Investing in Evidence-Based Workforce Development Strategies
December 2024

America Forward and Results for America jointly recommend that the Trump-Vance Administration prioritize evidence-based workforce development approaches to make the best use of government resources and improve economic opportunity. This is important because:

- Evidence-based strategies can help to ensure that workers and employers receive a positive return on investment in training programs by emphasizing proven strategies and approaches.[1]
- Federal workforce funding should be redirected to evidence-based strategies and programs building rigorous evidence wherever possible. Many evidence-based training programs in high-demand sectors, such as industry-driven sectoral employment programs, are ready to expand with more support.
- DOL can cut red tape, such as burdensome enrollment processes under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), that present barriers to using evidence-based strategies.

Moving forward, DOL under the Trump-Vance Administration should take the following steps:
1) Prioritize evidence-based strategies in its national programs and grantmaking processes.
2) Invest in evaluation to test innovative strategies, determine what works, and promote continuous improvement.
3) Support strong implementation in the field by strengthening technical assistance and promoting outcomes-focused approaches.

1) Prioritize Grants to Evidence-Based Strategies
The Administration should target Federal funding to evidence-based strategies, including:
- **Agency-wide definitions of evidence**. We recommend DOL create agency-wide definitions for evidence to provide clarity to the field and support the use of evidence-based priorities throughout DOL grants. We recommend that DOL reference the "evidence-based" definitions for Department of Education grants under the Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR) and build on implementation of "evidence-based" provisions under the Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) program. In addition, we suggest that DOL incorporate a definition of "evidence-building" to support continued improvement.
- **Prioritize evidence-based strategies in national programs.** DOL should prioritize evidence-based strategies in its national programs. First, DOL should include requirements or incentives for grantees to propose evidence-based strategies in Notice of Funding Opportunities (NOFOs).[2] Too often, grant priorities have weighed process issues like administrative capacity over the actual evidence behind programs. DOL should also leverage flexible funds, such as those available under the H1-B fees paid under the American Competitiveness and Workforce Improvement Act (ACWIA) program, to invest directly in evidence-based workforce programs such as sectoral strategies.
- **Encourage the use of evidence-based strategies in formula programs.** The Department should take all available means to support state and local governments in shifting funding towards approaches with proven impacts (or under evaluation), including technical assistance, guidance, and performance negotiations.

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[1] A deep body of evidence now demonstrates that models such as sectoral employment training, transitional employment provided by employment social enterprises, and subsidized employment can provide a pathway to economic mobility. See Administration for Children and Families (2022), "What Works to Improve Employment and Earnings for People with Low Incomes?," https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/pathways-meta-analysis-feb-2022.pdf.

[2] See Results for America's Federal Evidence-Based Spending Guide: https://federalspending.results4america.org/.

2) Evidence-Building

We recommend the Department prioritize building evidence that addresses the quickly changing labor market and promotes upward mobility among workforce development participants:

- **Pursue a new innovation fund to develop, test, adapt, and scale effective models.** We urge the Department to leverage available funding and request appropriations for a workforce innovation fund that invests in practitioner-led innovation, similar to the Department of Education's Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program. This investment is essential to enable providers to respond effectively to emerging needs of employers, workers, and communities and improve outcomes.
- **Launch a Job Corps demonstration.** We recommend that the Administration prioritize strengthening the $1.8 billion Job Corps program by launching a $100 million sectoral strategies demonstration, leveraging authority under WIOA. Sectoral strategies are backed by deep evidence, are cost-effective, and ideally-positioned to empower economic mobility among the opportunity youth that Job Corps serves. This approach would build on recommendations from a recent DOL-funded report on Job Corps evaluation.[3] DOL should also prioritize an updated evaluation of the current Job Corps program leveraging high-value participant-level outcomes data from the National Directory of New Hires that will only be available through March 2025.
- **Across national grants, encourage rigorous evidence-building.** We encourage the Department to support rigorous evidence-building across competitive and formula grant programs, ranging from formative research (e.g., pilots, implementation research) to causal research (e.g., randomized controlled trials). Through a new definition of "evidence-building," DOL should ensure funded causal research aligns with standards under the DOL Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research (CLEAR) as well as prioritize evidence on cost-effectiveness.

3) Support for Strong Implementation

We urge the Department to expand its support for evidence-based decision making across the workforce development system. Priorities should include:

- **Strengthening technical assistance for evidence-based strategies.** DOL should fund technical assistance and provide guidance to state and local agencies regarding the use of evidence-based strategies and ongoing evidence-building as a key improvement strategy. In addition, DOL should provide resources for providers and intermediaries who work closely with state and local governments to implement and improve evidence-based programs. This technical assistance can include support for capacity-building; data and learning; scale-up and fidelity monitoring; and market research and sustainability.
- **Increasing accessibility of CLEAR.** While the Department's CLEAR clearinghouse for evidence-based strategies is a valuable resource, it should be easier for stakeholders to use. DOL should engage stakeholders to better understand what materials would be helpful, such as accessible practice guides and outreach linked to funding opportunities. DOL should also prioritize aligning CLEAR with the other major federal evidence clearinghouses, such as the What Works Clearinghouse at the Department of Education and the Pathways to Work Evidence Clearinghouse at the Administration for Children and Families, to reduce redundancy and improve accessibility.
- **Expanding support for performance-based contracting and outcomes-focused approaches.** To leverage the potential of performance-based contracting to drive stronger outcomes through public-private partnerships, DOL must clarify its guidance and provide technical assistance on implementation of the "pay-for-performance" authority under WIOA that enables governments to prioritize long-term economic outcomes. DOL should also provide guidance that enables evidence-based providers to streamline their WIOA enrollment processes, which can require a dozen steps for each participant because of boards' concerns over potential audits.[4]

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[3] See p. 21:
https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/A_Proposed_Research_and_Evaluation_Framework_for_the_Job_Corps_Program.pdf.
[4] We urge the Department to address outstanding issues such as lack of clarity around performance indicators and payment timelines and to eliminate the unnecessary feasibility study requirement. See
https://results4america.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/WIOA-PFP-DOL-TEGL-Recommendations-1.pdf.