

Obstacles and Opportunities:

Insights from Six Innovators in Workforce Training

Executive Summary

In a time of transformational change within the economy and labor market, the workforce development field is struggling to keep pace.

Both public policy debates and private funding norms seem stuck in the practices and patterns of the past, sacrificing innovation in favor of predictability. All too often, this dynamic means that both jobseekers in search of new opportunities and employers looking for highly qualified talent fail to achieve their goals.

The CEO Task Force—a group of chief executives from six standout workforce organizations—offers proof that a better approach is within reach. Deliberating over the course of 2023, Task Force members leveraged their expertise delivering sector-leading wage gain outcomes for low-income jobseekers to identify a number of pain points holding back good workforce outcomes, and produced ideas on actions to drive progress on those issues.

This brief captures the highlights of their work. It is organized around two “Opportunity Statements” characterizing challenges within policy and philanthropy, respectively. Within each are a number of findings and recommendations, informed both by the Task Force members’ experiences as effective implementers and the insights of nationally recognized experts engaged to challenge and deepen their thinking.

The first Opportunity Statement, “Aligning Workforce Policies to Labor Market Realities,” urges policymakers to evolve past a focus on compliance and short-term outcome measures to embrace interventions that deliver long-term value. The Task Force found that federal workforce policy is under-resourced, fragmented, and tilted toward the status quo, and that the incentives of the public workforce system favor process compliance rather than new ideas and practices.

To reverse these trends, the Task Force makes three recommendations. The first calls for short-term, achievable policy changes to fund innovative training, prioritize evidence-based practices, and build stronger data systems. The second is to create a workforce-focused entity analogous to the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which could supercharge new research and development to get in front of emerging issues such as AI and the shift to skills-based hiring. Finally, the Task Force urges development of new capacity for advocacy through a coalition of innovative providers with private sector employers.

The second Opportunity Statement, “Strengthening Philanthropic Impact,” considers how private funders can take steps that will increase the return on their giving investments while preserving their distinct priorities. Here, the Task Force found that the unique processes that many funders require for various aspects of grant-making impose costs on providers that reduce their capacity to deliver on grants. A second finding concerned the nature of the relationships between funders and providers, in which poor communication, diverging expectations, and fraught power dynamics can frustrate shared goals.

In response, the Task Force calls for funders with aligned objectives to work collectively and standardize processes when it makes sense for them to do so. A second recommendation is for providers and funders alike to pursue “rational partnership” characterized by transparency and a spirit of collaboration. The Task Force members are eager to hear from the workforce community on reactions to these ideas.

Task Force Members

Accelerate America

A partnership of Propel America with National Louis University, Accelerate America develops flexible pathways to both immediate in-demand jobs and a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution. Participants receive career training, coaching, and support to become Medical Assistants within six months of starting the program, all while earning college credit toward degrees.

Task Force representation: *Chad Rountree (CEO, Propel America), Thackston Lundy (Vice President of Workforce Pathways, National Louis University)*

Climb Hire

Overview: Founded in 2019, Climb Hire serves low-income and un- or under-employed working adults looking to break into new careers in fields including technology. The organization provides technical and essential skills that employers demand, as well as a community and network to help "Climbers" build social capital.

Task Force representation: *Nitzan Pelman (CEO and Founder)*

Craft Education System

Overview: Craft supports professional apprenticeships and "apprenticeship degrees" in fields such as teaching and nursing, by tracking data and helping to connect learners to degree opportunities through higher education institutions, as well as with employers. Its core innovation is in determining how authentic work tasks performed by classroom paraprofessionals correlate to academic activities, and ultimately credit and degrees.

Task Force representation: *Mallory Dwinal-Palisch (CEO and Founder)*

NPower

Overview: NPower provides young adults and military veterans with technology and digital skills training, helping them access jobs and connect to career paths in IT. Serving a population of overwhelmingly low-income BIPOC participants, NPower has delivered a program graduation rate of 80 percent, with average wage gains of 420 percent for program completers.

Task Force representation: *Bertina Ceccarelli (CEO)*

Upwardly Global

Overview: Upwardly Global is the country's foremost provider of employment services for immigrants, refugees, and asylees with professional backgrounds. Serving nearly 6,000 new arrivals each year, Upwardly Global makes job matches in high-demand sectors such as technology, healthcare, and finance, with participants earning an average starting salary of nearly \$68,000 per year.

Task Force representation: *Jina Krause-Vilmar (CEO), Lily Bukshpan (Director of Institutional Giving)*

Vehicles for Change

Overview: Vehicles for Change (VFC) supports economically struggling families by repairing and providing donated cars to help them access jobs, childcare, doctor's appointments and more. The organization has awarded nearly 7,000 cars to low-income families since 1999, with a 2011 study finding that 75 percent of those served got better jobs or increased their earnings by an average of \$7,000 within a year. VFC also trains individuals with barriers to employment as mechanics to help prepare cars for families.

Task Force representation: *Martin Schwartz (CEO), Davine Snead (Vice President of Development)*