



To: Council of the District of Columbia

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Re: Best Practices in Employment to Inform an Equitable COVID-19 Recovery

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting recession have had dramatic effects on the workforce, labor market, and employers. The pandemic created unprecedented challenges and exacerbated existing inequities, especially for Black, Latinx,¹ and many immigrant communities. Washington, DC, a diverse and vibrant metropolis that is also our nation's capital, saw unemployment rise to 11.1 percent¹ during the peak of job loss, with higher rates for Black and Latinx workers.

As of September 2021, the national unemployment rate stood at 4.8 percent,² with a rate of 6.6 percent³ in DC. Although the economy and labor market have improved from their worst point during the recession, action is still needed to help those who are struggling to find good jobs, to improve the quality of jobs that are available, and, in turn, to meet the needs of businesses for skilled workers. Our nation and communities are at an inflection point where policymakers can use the large federal investments in workers, infrastructure, jobs, and communities to build local economies and a nation that is more inclusive and equitable.

Key Questions and Best Practices

This memo identifies a set of questions that the DC Council can consider in developing a strategy to meet the needs of the workforce for good jobs and employers for skilled workers. For each question, we identify best practices from around the country and tools and resources that can support policymaking and planning (table 1).

¹ This memo uses the term Latinx to describe people of Latin American origin or descent. The authors use this term because it helps us provide a more consistent and gender-neutral identifier that respects the diversity of this population.

TABLE 1

Summary of Key Questions and Best Practices

<p>How does DC define “inclusive recovery”? Changing workforce systems Atlanta CareerRise San Diego Workforce Partnership</p>
<p>How should DC workers be engaged in shaping workforce recovery? San Francisco’s ReWork the Bay City of Milwaukee: American Rescue Plan King County Metro’s Mobility Equity Cabinet</p>
<p>What are strategies for supporting new or reentering workers? Kentucky civil service apprenticeships Georgia Youth Apprenticeship Program New Way Mississippi, Jobs for Jacksonians Philadelphia Re-Entry Program</p>
<p>How can DC align training with jobs and skills that are in demand? Greater Washington Partnership Broward UP Alliance for Careers in Healthcare, Tech Talent Pipeline Accelerate Chicago Digital Skills for All</p>
<p>How can DC support the development of good jobs and improvement of existing jobs? Job quality framework Job quality competencies guide for practitioners Employment training panel Business Expansion Incentive Program Monroe Community College nurse training</p>

How Does DC Define “Inclusive Recovery”?

A key first step in developing a workforce strategy that is centered on job quality and equity is to define goals and establish metrics to track those goals. Workforce development metrics have historically focused on measuring the number of people who obtain any job. The decade prior to the pandemic saw an increasing focus on job quality as the public workforce system shifted to measure increases in earnings as well as job retention (tenure). One criticism of that focus is that other dimensions of job quality and who can secure a quality job remain.

The pandemic has created new momentum to implement intentional strategies focused on addressing racial inequities and centered on good jobs. Communities can measure progress toward systems changes—such as improved access to data on outcomes, increased collaboration or changes in policies to make it easier for job seekers to access services—in order to develop more equitable economies. Three examples follow of ways to establish new goals that reflect this approach.

CHANGING WORKFORCE SYSTEMS

The Urban Institute developed *Changing Workforce Systems: A Framework for Describing and Measuring Systems Change* as a resource for local leaders to think about how to set goals and measure outcomes in a workforce system.⁴ In the wake of the pandemic, it can be used as a tool for planning recovery efforts.

ATLANTA CAREERISE

[Atlanta CareerRise](#) (ACR) is a funders' collaborative managed by the United Way of Greater Atlanta.⁵ Thanks to a grant from the National Fund for Workforce Solutions, ACR was able to study the racial and economic inequities in access to the region's workforce system services and to develop plans to address them. The Urban Institute collaborated with Atlanta CareerRise to engage local stakeholders. That joint effort identified indicators that workforce development leaders can use to shape goals, set targets, and measure progress toward more equitable policies and programs that address racial and economic disparities in the region.⁶

SAN DIEGO WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIP

This group is a regional workforce development board. In an effort to reorient its services in support of better job quality, it has conducted focus groups with local service-sector workers and employers. Goals include increasing employee ownership, training job seekers on job-quality fundamentals, and integrating job-quality requirements into workforce subrecipient contracts.⁷

How Should DC Workers Be Engaged in Shaping Workforce Recovery?

