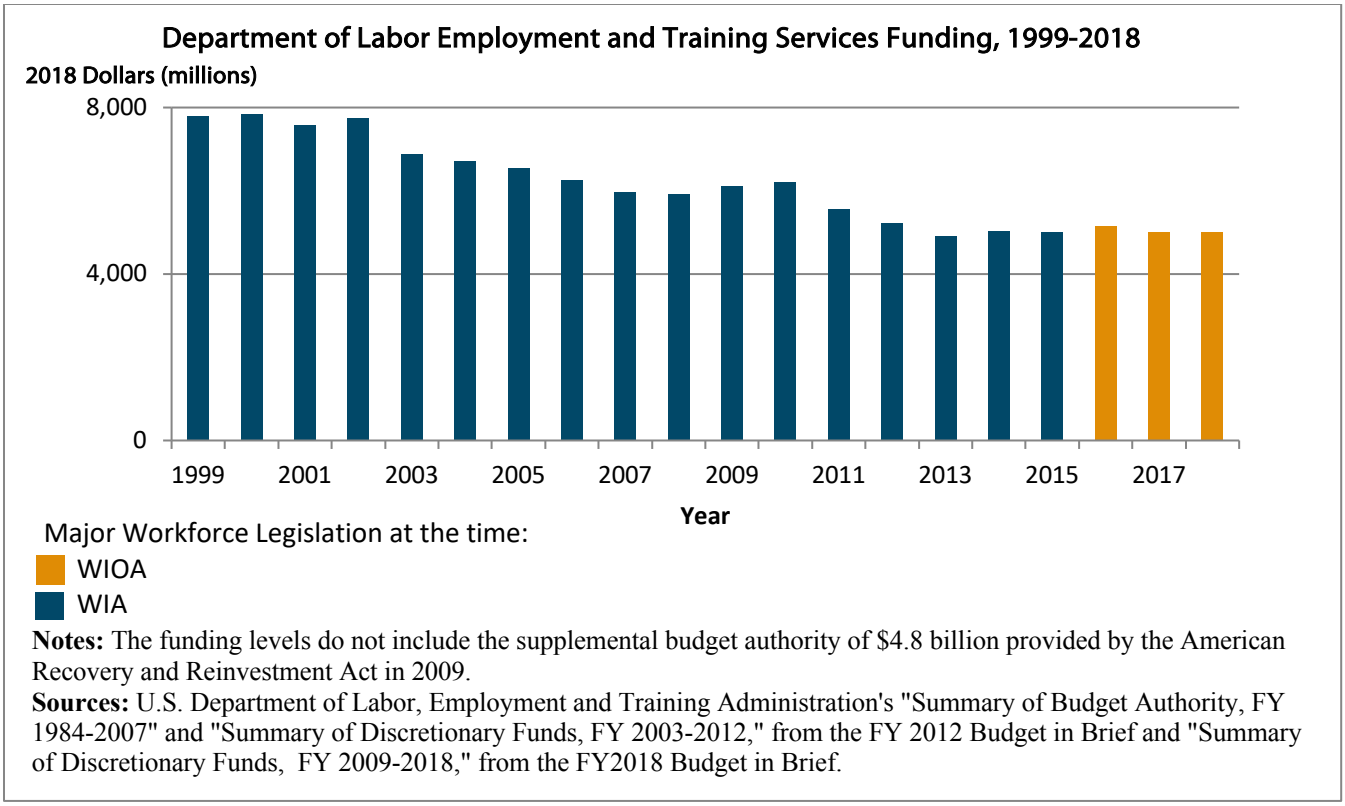
Scale investments in effective practices and foster innovation.

Congress and federal agencies are in a unique position to learn from states and local communities across the nation, tease out what is working, and pollinate strategies from one community to the next and one state to another. In this manner, having a national framework sets a standard with an eye toward consistency, continuous quality improvement, cross-sector alignment and collaboration, and improved outcomes. The codified Career Pathways definition in WIOA, Perkins Career and Technical Education Act (Perkins V), and the Higher Education Act (HEA)—see Appendix II—is a prime example of the federal role in learning from the field—practitioners, researchers, state/local policymakers, students, and workers—to seed best practice, foster innovation, and spur partnerships and alignment across federal funding streams and systems.

Fund workforce and education systems to meet the demands of youth and adults and employers.

