Wider Opportunities for Women

The Workforce Investment Act: Suggested Improvements For Reauthorization

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Set ambitious earnings goals for WIA customers.

Adopt economic self-sufficiency as a purpose of the WIA program. Increasing WIA participants' economic self-sufficiency should become a prominent purpose of the Workforce Investment Act, equal to the goal of training workers to meet the needs of local businesses. Legislation should define self-sufficiency as the minimum income needs of families, by family size, the number and ages of children in the family and sub-state geographical considerations such as the local costs of basic necessities as health and child care, housing and transportation. The calculation and updating of Self-Sufficiency Standards should be a permissible use of WIA funds.

Counsel WIA customers about career paths leading to self-sufficiency. Integrate the Self-Sufficiency Standard into an on-line calculator that enables One-Stop caseworkers, customers and the public to determine what a self-sufficient income is for a particular family and what local jobs and training sources can lead to family-sustaining career pathways.

Counsel customers about nontraditional occupations. Women can increase their income by up to 30% by pursuing many traditionally male occupations in high-growth industries such as construction, information technology and advanced manufacturing. Similarly, many males can improve their income if they pursue a career as a registered nurse. Female WIA customers in particular would benefit from case management and services tailored to careers in occupations where they currently are less than 25% of the workforce.

Encourage sector strategies leading to self-sufficiency level wages. Sector partnerships have proven an effective way to focus on high-wage, high-demand industries where workforce agencies, employers, community colleges, labor unions and training providers collaborate to enable participants to develop the knowledge and skills they need to move from entry level to higher level jobs.

Require outreach to low-income individuals and others with particular barriers to employment.

Prioritize services for low-income individuals and TANF recipients. Current law requires such priority, but only when funds are "limited," and it does not say how this is to be carried out. Because the number of low-income participants has declined since 1998, the new law, like the Recovery Act, should explicitly target these low-income participants

Require workforce plans to describe how they will address the needs of specific "hard-to-serve" participants. The current law's emphasis on average earnings outcomes for all participants, is a disincentive to serve groups whose earnings prospects are lower because they can only work part-time or face other employment barriers. These populations include older workers, single parents, “displaced homemakers” and those seeking nontraditional employment.

Provide supports needed by low income and special populations with employment barriers. Congress should follow the Recovery Act’s precedent of targeting funds to low-income individuals and recipients of public assistance and encouraging the use of formula grant funds for needs-based payments, supportive services such as child care and transportation and the development of programs offered on nontraditional schedules.

Emphasize intensive skill development.

Eliminate the “sequence of services.” The sequence of services written into current law strands many customers in “core” information and referral or middle tier “intensive” services like career counseling. Many never reach the point of learning basic literacy or new job skills. Initial One-stop orientation should give participants the choice of entering education and training immediately or at the same time they are receiving other services.

Increase WIA’s overall authorization level and set-aside a portion of funds for actual job training. Funding for workforce development has declined by roughly 75 percent since the early 1980s. This trend must be reversed if we are to address our nation’s skills shortage. Local workforce agencies should be required to stops to spend at least aside 50 percent of their funding for actual job training. Costs associated with helping individuals to participate in skill building activities, including the provision of supportive services and needs-related payments, should count towards the 50 percent.

Accountability. Align performance and accountability provisions with those in the Carl T. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006, including the completion of programs leading to degrees, industry-recognized certification and careers leading to self-sufficiency. All data should be disaggregated by race, gender, age and ethnicity and by membership in hard-to-serve special population groups.