

## Charting the Course: An Opportunity to Improve Workforce Development in DC

**M**ore than 60,000 DC residents are essentially locked out of the City's economy because they lack a high school diploma or its equivalent, and need to significantly increase their education, skills, and credentials in order to progress to the goal of a family-supporting job. A successful economic development strategy must incorporate a strong workforce development plan to bring these residents into the District's economy as full and successful participants.

Investing strategically in these residents will have multiple benefits: the residents will be able to become more productive

and acquire more valuable skills; businesses will have access to a greater local talent pool, and the net effect on the District economy will be positive. Research shows that these investments not only yield significant improvements in employment, earnings, and contribution to the tax base, but also pay dividends in reductions in homelessness and dependence on public assistance and in improved health of workers and their families and children's educational success.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the District has built and strengthened important workforce development infrastructure, including a strong

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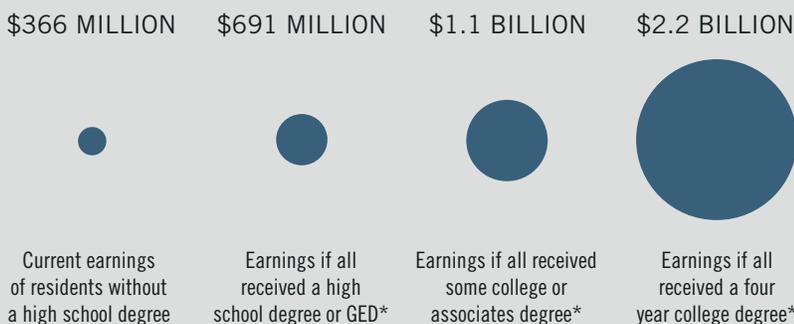
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### DC RESIDENTS WITHOUT A HIGH SCHOOL DEGREE WILL CONTRIBUTE MORE TO DC'S ECONOMY BY REACHING HIGHER LEVELS OF EDUCATION



\*Assumes residents without a high school degree would have the average earnings of DC resident at this education level

SOURCE: US CENSUS BUREAU AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY 2013

and functioning Workforce Investment Council (WIC). Though the District has made progress, the workforce development system is still missing a coherent, comprehensive, cross-agency strategy to take residents from where they are now through the many steps to the end goal—a family-sustaining job that provides ongoing opportunities for career advancement. The current fragmented system creates too many opportunities for individuals to fall out of the process and land far short of that goal.

The District needs a workforce development system that is seamless, creating viable pathways with smooth transitions so that individuals can successfully pursue all the steps to economic and career success. Three key elements are required to bring about such a system: a career pathways approach to workforce development; a culture of performance and accountability; and continued strong leadership from the WIC.

Over the past several years, the District has brought a once-neglected workforce development system back into compliance with key federal and local standards. The Mayor and Council now have an important opportunity to build on that momentum to help the system evolve from one that is focused on basic compliance with state and federal regulations to one that is strategically optimized and focused on achieving key outcomes that will help more District residents achieve economic security.

Two key opportunities can be leveraged in that effort. Congress recently reauthorized the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). The new law

will already require the District to better integrate its programs. WIOA also fixes some key problems and opens new opportunities. In addition, the Council mandated the creation of an Adult Career Pathways Task Force in the last budget cycle. This task force can help to lay the groundwork for building the system District residents need.

### **Build a Career Pathways Framework for Workforce Development**

A “career pathways” approach to education and training has been demonstrated to be successful, particularly with individuals who lack a high school diploma or its equivalent, have experienced long bouts of unemployment, or face other significant barriers to employment. This approach squarely addresses the realities and challenges faced by low-skilled residents by meeting them where they are (addressing their educational, job training, and personal needs) and assisting them to progress incrementally toward the end goal of a family-supporting job with growth opportunities. The pathway approach connects progressive levels of education, training, support services and credentials. Each career pathway has three essential features:

- Multiple entry points, so that individuals can begin their career path at the most appropriate skill level;
- Multiple exit points so that individuals can enter the workforce at various milestones and easily return to their education when they’re ready—either between jobs or while they are working; and
- Well-connected and transparent education, training, credentialing,

and support services to facilitate progress along the pathway and ensure participants can get credit for their education and experience in the future.<sup>2</sup>

Implicit in this approach is the alignment of services across agencies and funding sources, and a commitment by programs to design and support “handoffs” (including bridges between programs or inter-agency referrals) such that individuals who complete one program are set up for success on the next step of the pathway. Without such strategic connections, individuals are far less likely to develop an achievable career plan and continue their progress to ultimately achieve success in the job market.