After reaching an all-time high of $24 billion annually in the late 1970s (in constant 2018 dollars), Congress has significantly reduced our nation's investment in workforce training and employment services at the U.S. Department of Labor to about $5 billion a year today.[44] Since the early 2000s, employment and training programs have been cut significantly, from the steady $7-8 billion level to around $5 billion, where it has remained for a few years.[45]

Current funding levels are insufficient to provide the employment and training services that individuals with barriers to employment need to move out of poverty and into good jobs. Current federal youth employment and training programs serve approximately 339,000 Opportunity Youth, reaching just about 25 percent of the young people in need of employment, education, and service pathways.[46] Total federal funding for adult education programs in 2019 was less than 1 percent of the total education budget.[47] At current levels of funding, adult education serves about 1.4 million adults annually. With 36 million adults lacking foundational skills, we have a tremendous gap in service.



Notes: The funding levels do not include the supplemental budget authority of $4.8 billion provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in 2009.
Sources: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration's "Summary of Budget Authority, FY 1984-2007" and "Summary of Discretionary Funds, FY 2003-2012," from the FY 2012 Budget in Brief and "Summary of Discretionary Funds, FY 2009-2018," from the FY2018 Budget in Brief.

A focus on equity also inherently means intentionally addressing barriers faced by people with low incomes, people of color, immigrants, and those who have experienced trauma. WIOA includes provisions to fund "Supportive Services" to mitigate barriers, including transportation, child care, housing, and financial assistance to enable individuals to participate in training activities.

Transportation is a major barrier to employment, accessing postsecondary options, and managing daily life.

In urban and suburban areas with public transportation, the cost is often too high, and bus and train routes are infrequent in low-income areas. For rural residents and individuals living in more spatial counties, public transportation is limited and having access to a reliable car is paramount to accessing jobs, education and training and other services such as child care.

Individuals who have experienced trauma may have stressors and triggers that can pose barriers to workforce development and education program participation and gaining employment.[48]

> *"Every once in a while, everyone needs to talk to that perfect stranger who can help you deal with everything going on in your life."*
>
> *—Young Adult Focus Group Participant*[49]

It is important to recognize the intersections between health, mental health and one's ability to access and participate in education and training successfully.

Mental illnesses and Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) affect one-third of working-age individuals eligible for Medicaid, and a large proportion of these individuals have co-occurring disorders and/or poor physical health.[50] Proper access to care through Medicaid, including prevention, screening, and treatment for mental health and substance use, can help people to obtain and maintain employment.

Documentation is a major barrier to employment for immigrant youth.

The nearly 2.1 million[51] undocumented youth under the age of 24 are often left out of opportunities and programs, and therefore face uncertainty about their job prospects and futures. Undocumented youth experience higher rates of workplace exploitation, including wage theft[52] and sexual harassment[53]. These youth vastly underreport abuse for fear of reprisal from their employers, police, or immigration authorities. While the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program provided temporary deportation relief and work authorization to approximately 800,000 young people, many were left out of the program and current beneficiaries now face an uncertain future due to the Administration's efforts to terminate the program. Congress can pass clean legislation, like the Dream and Promise Act, that enables young people who grew up in the United States full access to the labor market. Policymakers can also remove requirements related to citizenship status from federal funds that support workforce development and postsecondary education.

4. We Know What Works and Where Investments Should Be Made

It's time to act, address, and dismantle these barriers. Research and program experience nationally and in states and communities around the country has demonstrated what works and where investments are needed. Investments must place equity front and center. Below, I've highlighted key areas for policy action and budget investments:

1. Invest in scaling up effective strategies for workforce development and postsecondary programs and partnerships that include other research-tested approaches for low-income adults and youth.
2. Invest in scaling up jobs—through documented strategies like subsidized jobs, including transitional and summer jobs.
3. Directly address collateral consequences for people impacted by the criminal justice system.
4. Invest in core work supports such as child care and health care.
5. Promote improved economic security through better jobs and a stronger EITC.

Equity at the Center

As noted above, investments must create equitable opportunities for workers of color. Policymakers must place equity at the center and use data to understand, diagnose, and address access and disparities based on race, gender, geography, and income.