In the Council's efforts to strengthen DC's workforce, targeting those most in need is critical. To understand the needs of residents, communities have long relied on publicly available employment data from the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) (e.g., the American Community Survey, Current Population Survey, Current Employment Statistics, and Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics).⁸ These sources can help answer questions of who makes up the unemployed/underemployed population, which industries need trained workers, and whether local workers are able to find and maintain employment. Some communities are now taking an additional step to elevate the voices of residents themselves: through meetings, surveys, and focus groups, residents can have a direct say in defining their own needs. Ideally, worker input is part of an ongoing partnership, not a one-time event. Once these data have been collected, metrics can be developed to support ongoing evaluation of the city's workforce development efforts.

SAN FRANCISCO'S REWORK THE BAY

The philanthropy-led [ReWork the Bay](#) is a San Francisco initiative that offers a great example of how a city can lift worker voices to advance workforce equity.⁹ One idea from the initiative is to invite unions and worker organizations to the table where decisions are being made that may affect them. Crucially, the group acknowledges that "worker issues" means more than what happens in the workplace; it includes issues of child care, health care, housing, immigration, and more.¹⁰

ReWork the Bay undertook an analysis of the region's workforce outcomes using labor market data from the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), wages and employment from the five-year [American Community Survey](#) microdata, and job demand and automation resiliency from [Burning Glass Technologies](#). This analysis found significant occupational segregation in the region, with Latinx workers overrepresented in the construction, maintenance, and farming occupations. It also found that just under half of Bay Area workers are in stable jobs that provide a living wage and strong retention and are resilient to automation.¹¹

Of course, labor market dynamics are not the sole determinant of workforce outcomes. Workers also face barriers to employment because they lack affordable and reliable options for transportation, child care, and housing.¹² Addressing these gaps in access to good jobs will go a long way toward ameliorating racial inequities in the workforce.

CITY OF MILWAUKEE: AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN

The city of Milwaukee engaged the community in decisions about use of [American Rescue Plan](#) funding as part of an effort to apply a racial equity lens to recovery planning.¹³ Community engagement activities included surveying residents in the summer of 2021 and updating the community in November 2021. Funding was allocated to meet a variety of needs, including workforce development and summer youth employment.

KING COUNTY METRO'S MOBILITY EQUITY CABINET

King County Metro, the transit department for the Seattle region, convened leaders from historically underrepresented communities—including low-income populations, communities of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, and limited-English-speaking populations—to create the [Mobility Equity Cabinet](#).¹⁴ Between May 2019 and July 2021, the cabinet met regularly with Metro staff to cocreate principles and policy recommendations for future public transit investments that would address the greatest needs of the community. For example, they identified the need for a new transit schedule in South King County that would better align with the nontraditional work hours of many of the area's residents.

What Are Strategies for Supporting New or Reentering Workers?

Two populations that need extra support are new entrants to the workforce, particularly disconnected and underrepresented youth, and people reentering the job market with a criminal record.

Apprenticeships for Young Workers

Strategies for addressing youth unemployment include career exploration, career-focused training, subsidized employment, apprenticeships, mentoring, summer jobs, and other types of work-based learning. These “earn and learn” opportunities, during both the school year and the summer provide the opportunity for young people to explore career options, build skills and a record of early work experience and earn a wage. The programs are most effective in promoting inclusive growth when they target youth of color and youth from neighborhoods burdened by historic underinvestment. To coordinate and develop these new services, local government should partner with philanthropic leaders and businesses.

KENTUCKY CIVIL SERVICE APPRENTICESHIP

Kentucky has taken up the challenge of building skills and job experience for young workers with an innovative [civil service apprenticeship](#) program.¹⁵ Started in 2018, the program's apprentices benefit from professional networks, experience, and technical and interpersonal skills development. The government benefits from a new talent pipeline.

