Building a Workforce Development Ecosystem That Works
Supporting Vulnerable Populations
February 2023
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Inclusive Workforce Development

Effective workforce development ecosystems recognize that everyone has a role to play in building strong regional economies and meeting labor market demands. This requires intentionally reducing barriers for vulnerable populations. Welcoming a more diverse population into the workforce can alleviate labor shortages and bring new perspectives to the workplace.

This paper explores the question: What can be done to assist those who are not currently thriving in the workforce development ecosystem? Achieving broader workforce participation will enable employers to tap into non-traditional talent pools while simultaneously helping disadvantaged populations achieve economic self-sufficiency.
Vulnerable Populations

Vulnerable populations are those who face challenges in realizing full participation in the economy due to a variety of barriers. These groups may differ by state or local region and include but may not be limited to those vulnerable due to:

- Instability (e.g., lower income, insufficient housing, basic needs insecurities, lack of education, financial restraints, former incarcerations, transportation or other mobility challenges, substance use issues)
- Disability and/or health challenges
- Regulatory status (e.g., refugees, immigrants)
- Systemic inequalities (e.g., due to demographic identities like age, race, ethnicity, gender, and/or sexual orientation)

Many individuals in these populations face barriers to gaining and retaining meaningful employment with good wages.

Vulnerable Populations Face Several Barriers to Employment

- Individuals with disabilities had a 39% labor participation rate and 5.4% unemployment rate compared to 76.9% and 3.2%, respectively, for persons without disabilities in 2022.
- Transgender adults are twice as likely as cisgender adults to be unemployed.
- On average, from July 2021 to April 2022, LGBT individuals were more likely than non-LGBT individuals to report that they have experienced homelessness ranging from 57% to over 90% compared to 3.6% for the general U.S. population between 2009 and 2020.
- Black and Hispanic workers had consistently higher underemployment rates than white workers from 1994 to 2018.
- In 2022, the unemployment rate for individuals who identified as Black and having a disability was 12.4%, while the unemployment rate for individuals without disabilities who identified as Black was 5.9% (both rates were well above the average unemployment rate for the U.S.: 3.5%).
- Formerly incarcerated individuals have an estimated unemployment rate of 27%, and an estimated 60% of formerly incarcerated individuals face joblessness.
- Labor force participation rates among adults 25–64 decreased over three times more in rural areas versus urban areas from 2007 to 2019.
- Although refugees have unique and early access to employment services, they are less likely to be employed the longer they stay in the U.S. due to a decline in federal funding support during the period of adjustment needed for refugees to find employment based on specific skillsets, learn English (if applicable), and ensure long-term security.
- Youth unemployment has averaged 11.7% from 1948 to 2022. It stood at 8.2% in December 2022, compared to 3.5% overall.
- Mental illnesses, such as depression, are often associated with higher rates of disability and unemployment. Depression interferes with a person’s ability to complete physical job tasks about 20% of the time and reduces cognitive performance about 35% of the time.

1 US Department of Labor Frequently Asked Questions
2 Disability Employment Statistics
3 Being Transgender at Work
4 U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey Public Use File (PUF), Weeks 34–41
6 Race and underemployment in the US labor market (brookings.edu)
7 Disability Employment Statistics
8 Prison Policy Initiative Out of Prison & Out of Work
9 U.S. Department of Justice Special Report
10 USDA ERS - Rural Employment and Unemployment
11 Refugees in U.S. struggle to find long-term work | Cornell Chronicle
12 Youth Unemployment Rate in the U.S. 2022
13 Monthly Youth Unemployment Rate in the U.S. Jan 2021 to Jan 2023
14 CDC Mental Health in the Workplace
How the Ecosystem Works to Support Vulnerable Populations

Each organization within the workforce development ecosystem – government, education providers, community-based organizations, non-profits, charitable foundations, and employers – plays a role in both reducing barriers for vulnerable populations and helping employers find the talent they need. Ecosystem partners have different missions and thus have unique opportunities to support vulnerable populations:

**Government**

Agencies across local, state, and federal government, along with partners in their delivery systems such as workforce development boards and One-Stop Operators, directly engage with job seekers and play a major role in how the workforce development ecosystem works. Some programmatic and policy-related initiatives that government agencies can take to support vulnerable populations in their ecosystem include:

- Improving interagency collaboration and community outreach efforts to connect vulnerable populations to the wraparound support services (e.g., transportation, internet, housing, child and eldercare, substance abuse and/or mental health treatment, language support) required to fully participate in workforce development programs.
- Incentivizing an ecosystem-based approach for vulnerable populations when providing funding to organizations for workforce development. For example, education providers who receive federal or state funding could be asked to report on performance measures for populations of interest (e.g., people with disabilities, lower income individuals).

They could also be asked to partner with employers to provide stable pathways to employment.

- Including vulnerable populations intentionally in the stand up of new industries so that they have equitable access to next generation jobs. For example, government could reduce start-up costs and provide entrepreneurial training for small businesses owners from marginalized groups who want to capitalize on these evolving industries. Government could also work with communities to educate different populations, such as underemployed youth, on these careers and provide financial assistance for them to complete the appropriate training.

**Impact in Action**

*California is taking action to boost the employment prospects of vulnerable populations through its Community Economic Resilience Fund (CERF). The CERF is a $500M program developed by California’s Office of Planning and Research (OPR), the California Labor Workforce Development Agency (LWDA), and the Governor’s Office of Business and Economic Development (GO-Biz) to support resilient, equitable, and sustainable regional economies. Pooling federal, state, and private philanthropic resources, CERF supports new strategies to develop industries that create high-quality, broadly accessible jobs for all Californians in the transition to a carbon-neutral economy. The CERF provides grants to regional efforts throughout the state that must meet criteria for equity, job quality, and sustainability, among others.  

**Education Providers**

There are many different providers of educational services that support workforce and economic development,
including four-year institutions, community and technical colleges, credentialing organizations, career centers, non-profits, and more. Education providers can partner with government, employers, and the community to recruit individuals from vulnerable populations and provide stable pathways for them into meaningful, good-paying careers. Education providers can also equip vulnerable populations not only with in-demand technical skills for the jobs of today but also the interpersonal skills (e.g., empathetic listening, collaboration and teaming, growth mindset, resiliency, and applied creativity) that are common across all jobs of the future to help promote long-term career success. Education providers can incorporate coaching, mentoring, and interpersonal skills development into their curricula so that individuals from marginalized groups can build skills that will support them throughout their careers.

Impact in Action

Network2Work originated as workforce development initiative out of Piedmont Community College in Virginia and is now a WIOA-funded program by Virginia Career Works. They use a community-based approach to connect job seekers to training, jobs, and other resources. They partner with local employers to identify job needs and then work with community leaders to identify individuals from predominantly lower income families who may have transferrable skills that would meet those needs. Network2Work then connects those individuals, 43 percent of whom are single parents, to job trainings offered at Piedmont. Moreover, the program connects participants with the resources they need to succeed in their new job, including childcare, transportation, legal assistance, healthcare, and more. Of those job seekers who enrolled in Network2Work through Piedmont Community College over the past two years, 74% found jobs within six months after enrollment. Over half of those jobs pay more than $30,000 annually, and on average program graduates more than doubled their income, with an average wage gain of 109%.

Impact in Action

One Million Degrees (OMD) partners with Chicago area community colleges to provide comprehensive supports to low-income students to help them succeed in school and beyond. OMD provides wraparound support services that aims to put students on a path to graduation and economic mobility. OMD provides career planning, tutoring, mentoring, professional coaching, and connects students to local resources to support their persistence in post-secondary education. OMD Scholars graduate at twice the state average with the skills and experiences necessary to launch economically mobile careers.