In the case of workforce and education investments, the public workforce system and their education, employer, and non-profit community-based partners can mitigate discrimination and help youth, adult learner workers, workers of color, and people impacted by the criminal justice system. Policy provisions can target investments to under-resourced communities and regions of the country; require data transparency in reporting requirements, including outcome data disaggregation by racial, ethnic, gender and other groups with barriers; require and/or encourage particular programmatic strategies such as career pathways, sector strategies, transitional jobs, and pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship to support youth and adult learners needing additional skills and work experience; and foster cross-sector and employer partnerships to remove and address collateral consequences facing those impacted by the criminal justice system. With support, these individuals with barriers to employment can build social networks, broker access and proximity to employment and work experiences, and gain credible employment references that are critical to establishing solid work history.

Congress should make strategic investments in research-based strategies at scale and foster state and local

workforce and postsecondary and partnerships with the private sector. While efforts to "ban-the-box" on employment applications and remove unnecessary licensing bans for individuals with a criminal record are needed, other provisions to ensure background checks are accurate, such as the Fairness and Accuracy in Criminal Background Checks Act, are an important step in mitigating barriers to employment.

Effective strategies depend on comprehensive and well-connected collaborations across systems (K-12 education, postsecondary, justice, child welfare, health and human services, business and industry, etc.); strong case management function with "advisors" and "navigators" to support workers in navigating the policy/program silos; and employer partnerships.

Career Pathways

Career pathways are a service-delivery model that can help close gaps in education, and employment while also advancing racial equity. Specifically, this model offers an opportunity to retool our workforce and education systems to better serve individuals with varied education and skill levels and non-academic needs. Through the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways, a CLASP-supported technical assistance network with states, we've identified three core features of a career pathway: [54]

1. Well-connected, quality education and training programs that result in credentials with labor market value and include support services, work experiences, and employment services;
2. Multiple entry points for targeted populations, starting from initial levels of education and connecting to higher levels;
3. Multiple exit points leading to progressively higher levels of employment within a career path.

When done correctly, career pathways provide quality education and training opportunities targeted to individuals without a postsecondary credential who are in low-wage jobs.[55] Operationalizing career pathways and the systems needed to support them requires intentionality and infrastructure to use data and shared performance measures, leveraging co-enrollment policies with WIOA and state-funded programs, and long-term investment in retention, follow-up, and outreach support. While we have yet to see the full promise of career pathways, states are making promising advancements. Career pathway strategies such as Integrated Education and Training allow for youth and adults to accelerate their learning and advance skills in partnership with industry, employers, and educational institutions. These established partnerships help to mitigate employment barriers.

Integrated Education and Training

Integrated Education and Training (IET) is a research-proven educational practice based in adult learning theory. Through IET programs, youth and adults seek goal-oriented, relevant, and practical knowledge. Successful IET programs lead to educational and economic mobility, offsetting opportunity costs for people with family and work responsibilities. IET programs align foundational skill building, workforce preparation, and workforce training.[56] Over the past 50 years, the threshold of skill needed for adult self-sufficiency has moved from an 8th grade functioning level, to a high school diploma, to a postsecondary credential. Adult educators responded to this need, creating inventive programming built on the core principles of adult learning theory.[57] WIOA title II is the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. And while it is far and away the WIOA title that serves the most participants, it has never yet been funded at its authorized levels or been provided the resources to scale IET models (see Appendix III for examples of IET models).

Subsidized employment

This includes a range of employment positions in either the public or private sector. Employers pay their

employees using a subsidy for short or long-term placement and are reimbursed for the wages associated with creating and maintaining the position. Particular models of subsidized employment include *transitional jobs* (see Appendix III) that combine work-based income and support services for disadvantaged workers—youth, returning citizens, individuals experiencing homelessness, and those with mental health challenges—to improve their employability, as well as summer employment programs that help youth gain work experience while increasing educational attainment and life skills.[58]

Subsidized employment programs can be tailored to address the barriers to employment of these specific groups by enhancing the job search, job training, and employment experiences. For example, in a 2012 CLASP study about the employment experiences of young men of color, we found that young men cited lack of work experience and references as chief barriers to getting a job.[59] These programs often include additional support services such as child care assistance, life skills courses, or mental health services to support participation and promote long-term employability.