Adoption of a career pathways framework will require the District to move beyond stand-alone programs which operate in silos to establishing a system in which:

- A high school diploma or equivalent credential, including a GED, is a step on a pathway that leads to additional education, training, and work experience, not just an end in itself;
- All education and workforce programs are interconnected, demand-driven, aligned with employer expectations, and allow individuals to move seamlessly among them as they seek to advance to the next step in their careers; and
- Business representatives from targeted sectors, through leadership of the Mayor and WIC, are engaged in a meaningful way to ensure that the District is preparing the types and numbers of workers they need.

## New Opportunities in WIOA

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) became law in July, 2014. It is the first update to the nation's primary workforce development legislation since 1998 when WIA was enacted. WIA established a universal access system of one-stop career centers, which provide access to training and employment services for a range of workers, including low-income adults, low-income youth, and dislocated workers. WIOA includes many substantial changes to WIA that will better align workforce programs with each other and with the needs of employers, and ultimately help improve the District's workforce development system.

In general, the old law contained provisions that functioned as a deterrent to serving those with significant barriers, or from providing the full range of services needed to successfully assist low-income, low-skilled individuals to attain economic and career success. The new law eliminates these deterrents, and in fact places a high priority on serving these individuals. It promotes specific strategies and services that have proven successful in assisting low-skilled individuals who often face other barriers to employment as well as limited access to career opportunities

Key shifts in national law are a direct result of both past failures and the development of proven successful methods. The new law emphasizes several key improvements that are particularly relevant in the District:

- An increased commitment to assisting individuals with barriers to achieve economic and career success;

- A focus on career pathways as a key vehicle for achieving that result;
- Improved coordination across agencies to ensure smooth progress for individuals as they pursue their career goals;
- Sector partnerships that engage key employers in specific industry sectors, identify in-demand credentials, and ascertain gaps in current programming are a new requirement for the WIC. These sector partnerships can and should inform career pathway discussions in the District; and,
- Incremental performance measures that more accurately track progress and document successful outcomes across agencies, including the Department of Employment Services (DOES), Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), and others.

The implementation timeline for WIOA creates both urgency and opportunity for the District. The majority of WIOA provisions become effective on July 1, 2015, the first full program year after enactment. New and more rigorous performance measures will take effect in July, 2016, making it critical to use this year to develop structures and services to meet the new performance measures, and ensure that the system is prepared to meet them. States and localities also have until early 2016 to develop a new strategic implementation plan, which will allow the District to test and refine new approaches during this year, and use the results to create an optimal plan.

The Budget Support Act of 2014 established the Adult Career Pathways

Task Force housed within the Workforce Investment Council.<sup>3</sup> They are tasked with the creation of a city-wide strategic plan for connecting adult basic skills program administered in the District to career pathways. The group includes the leadership of the various District agencies tasked with elements of career instruction, including the WIC, OSSE, DOES, City Council, Deputy Mayor for Education, and others. With the establishment of this Task Force, the District is ideally positioned to meet expectations for the increased use of career pathways mandated by WIOA.

## Recommendations

- Transform the current workforce development system by implementing a career pathways framework focused on key industry sectors. Ensure all publicly funded (both federal and local) programs that have an adult education, job skills training, or employment component, including WIOA, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF), Transitional Employment Program (TEP), and adult charter schools utilize a career pathways framework.
- As a key starting point in creating a career pathways system, and guided by the work of the Adult Career Pathways Task Force, incorporate a career pathways framework into the WIOA state plan. In accordance with WIOA section (101)(d)(1), the mayor should designate the WIC to design and facilitate a collaborative planning process with partnership agencies for the development of the unified state plan. Meaningful shared

planning should be used to address a common set of goals and performance measures spanning both federally- and locally-funded programs. Youth-serving agencies should also be engaged to ensure that the career pathways approach includes youth as well as adults.<sup>4</sup>

- Set a particular goal that all adult learners enrolled in an educational or workforce training program (those without a high school diploma or equivalent and/or basic or below basic literacy skills) have access to a career pathway by 2020. Ensure that on-ramps for individuals with other common barriers (e.g., a criminal

record, limited work experience) are well-articulated as well.

- Commit appropriate budget and staffing resources to implement the strategic plan developed by the Task Force. Include funding in the FY16 budget for The Career Pathways Innovation Fund to help plan, pilot and scale up programs and practices that the Task Force determines are necessary to build out specific career pathways in key industry sectors. This fund should be administered by the WIC with direction from the Task Force.
- As recommended in a recent report by DC Appleseed, provide the

“additional support...necessary to help lower-level learners successfully advance in career pathways. Learners with skills below the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level may need to build their basic skills in order to advance in career pathways models. Programs for lower-level learners should ensure that students get the foundational skills necessary to advance in career pathways, and that learners are connected to career pathways as they master lower-level skills.”<sup>5</sup>