Community-based Organizations, Charitable Foundations, and Non-profits

There are a number of community-based organizations, charitable foundations, and non-profits engaged in the workforce development space. Often, they serve as the voice of and conduit to vulnerable populations in the workforce development ecosystem, especially those organizations that have trusted relationships with these groups. Community leaders and members of vulnerable populations can be engaged in every aspect of workforce development to help promote effective marketing, programming, and wraparound support. For example, a leader of a community-based organization that is committed to preventing and ending local homelessness will understand first-hand what types of resources are needed and what messaging and programming are useful, practical, and appealing to individuals suffering from homelessness. Community leaders can not only provide guidance on potential ways to engage members of their communities but can serve as messengers to their communities to encourage individuals to take advantage of workforce development opportunities.
Employers

The ultimate goal for workforce development that effectively supports vulnerable populations is that these individuals will be able to fill employers’ skill needs and have meaningful careers with living wages. Employers that are focused on becoming skills-based organizations and evaluating and improving recruiting and hiring processes allow them to expand their worker pool and be more inclusive of vulnerable populations. For example, employers may recalibrate their candidate screening processes in favor of recruiting workers based on their skills and previous experiences, not whether they have college degrees. Employers may also partner with non-profits and community-based organizations who have long standing relationships with these populations and co-invest in their education and pathways to careers. Some also are responding to shortages in the labor supply by creating targeted retention and advancement programming for employees from vulnerable populations to support them throughout their careers. For example, employers can prioritize vulnerable populations for leadership advancement training and create mentorship and/or sponsorship programs that will pair vulnerable populations with leaders within the organization.

Impact in Action

OneTen is a coalition of more than 70 employers, over 100 talent developers, and leading community-based organizations that are committed to helping hire, promote, and advance one million Black individuals without a four-year college degree into well-paying jobs by 2030. Since OneTen’s inception, more than 50,000 people have been hired through the coalition and countless more have increased their access to economic opportunity and mobility. Deloitte is a founding member of the OneTen coalition and, as part of that commitment, has launched a series of pilots to establish processes for attracting, selecting, developing, and progressing professionals without four-year degrees. Deloitte’s US Purpose Office recently announced a continuation of its commitment to OneTen as part of a wider $1.5B Social Impact Investment over the next 10 years to help increase social and economic mobility.
Continuous Evaluation and Improvement

A key component to all workforce development efforts is an ecosystem-based approach to continuous evaluation and improvement. All partners should align on metrics and outcomes that will enable them to track progress for vulnerable populations and continuously adapt programs, pathways, and resources based on trends. Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis can be leveraged to evaluate effectiveness of the ecosystem in support of vulnerable populations. Trends related to demographics, program participation and completion, support service participation, labor force participation, unemployment, underemployment, job vacancies, wages, poverty, homelessness, and food insecurities are important indicators to track.

In addition, qualitative feedback should be collected from across the ecosystem and from vulnerable populations to gain nuanced insights into continued barriers, program effectiveness, career readiness, and career growth. Working with community leaders, ecosystem partners can collaborate with vulnerable populations to gather feedback on how best to tailor and deliver programming. Using this information, they can continue to work together to refine their approach to supporting vulnerable populations, be it improvements to marketing to build greater awareness of career opportunities, to programming to incorporate culturally relevant content, to support services to improve access, to career pathways to promote seamless integration into jobs, to organizational cultures to support job retention, and more.
What’s Next

Workforce development ecosystem partners can come together to support vulnerable populations. This requires a holistic approach where collaboration is key. To improve outcomes for vulnerable populations, the ecosystem can make the following moves now:

1. Government can improve collaboration internally and with external ecosystem partners to increase engagement and recruitment of members of vulnerable populations for workforce development programming
2. Education providers can assess their program offerings and adjust as needed to provide relevant and inclusive curricula that prepare vulnerable populations for the future of work
3. Community-based organizations and non-profits can conduct targeted outreach to community members that they serve to help them find workforce development and employment opportunities that will be most meaningful to them
4. Employers can evaluate their recruiting and hiring processes to open the aperture to broader talent pools that are more inclusive of vulnerable populations

The time is now for all individuals to be able realize their potential through meaningful, purpose-driven careers. Of equal importance is the need to address acute workforce challenges to bolster local, state, and regional economies and maintain the U.S.’ competitive position. All workforce development organizations can play a role in this important work by coming together to support vulnerable populations who have been historically excluded from full participation in the economy.
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