Summer Youth Employment Programs

The benefits of summer jobs span past adolescence. Teen employment predicts future employment. Child Trends and FHI 360 identified that the skills most frequently sought by employers include communication skills, social skills, higher-order thinking, self-control, and positive self-concept.[60] Teens can learn all these skills through their first jobs. Summer jobs are also linked to staying in school and increased engagement (see Appendix III) and in some cases keeping youth safe.[61] Summer youth employment programs (SYEP) can be a critical equity investment. SYEP participants tend to come from high-poverty communities where job opportunities are few and far between. Summer jobs provide much-needed income for youth and their families. Youth report using earnings to purchase school supplies, help their families buy food, or contribute to college costs.

WIOA includes provisions that allow local areas to support transitional jobs and requires local areas to spend a minimum on work experiences for youth, including summer jobs. These provisions are a welcome initial step. However, simply including these provisions is insufficient to meet the enormous demand for these programs and to meet employer needs. Individuals with barriers to employment need large-scale investments in subsidized jobs such as transitional jobs and summer youth employment. Congress should work to reinstate the federal summer jobs program to match the efforts of mayors and local leaders from around the country.

Reconnecting Opportunity Youth

In 2014, Congress overwhelmingly approved WIOA to modernize our workforce-development system and make it more responsive to industry. During fiscal year 2018, 81 percent of those served by WIOA Youth providers were out-of-school youth, and 69 percent were employed two quarters after exit from their program.[62] Congress should fund programs that serve Opportunity Youth at levels sufficient to reconnect one million youth each year, which requires increased appropriations of approximately $4.1 billion annually. For more details on this proposal, including the benefits that it would yield, see the *Bridge to Reconnection* report.[63] The *Opening Doors for Youth Act* is an important vehicle to help reconnect youth by providing subsidized summer and year-round employment and supporting local community partnerships in improving high school graduation and youth employment rates,

Congress should explicitly work to address collateral consequences facing individuals impacted by the criminal justice system and allocate resources to states, local communities, and employers that prioritize prevention for youth and focus on pathways from incarceration to reentry.

Expand and invest in Ban the Box policies and enforcement.

> *Reentry is not the goal. It is a specific point in time. The goal is lifelong reintegration, sustained civic engagement, and a life that one can enjoy and be proud of and pass along to their children and their communities."*
>
> *—Vivian Nixon, College and Community Fellowship*

Policy vehicles that remove barriers to work based on criminal history and involvement with the criminal justice system, such as "Ban the Box" legislation, can improve the employment and education prospects of returning citizens and boys and men of color—the people who have been most impacted by the criminal justice systems and mass incarceration. The federal government should adopt these fair hiring policies and work with the private sector to change their hiring practices. More work is needed to monitor enforcement of these policies and to connect them to system-wide workforce and economic development planning and training and education.[64]

In addition, Congress can take steps to remove the ban on access to public benefits, including SNAP and TANF, for individuals with previous convictions for drug-related felonies. Denying people access to food and cash assistance does not improve employability for returning citizens—rather, denying access to these critical supports makes it harder for people to reconnect with their families and find work, which can contribute to recidivism.[65]

Invest in correctional education and reentry.

National research shows that correctional education leads to a 43 percent reduction in recidivism and a 13 percent higher likelihood of post-release employment. [66]

With a federal ban on Pell grants for incarcerated individuals, states have had to make their own investments in correctional education and training. A report from the Indiana Department of Correction in 2012 found that education and employment were key factors for reducing recidivism in the state. They found that inmates who attended correctional education programs had a recidivism rate of 29.7 percent, compared to a 67.8 percent recidivism rate for those who did not. In addition, they found that over 50 percent of formerly incarcerated individuals who were unemployed returned to prison within 5 years.[67] These implications underscored the need for more education and better alignment with articulation and employability after release. The state responded by investing in career pathway education and training programs for incarcerated individuals through partnerships with the state's department of workforce development.

Congress should invest in work supports, such as child care and health care to reduce barriers to employment.

To address the employment challenges facing low-income parents, Congress must invest in child care.

Families struggle to meet the high costs of child care, and many children lack access to quality child care settings. Child care consumes a particularly large part of the budgets of poor families. For families in households with incomes less than the federal poverty level who pay for child care, child care expenses consume an average 30 percent of their income, compared to 18 percent for families with incomes between 100 and 200 percent of poverty and 7 percent for families making over 200 percent of poverty.[68] Parents without access to affordable child care may have to use less safe, lower-quality care, make untenable choices in their household budget, or choose between work and their children's care.[69] While Congress made an important investment in the Child Care and Development Block Grant in FY 18 and FY19 appropriations, the program still serves a very small share—approximately one in six—of eligible children.