GEORGIA YOUTH APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

The Georgia [Youth Apprenticeship Program](#) combines school-based and work-based learning, leading to the completion of a high school degree, a post-secondary certificate or degree, and industry-recognized certification or competencies applicable to in-demand and high-quality jobs.¹⁶ Results show that a majority of the program's apprentices earn an industry-recognized credential and are offered full-time employment after completion.¹⁷ Beyond student success, the program is useful for coordinating industry, education, and the community. This coordination enhances the relevance of curriculums and retention of students and ultimately creates a more productive local economy.

Programs for Reentering Citizens

Another historically underserved population is citizens with criminal records seeking to re-enter the workforce. These individuals face heavy stigma during the job search process and competition from more experienced job applicants. Targeted programs and services can help them find jobs and reduce recidivism.¹⁸ Those efforts are also a crucial part of promoting an inclusive recovery, as these individuals are disproportionately from communities of color. Local governments can encourage employers to hire those with criminal records by supporting subsidized jobs, apprenticeship programs, and other workforce development efforts that include justice-system outreach.

NEW WAY MISSISSIPPI AND JOBS FOR JACKSONIANS

In Jackson, Mississippi, the nonprofit [New Way Mississippi](#) collaborates with a city employment assistance program, [Jobs for Jacksonians](#), to connect citizens returning from incarceration to jobs.¹⁹

PHILADELPHIA RE-ENTRY PROGRAM

Philadelphia's [Re-Entry Program](#) Tax Credit is available to local businesses that hire someone with a conviction history either full time or part time.²⁰ Qualifying businesses can apply for the \$10,000 credit for three years against the city's business privilege tax.

How Can DC Align Training with Jobs and Skills That Are in Demand?

Given the anticipated federal investments in infrastructure and other areas, understanding the jobs and skills that are in demand is critical to ensuring that workers are being prepared for long and successful careers. DC can pursue two useful tracks: convening partnerships and promoting digital literacy.

Sectoral Partnerships

Education and training programs must be designed to meet the emerging skill needs of employers. The Council should use labor market data and convene industry and sectoral partnerships to inform the path forward.

GREATER WASHINGTON PARTNERSHIP

Initiatives like the [Greater Washington Partnership](#), an alliance of businesses in the capital region, are already doing great work in DC to understand the region's economic challenges and opportunities.²¹ The [Capital CoLAB](#), for example, brings together employers and educators to build industry-aligned and inclusive digital tech pathways.²² The CoLAB's [Employer Signaling System](#) combines labor market information with employer and educator feedback to keep up with the knowledge, skills, and credentials needed for entry level roles in information technology.²³

BROWARD UP

In Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Broward College's [Broward UP](#) program takes a community-centric approach to workforce education and support services.²⁴ The program operates in six zip codes with the highest average unemployment and lowest education attainment levels. The college surveys these communities to understand the residents' needs, then develops its programming in partnership with local employers and municipal leaders.

ALLIANCE FOR CAREERS IN HEALTHCARE, TECH TALENT PIPELINE

Health care and technology are key growth sectors in many communities, including the greater DC region, and both can offer pathways to good jobs. New York City operates two industry partnerships, [the Alliance for Careers in Healthcare](#) and [the Tech Talent Pipeline](#), that help determine and address mismatches between labor market supply and demand in those sectors.²⁵ These collaborations loop in feedback and funding from city agencies, philanthropy, organized labor, training providers, and businesses to ensure that employers are engaged in the creation and maintenance of a local talent pipeline to living wage jobs.

Digital Literacy

Many adult learners and other job seekers lack the digital skills necessary to search and apply for jobs, training, or education programs. Those skills are more important than ever given the shift toward digital provision of services and shift to remote work that was necessary to accommodate COVID-19 safety measures. Taking steps to address the digital skills divide is a matter of equity. Analyses find that digital skill deficiencies disproportionately burden workers age 50 and older, as well as young adults from low-income households or rural areas or whose first language is not English.²⁶ Local leaders can shrink the digital skills divide by supporting digital literacy training.

