

Workforce Investment Boards Upskilling Strategies to Re-start the Region's Economy

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Current U.S. Commerce Secretary and former Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo recently said, "What we have to do is support business, but also support our workers with job training programs and with reasonable wages." As we exit the COVID-19, the Secretary's words should serve as a rallying cry for the Los Angeles region. Due to the pandemic's impact and because we have a service sector-dependent economy, Los Angeles County's Workforce Investments Boards have a unique opportunity to use federal stimulus funds and other financial resources to boost employment and alleviate income inequality.

Many minimum wage workers in food service, hospitality and restaurant sectors may not have jobs when they're able to return to the workforce. Pre-COVID, it was also known that as many as 40 percent of the middle skill jobs already being created in LA County couldn't be filled because of a lack of trained workers. High-demand, good wage career pathways exist in Los Angeles, in sectors such as advanced manufacturing, biotech, healthcare, logistics, IT and more. The Los Angeles County Business Federation (BizFed) and its Anti-Poverty Committee were already calling attention to this tragic disconnect, but the COVID-recovery era presents a golden chance for training and a new era of opportunity and growth in Los Angeles

The key resides in an under-appreciated and under-valued resource: our local community colleges. These institutions offer the job training that is essential for many of these entry- and mid-level positions. Sadly, barriers exist for low-income workers to get into this training and, ultimately, tap into these jobs.

First, many training programs take too long to complete. A minimum wage worker receiving unemployment benefits is only getting part of a former salary and needs to return to work – ideally, full-time work – quickly. Many college training programs require one or two years of courses to finish the required certification that would grant participants access to strong career fields that can become family-sustaining. Second, potential students often don't know that free, low-cost or grant-funded job training is available at community colleges. Third, low-income trainees need extra support such as childcare while they attend class, transportation assistance, soft skills development and other help. Last but not least, many need help to strengthen their English language skills in order to move up the career ladder.

The Los Angeles County Business Federation (BizFed) and its Anti-Poverty Committee has studied this dilemma and recommends that the Los Angeles-area (City & County) Workforce

Investment Boards, in their 2021-24 Local Plan, designate funds to community college job training programs in high demand industries for the following specific purposes:

Provide stipends to community college faculty who teach in job training programs to spend the time needed to re-tool their curricula for more time-condensed programs that can be completed in one semester or less. Los Angeles Valley College has a highly regarded, successful model for this type of training in its six-week intensive Advanced Manufacturing, Biotech and Transportation Academies. We recommend that this model be replicated on other community college campuses.

Designate or hire college employees who can partner with local nonprofits to recruit their low-income, unemployed service recipients who would benefit from upskilling and re-training programs. Specifically, this outreach should target the agencies that are not in the workforce system (i.e. food pantries, healthcare clinics, after school programs, etc.). Also, additional job developers could be employed at America's Job Centers who can connect former workers in downsized industries with community college job training programs.

Fund on-campus childcare centers or Family Resource Centers, or contract with nearby childcare facilities where trainees can drop off their children while they are in class. Additionally, provide vouchers for transportation to and from campus when needed and include as part of the training programs a strong soft skills component.

Expand the offerings of English as a Second Language classes, including courses that are designed for those who are functionally illiterate or who have had limited educational experiences in their native countries.

Now is the time for Los Angeles County and its Workforce Investment Boards to take bold steps to create jobs and decrease income inequality and to partner with all community colleges in LA County. Efforts to upskill our lowest income workers, moving them into family sustaining "jobs of the future" sooner rather than later helps all of us by creating a more robust and growing economy.

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