Congress should promote increased economic security for individuals with barriers to employment and low-income workers by considering such policies as expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC); creating good jobs with progressive wages; increasing the minimum wage; instituting benefits such as paid family and medical leave and paid sick days; and promoting fair and predictable schedules.

Numerous policies would improve job quality for workers earning low wages. These include increasing the federal minimum wage and creating a $15.00 an hour floor for workers and overtime salary threshold to at least approximately $50,000 a year; improving workers' bargaining power; enhancing enforcement for existing labor standards; and increasing access to quality; affordable child care; health care; and retirement benefits.[1] These policies would improve low-wage workers' economic stability. Critical work supports like paid sick days and paid family and medical leave can mean the difference between a family staying afloat or falling into poverty when welcoming a new child or coping with a medical condition. For many workers, taking time off without pay often just isn't an option. Staying attached to a job ensures low-wage workers have needed income along with the opportunity for wage growth and career training and advancement opportunities. A national scheduling standard would also provide low-wage workers with much-needed stability in their schedules and therefore their incomes.

The EITC, which supplements the earnings of low-wage workers, is one of nation's most important anti-poverty programs. In 2017, the EITC, along with the Child Tax Credit, benefited over 29.1 million people, lifting 8.9 million (including 4.8 million children) out of poverty,[70] Unfortunately, the EITC provides a very limited benefit to workers without dependent children and is only available to 25- to 65-year-old workers. Recent bipartisan proposals would lower the eligibility age to 21 and raise the maximum credit, providing needed supplemental income for low-wage workers. These improvements to the EITC would benefit up to 16 million workers, including 2.6 million African Americans and 3.9 million Latinos.[71] The EITC can better strengthen economic security for workers with a robust minimum wage floor. These two policies should be paired together for maximum impact.

Conclusion

Today's economy leaves out far too many people—youth and young adults, people affected by the criminal justice system, low-income adult learners, families with children, and low-wage workers. But that's not inevitable—we know what barriers they face and, even more important, we know what works. Among the immediate steps I would urge the Congress to consider are:

- Lifting the budget caps to make possible adequate investment in workforce and postsecondary programs and crucial work supports like child care by:
    - Scaling up effective and research-based strategies, such as career pathways, integrated education and training, and pre-apprenticeships;
    - Greatly expanding investments in federal programs that reconnect Opportunity Youth to education, employment and service pathways;
    - Ensuring federal adult education policies and investments are central to addressing employment barriers;
- Investing in job creation while also improving the quality of private sector jobs by:
    - Building on state and local experience and research to implement robust and targeted subsidized jobs policy investments;

    - Ensuring low-income individuals with barriers to employment have access to good jobs, with progressive wages, and benefits such as paid family and medical leave and paid sick days and fair and predictable schedules;
- Making improvements to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and Higher Education Act to aid in cross-system alignment and to address the major barriers discussed in this testimony;
- Directly addressing the consequences of incarceration by:
    - Removing barriers to postsecondary education and restoring Pell grants to individuals who are incarcerated;
    - Investing in correctional education and pathways to reintegration and reentry;
    - Targeting research, investment, and policies in adult education, workforce development, and postsecondary education to serve and better connect individuals impacted by the criminal justice system to education, training, and work; and
- Placing equity front and center, with a focus on low-income people, young people, and people of color, in any proposals to improve economic opportunity, for example, through infrastructure investments.

More broadly, drawing on the federal government's crucial role in investing in equity and spreading innovation, I urge Congress to create a plan for universal access to education and employment for all young people. There are many models for what such a plan could entail, and I would be delighted to provide additional information.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.