ACCELERATE CHICAGO

The city of Chicago has partnered with Microsoft to provide free digital-skills training courses for at least 300,000 residents. The initiative, [Accelerate Chicago](#), aims to open new opportunities in well-paid, sustainable jobs for people who have struggled to find employment before or because of the pandemic.²⁷

Chicago is the latest city to launch “Accelerate” with Microsoft, following New York, Atlanta, Houston, and Louisville.

DIGITAL SKILLS FOR ALL

Seattle’s [Digital Skills for All](#) initiative equips underserved youth ages 16 to/through 24 with the computer science skills needed to succeed in entry-level technology jobs.²⁸ Students benefit from a combination of academic training and apprenticeship experience, as well as industry connections.

How Can DC Help Develop Good Quality Jobs and Improve Existing Jobs?

The COVID-19 pandemic has made starkly apparent the racial disparities that exist in our economy today, and job quality is no exception. Overall, white workers are 50 percent more likely than workers of color to hold good-quality jobs.²⁹ People of color make up a disproportionate share of essential and frontline workers, as well as those employed in service industries like hospitality and retail. These positions were already riskier and more vulnerable to wage decreases or job loss, and those conditions were made worse by the pandemic. This reality is the result of centuries of disinvestment in communities of color, exclusionary labor protections, and labor market discrimination.

The current momentum behind racial and economic equity movements presents an opportunity to shift away from business-as-usual in workforce development efforts. Inclusive recovery means not only promoting access to jobs or increasing the number of jobs in higher-paying industries but improving job quality. Good-quality jobs benefit the workers, the employers, and the community at large. Key tools for developing and supporting good jobs, as well as examples of efforts to support job quality, follow.

JOB QUALITY FRAMEWORK

The Urban Institute report, [Understanding Good Jobs](#), presents a framework for job quality that considers definitions from the business community, economics, sociology, law, and international policy organizations.³⁰ The framework comprises five broad categories: pay, benefits, working conditions, business culture and job design, and on-the-job skill development and training. Each category is broken down into elements that provide benefits in a current position and elements that support advancement. A report from the [National Fund for Workforce Solutions](#) provides essential information on the good-jobs gap and targeted strategies for improving the future of work.³¹

JOB QUALITY COMPETENCIES GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS

The National Fund for Workforce Solutions has created a [guide](#) for workforce collaboratives on how to approach job quality work with employers.³² The guide can help the Council assess its current competencies for addressing job quality issues, build its capacity to affect change, and work with regional stakeholders in building quality jobs.

EMPLOYMENT TRAINING PANEL

California’s [Employment Training Panel](#) provides funding to employers to help their workers upgrade their skills.³³ The program has been in place since 1982 and is funded by California employers through a payroll tax. The funding structure is pay-for-performance, measured by the completion of training hours and employment retention at a good wage. Part of the panel’s mission in supporting this training is to “provide workers secure jobs paying good wages and having opportunities for advancement” and “promote benefits and ongoing investment of employee training among employers.”

BUSINESS EXPANSION INCENTIVE PROGRAM

Through its [Business Expansion Incentive Program](#), Austin, Texas, offers incentives—such as property tax and wage reimbursements—to promote the growth of jobs that meet minimum quality standards.³⁴ For example, eligible businesses must pay at least the city’s living wage.

MONROE COMMUNITY COLLEGE NURSE TRAINING

In an innovative partnership, community colleges in Rochester, New York, worked with local long-term care facilities to come up with a solution to the high turnover rate and poor job quality affecting certified nursing assistants. Employers committed to paying better wages and providing opportunities for advancement in exchange for the colleges' efforts to provide high-quality and cost-effective training programs. The partnership has been a huge success, resulting in increases in retention and job quality.³⁵

Conclusion

This memorandum raises key considerations and examples of practices underway around the country to inform the development of strategies that support equitable and inclusive workforce recovery in Washington, DC.

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