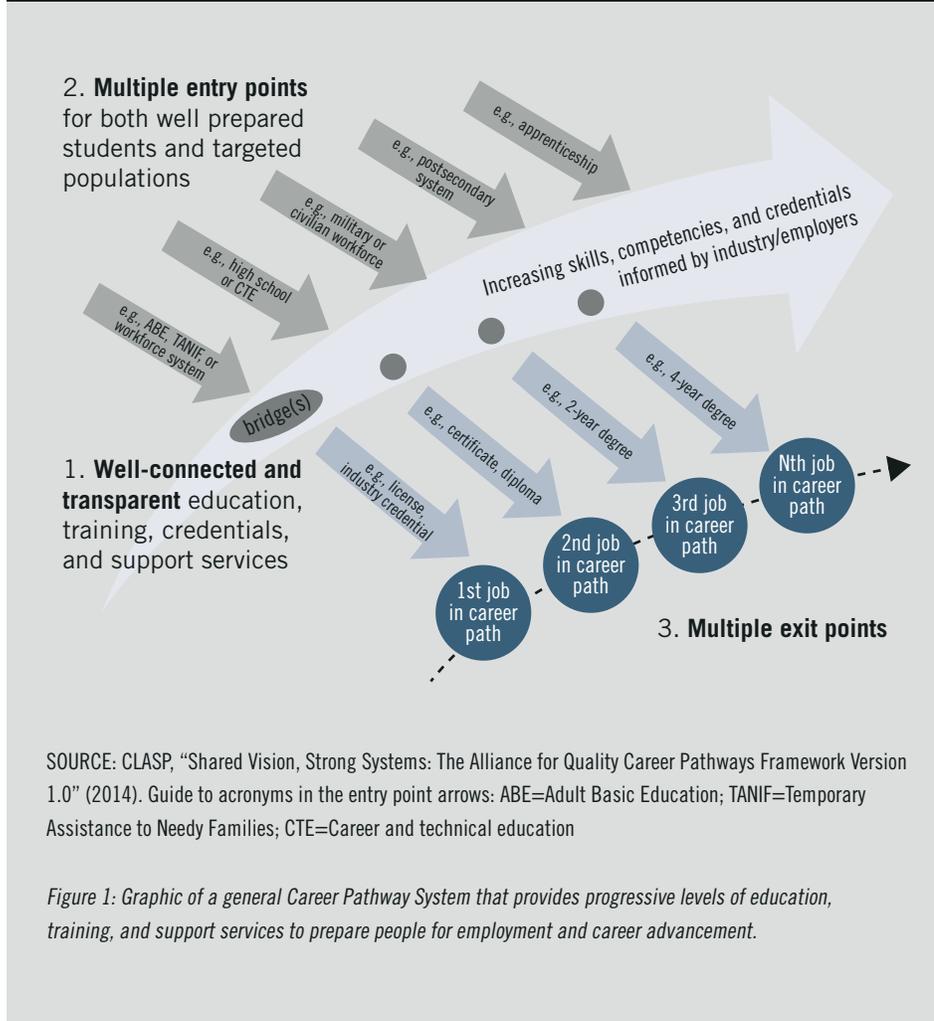
### Lead a Culture of Accountability and Performance

The Workforce Investment Implementation Act of 2014, passed by the DC Council last year, clarified the formal responsibilities of the Workforce Investment Council.<sup>6</sup> With a stronger and more effective WIC in place, there is an opportunity to move beyond simple compliance with federal requirements and focus on a strategic approach to meeting employment goals for the District. Such a strategic approach should look at how workforce and related systems can be leveraged and structured to make significant strides toward realizing economic opportunity for all District residents.

A key ingredient for success will be to create a culture of quality, performance, and accountability, where:

- The District establishes goals, tracks performance, and reports outcomes for every career pathways program (preferably in a common format across programs);
- Resources are driven towards high-performing, evidence-based or promising programs;

**FIGURE 1. ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF A CAREER PATHWAYS SYSTEM**



- Programs and agencies gain a better understanding of the needs of residents and the services they are seeking/using, and of the needs of employers;
- Agencies identify and document the most promising practices for District residents so they can be scaled up and/or replicated;
- Programs are held accountable for creating and implementing intentional handoffs to the next step along the career pathway; and
- Jobseekers and other stakeholders are able to easily identify and navigate training/education options.

The District must be able to measure its successes and analyze any shortfalls in order to continuously improve. It will be essential to put data systems and accountability mechanisms in place to support the career pathways system. That will involve gathering consistent and comparable data across systems. The District will need to fully utilize existing data and build new data capacity. In addition, strong leadership from the Mayor, the Council, DOES, and the WIC will be necessary to provide the incentive to set and sustain high expectations around performance and accountability. The Council's oversight and budget authority will be critical, as will its ongoing support for data-driven decisions at every level of government.

### Recommendations

- All publically funded workforce and adult education programs should adopt the WIOA performance measures and publish an annual

system-wide report card on performance. (Example: Washington State.) CapStat should incorporate these measures into its assessment of the District's workforce and economic development performance.