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Appendix I: WIOA Participant Data[1]

YOUTH SERVED BY SELECTED WIOA EMPLOYMENT BARRIER		
WIOA Title I Youth Activities	Total Participants Served	Percentage served
Total Nationwide	150,394	
English Language Learners, Low Levels of Literacy, Cultural Barriers	88,452	59%
Exhausting TANF within 2 years	83	0%
"Ex-offenders"	14,647	10%
Homeless Individuals / runaway youth	8,187	5%
Long-term Unemployed (27 or more consecutive weeks)	4,977	3%
Low-Income Individuals	127,768	85%
Single Parents (Incl. single pregnant women)	17,820	12%
Youth in foster care or aged out of system	4,793	3%

ADULTS SERVED BY SELECTED WIOA EMPLOYMENT BARRIER		
WIOA Title I Adult Activities	Total Participants Served	Percentage served
Total Nationwide	1,108,201	
English Language Learners, Low Levels of Literacy, Cultural Barriers	54,112	5%
Exhausting TANF within 2 years	351	0%
"Ex-offenders"	55,912	5%
Homeless Individuals / runaway youth	32,990	3%
Long-term Unemployed (27 or more consecutive weeks)	19,841	2%
Low-Income Individuals	505,292	46%
Single Parents (Incl. single pregnant women)	107,642	10%
Youth in foster care or aged out of system	213	0%

YOUTH AND ADULTS SERVED BY SELECTED WIOA EMPLOYMENT BARRIER [2]		
WIOA Title II Activities	Total Participants Served	Percentage served
Total Nationwide	1,427,339	
English Language Learners, Low Levels of Literacy, Cultural Barriers	943,061	66%
Exhausting TANF within 2 years	6098	0%
"Ex-offenders"	92,877	7%
Homeless Individuals / runaway youth	18,189	1%
Long-term Unemployed (27 or more consecutive weeks)	65,117	5%
Low-Income Individuals	321,426	23%
Single Parents (Incl. single pregnant women)	113,588	8%
Youth in foster care or aged out of system	6,450	0%

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Appendix II: "Career Pathway" Defined in Perkins V, HEA, and WIOA

Career pathways are a "combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services" that:

- Align with the skills needs of industries in a state or regional economy;
- Prepare an individual to be successful in a full range of secondary or postsecondary education, including Registered Apprenticeships;
- Include counselling to help individuals achieve their education and career goals;
- Include, as appropriate, education offered concurrently with and in the same context as workforce preparation activities and training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster;
- Organize education, training, and other services to meet the particular needs of an individual in a manner that helps accelerate their educational and career advancement;
- Enable an individual to attain a secondary school diploma or equivalent, and at least one recognized postsecondary credential; and
- Help an individual enter into or advance within a specific occupation or occupational cluster.

Appendix III: Workforce Development Program and Strategy Examples and Research

Integrated Education and Training Programs

Pre-Apprenticeship Programs are "earn-and-learn" programs that build technical and foundational skills. California Roofers & Waterproofers Apprenticeship is a partnership between East Los Angeles Community College and a Cal Apprenticeship program. In this program, apprentices build English language and math skills and employers benefit through improved recruitment and retention. Participants report increased job satisfaction.

Community College Programs provide just-in-time skill building with career & technical education courses. The Kentucky Work Ready KY scholarship initiative has more than 80 programs in high-demand industries. Participants can earn up to 32 credits hours tuition free, including a 16-credit program with 2 in-person and 3 online courses.

Out-of-School Youth Programs provide targeted re-engagement strategy for 18- to 24-year-olds. Saint Paul Emergency Medical Services Academy is an intensive, tuition-free emergency medical technician (EMT) certification and firefighter awareness program designed for low-income, minority, and women residents of Saint Paul between the ages of 18 and 30 (in the summer, the age range is 18-24). Participants earn an hourly wage during the training. Recruitment is targeted to youth of diverse ethnicity, linguistic ability, and cultural experience, with the goal of building an EMS workforce reflective of Saint Paul's communities.

Summer Youth Employment

The Youth Policy Lab at the University of Michigan conducted a study of Grow Detroit's Young Talent (GDYT) Summer Jobs Program, a collaboration managed in part by Connect Detroit. The study shows improvement in educational outcomes two years after participation. Participants are less likely to be chronically absent and more likely to stay in school, graduate, and take the SAT. In the two years following summer employment: 95 percent of participants remained enrolled in high school. 73 percent of rising 10th- and 11th-graders took the SAT. Participants were over 5 percentage points more likely to graduate high school.

> *For me, YouthBuild was the only option for me in my community. After dropping out of high school, there were not many options to get reconnected. At my lowest point in life, and being turned down by numerous jobs and programs, YouthBuild Brockton (MA) was there to welcome me with open arms. While in the program, I gained my credentials and a new family. The staff there supported me in ways that I didn't expect and saw potential in me that I did not see myself. They pushed me to go to college, which is something that I never imagined as a first-generation college student. Because of their amazing support, I went from being a high school dropout, to receiving my master's degree and landing a job that I love. While I am happy about my own personal transformation, I have always thought about all the young people that were turned down due to lack of resources. What if they were given the same opportunity as me? The truth is they can, if we expand and increase access to programs like YouthBuild.*
>
> *—Lashon Amado, Opportunity Youth United*

Transitional Jobs

Transitional Jobs (TJ) combine wage-paid work, job skills training, and supportive services to help individuals facing barriers to employment succeed in the workforce. Transitional Jobs are aimed at benefiting individuals, families, and communities. A central goal is to help TJ participants address their barriers to employment and prepare for successful work in the unsubsidized labor market by experientially learning, modeling, and practicing workplace behaviors and building a work history with job references. Transitional Jobs also aim to stabilize individuals and their families with immediate earned income and access to incentives such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Additional goals of Transitional Jobs are to reduce recidivism and its associated public costs, stimulate local economies through wages paid to TJ participants, and improve the economic health of TJ participants' employers.

Evaluations of TJ programs show that the strategy has many demonstrable effects:

- The benefits of these programs can far outweigh the costs. A recent evaluation of a reentry-focused TJ program found that every $1 invested in the program yielded up to almost $4 in returned benefits to the community and taxpayer.
- Transitional Jobs programs get people working who would not otherwise be employed by targeting such individuals. . Transitional Jobs programs keep individuals employed and earning a paycheck to meet their basic needs, even in very weak labor markets.
- Transitional Jobs programs can increase federal and state revenues. A program that placed over 27,000 individuals in TJ over a 6-month period generated nearly $13.6 million in federal income, Medicare, and Social Security taxes and over $2.7 million in state income tax.
- Transitional Jobs programs can reduce recidivism. Transitional Jobs programs contribute to lowering recidivism and re-arrest and decrease reliance on public benefits. In a recent study, Transitional Jobs programs contributed to decreasing recidivism up to 50 percent on several measures, such as re-arrest and reincarceration for a new crime.
- Transitional Jobs programs can contribute to the success of children. These programs positively impact the lives of children as evidenced by better long-term educational outcomes. These programs support parental engagement by noncustodial parents, with the earned income generated through these programs positively benefitting children and families.
- Transitional Jobs programs can positively contribute to the economic health of communities. The wages paid to workers are immediately spent in local communities by individuals who must provide for their basic needs. This increases local demand for goods and services. In a Chicago Transitional Jobs program that placed over 1,500 people in transitional jobs over 4 months, demand for goods and services increased by over $5 million because of the Transitional Jobs program.

Re-entry

With re-entry dollars from the Department of Labor, the City of Los Angeles's Compass Rose Collaborative (CRC) enrolls returning citizens in an intensive construction pre-apprenticeship program that is tailored to their situation. The staff work closely with LA Trade Technical College and construction employers and unions to provide targeted wraparound services to ensure that participants are prepared to enter and advance in the construction field. Participants earn basic safety certifications, such as OSHA, CPR/First Aid, as along with hard

skills training specific to employer and market needs. For example, CRC coordinated a short-term certification course for participants in the aftermath of the Malibu fires. Members of the cohort earned the OSHA and HAZWOPER certifications needed for fire clean-up and construction work. Since then, participant Raul Sanchez completed training for safety pre-apprenticeship MC3, OSHA-10, CPR, Forklift, and HAZWOPER. CRC staff worked with the Woolsey Fire Crew to plan an orientation, and Raul was selected for the fire crew with a start date in May. CRC's supports continues post-placement and addresses such issues as financial barriers by providing work boots and tools.

When Anthony Galindo started the CRC program, he was on parole, living in transitional housing, and concerned that he might become homeless. However, he was hired on the spot at a job fair a few weeks after completing his MC3, Forklift Training, CPR, and OSHA 10. He went from making $10.50/hr at a warehouse to $18.50/hr at his new construction job. By the time he was released from parole, Anthony had saved enough money to rent an apartment and purchase a vehicle. He has since received a raise and is earning $20.50/hr. He has high expectations of becoming a foreman at his job site in the near future.