- Create a single, integrated database on workforce program customers for all workforce/adult education programs. The database would include information on client assessment, referrals, program usage, and transitions among individual programs. (Example: Chicago's Integrated Workforce Information System.) OSSE and DOES are currently developing a "Data Vault" that bridges data systems used by various District agencies and has interface capability with the Statewide Longitudinal Education Data System (SLED—an educational data repository operated by OSSE) that could achieve this vision if implemented well. This should be encouraged and supported.
- Create more transparency for customers regarding training program options and performance via an online database. Currently, OSSE maintains the Learn DC web portal that includes information on local educational options, with the potential for expansion to include additional training providers and options. An expanded Learn DC site could fit this goal if implemented well. (Example: Maryland's State List of Occupational Training Programs.)
- As highlighted in the recent Brookings Institution report, *Improving Youth Programs and Outcomes in Washington, DC.*, evaluation and

technical assistance should be better supported, both by building the WIC's own capacity to support formative evaluation of programming, and by funding workforce and education providers to address capacity building, data management, and performance management, starting with The Career Pathways Innovation Fund.<sup>7</sup>

### WIC Leads Coordination

In recent years, the WIC has been revived through the efforts of a more engaged and expert membership and staff. The next step is to fully empower the WIC to lead and coordinate the City's strategic vision for its workforce development system, including input into budgeting and funding levels. The WIC is vested with new responsibilities under WIOA, charging the members and staff with increasing opportunities that will push government to work collaboratively to serve both businesses and jobseekers. In conjunction with WIOA implementation, the Mayor and Council should reinforce and strengthen the WIC's federally mandated role in coordinating the District's workforce development system.

Through the new legislation, the WIC will continue to serve as both the state and local workforce investment board, making the members of the board and the staff of the WIC subject matter experts responsible for advising the Mayor on the implementation and effectiveness of the District's workforce programs. The relationship between the board's private industry members, labor community, nonprofit community, and government officials is a critical component that will lead to the success of the system and can be used as a model throughout the District

Government. WIOA clearly articulates the WIC's responsibility as a convener and collaborator, charged with hosting community conversations to better align workforce resources and better understand the complexity of District and regional labor markets. The engagement of employers on a regular basis is a valuable asset that can lead to expanded job opportunities for District residents.

## Recommendations

Assign to the WIC the roles and functions that have been suggested for the Workforce Opportunity Advisor, including:

- Providing strategy and oversight on the District's Career Pathways system. Building on the Adult Career Pathways Taskforce, the WIC can serve a District-wide coordinating function for agencies that contribute to the workforce system;
- Ensuring the District's compliance with WIOA and other relevant federal and local legislation; and,
- Providing recommendations to the Mayor on actions that would improve effectiveness of the workforce development system and its impact on low-skilled and unemployed District residents.

Additionally, we recommend elevating the GS level of the WIC Director to reflect the seniority and significance of the position.

## Conclusion

The District is at a crossroads. There are enough elements in place to move our workforce development system to the next level, but doing so will require

strong leadership from Mayor and Council to both retain the gains we've made and to take us forward.

Now is the time to capitalize on the opportunities before us and create a career-pathways-driven system that meets the needs of all District residents and allows them to achieve genuine economic security. Establishing a strong culture of performance and accountability, and ensuring continued strong leadership capacity at the WIC are essential ingredients for success.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>*Education Pays 2013: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society*. S. Baum, J. Ma, K. Payea, The College Board, 2013. <http://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/education-pays-2013-full-report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>*Career Pathways Explained*, CLASP, Center for Post-Secondary Education and Economic Success. <http://www.clasp.org/issues/postsecondary/pages/career-pathways-explained>

<sup>3</sup>*Establishment Order—Adult Career Pathways Task Force*. <http://dcregs.dc.gov/Gateway/NoticeHome.aspx?noticeid=5161096>

<sup>4</sup>The National Skills Coalition has developed a playbook for creating effective state plans under WIOA, and can be used as a template for this work locally. <http://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/2014-11-NSC-WIOA-state-report.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>*From Basic Skills to Good Jobs: A Strategy for Connecting D.C.'s Adult Learners to Career Pathways*, Brooke DeRenzis, DC Appleseed. <http://www.dcappleseed.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/From-Basic-Skills-to-Good-Jobs-April-2014.pdf>

<sup>6</sup>*Workforce Investment Implementation Amendment Act of 2014*. <http://lims.dcccouncil.us/Download/31562/B20-0773-Introduction.pdf>

<sup>7</sup>*Improving Youth Programs and Outcomes in Washington, D.C.*, Martha Ross & Mala Thakur. [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2014/12/10%20pepnet/bmpp\\_pepnet\\_dec5.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2014/12/10%20pepnet/bmpp_pepnet_dec5.pdf)