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POLICY BRIEF

One Door: Real-World Integration Between Safety Net and Workforce Systems

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QUICK LOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

Audits. Performance audits are an important tool for lawmakers to understand the status of their workforce development systems.

State Taskforce. Governors or lawmakers should establish a taskforce for the purpose of laying out a plan to consolidate safety-net programs with workforce development programs.

State Program Consolidation. State lawmakers should make the experience of low-income people easier by streamlining government programs.

Federal Option to Fully Integrate Safety Net and Workforce Departments. The next WIOA reauthorization bill should allow a state to fully integrate welfare and workforce services within a single state agency, consolidating administrative structures and program offerings.

Performance Transparency and Accountability. Congress should require complete transparency of performance measures, including those used to measure how each One-Stop center performs on an objective level as compared to other One-Stop centers nationally and how individual training providers compare to other training providers.

Introduction

There's a difference between surviving and thriving. Too many low-income Americans just survive. The reality is that U.S. safety nets are not set up for Americans in poverty to achieve self-sufficiency and thrive.

To address the underlying causes of long-term poverty, it's essential that public policymakers realign our fundamental safety-net programs to better connect people to work. Right now, when someone turns to one or more safety nets, they remain disconnected from effective workforce support. If we want our work-capable neighbors to move off the sidelines, the pathways to work must be clear and effective.

States are facing a work crisis. The U.S. recently had 9.6 million open jobs.[1] During the COVID-19 recession, the workforce participation rate plummeted. In real terms, there are millions more people on the sidelines than before the pandemic.[2] And yet, state public workforce systems are not prepared and have not responded to the millions of Americans out of the workforce.

There's a better way. States can begin by auditing their current programs, appointing a taskforce to design a specific, comprehensive state plan, and then implementing the plan to streamline both safety net and workforce processes. Congress also needs to unleash state flexibility. This will require a federal option for states to co-locate welfare and workforce services in one state agency and consolidate federal administrative procedures. Finally, Congress must require complete and accurate transparency of performance measures across all postsecondary workforce and training programs.

Why Work Matters

Work has plummeted among low-income men and welfare-dependent women. A quarter of single mothers left or lost their job during the pandemic, and their employment has recovered more slowly than that of other demographic groups.[3] In addition, over six million prime-age men were neither working nor looking for work. Why does that matter? Particularly when Covid-era policies suspended the limited work requirements and safety-net benefits increased, many low-income families know that work is not expected.[4]

If safety-net programs do not ensure that these families are reconnected to employment, they will trap these low-income Americans in long-term poverty. Before the 1996 welfare reform law, after decades of no-strings-attached payments, nearly 9 in 10 families on welfare were jobless. About 90% of these families were led by a single mother, and one in seven children nationwide lived in families dependent on cash benefits. Most were stuck in long-term poverty, dependent on meager benefits for over 8 years. [5]

When the landmark 1996 federal welfare reform bill connected welfare to work, overall well-being improved. Government dependence declined for the first time in a half-century.[6] Employment of never-married mothers with a high school degree or less rose from 51 percent in 1992 to 76 percent within eight years.[7] Child poverty, which had been static for decades, fell sharply by almost 10 percentage points, and the poverty rate among single-parent families dropped by nearly 60 percent.[8]

When low-income families have at least one working parent, the positive impacts go beyond economic outcomes.[9] When unemployment lasts more than six months, it is also associated with decreased well-being, even measurably affecting mortality, reducing life expectancy by as much as a year and a half.[10] When mothers who were formerly dependent on welfare find employment, we see increased physical health as well as emotional and psychological wellbeing.[11] There are even better health and behavioral outcomes for their children.[12]

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: Background and Why We Need Reforms

It's essential that every work-capable individual in a safety-net program participate in effective employment and training programs. Unfortunately, today that is not the case.

The federal government spends more than $18.9 billion annually on all employment and training programs intended to help people who have fallen on hard times get back into the workforce.[13] WIOA is one of the few forms of federal assistance for short-term training and education. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) is the largest federal expenditure on short-term education and training services, more than $10 billion annually. WIOA funds about $500 million in employment and training vouchers annually.[14]

WIOA authorizes various education and training services intended to assist individuals as they prepare to reenter the workforce, ideally to find jobs with higher earnings. These programs include job search assistance, career counseling, occupational skill training, classroom training, and on-the-job training.

Each federally designated local workforce investment area in a state is required to have at least one physical comprehensive "One-Stop center." For an individual to access a WIOA voucher to participate in training, they must visit a one-stop center for a counselor to assess whether they meet the criteria.[15] There are nearly 3,000 federally designated One-Stop centers across the nation that operate WIOA programs.

WIOA has five main titles: [16]

- Title I serves youth and adult & dislocated workers through three state-formula grant programs, multiple national programs, and Job Corps.
- Title II relates to adult education and literacy, taking the form of a state formula grant program and National Leadership activities.
- Title III adds Employment Services, including career assessment, career counseling, development of an individual service plan, and intensive job search assistance.
- Title IV offers vocational rehabilitation services for individuals with disabilities.
- Title V governs how WIOA is administered.

In 2014, Congress replaced the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) because of the lack of coordination of employment and training programs highlighted in a 2011 Government Accountability Office report.[17] It was most recently extended through FY2021 by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021.[18] However, workforce programs still are not effectively serving people in need. In a 2019 report on the overall effectiveness of these government training programs, the White House Council of Economic Advisers concluded that "government job-training programs appear to be largely ineffective and fail to produce sufficient benefits for workers to justify the costs."[19]

Non-Coordination between Safety Net and Employment Programs

Despite the 2014 reforms, there remains a major divide between state welfare agencies and workforce capabilities. WIOA sends funds directly to federally designated local workforce boards, bypassing state legislatures that administer safety-net programs like Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) also known as food stamps, and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (TANF). This funding model does not serve low-income Americans well because safety-net and workforce systems are disconnected.

More than 80 federal safety-net programs exist today.[20] However, these programs are rarely coordinated at a level where people need to access them, and local workforce programs are rarely coordinated with state-level systems. To access both safety-net and workforce services, potential recipients are required to go on a goose chase. Every hour a safety-net recipient spends finding their way through the system is an hour they can't spend finding their way out of it.

It is prohibitively difficult for low-income beneficiaries to know where to get specific workforce services. A recent Harvard report concluded that beneficiaries face a "highly fragmented system, where strong programs are not differentiated from weak ones."[21] If they do find the right office, they often must resubmit the same information yet again. Even then, respective eligibility rules typically differ. They may (and often do) end up with multiple plans and multiple caseworkers.

To successfully integrate safety-net and workforce programs requires three essential elements. The first is state agency/department consolidation. The second is "single-state integration." Finally, the third key element to this discussion is cost allocation.

State Agency/DepartmentConsolidation

States currently can reorganize their state safety-net and workforce agencies that serve the same beneficiaries into a single, coordinated agency or department. This will streamline the experience for their customers and make the disjointed system appear more seamless to them. Currently, this requires a hybrid approach that does not require federal WIOA approval where the state must pursue a memorandum of understanding agreement with each of the federally designated local workforce boards in the state for any change.

There are two primary ways states can accomplish this goal. One option is that states can merge their health and human services departments with their workforce departments into a single state agency. The other option is through interagency agreements to coordinate employment and training services with safety-net programs among their human services and workforce service departments. However, with either of these options, almost all states must simultaneously coordinate with the federally designated local workforce development boards, which control many workforce services.

Single State Local Area Designation

Nearly 60% of total WIOA funding for youth, adults, and dislocated workers bypasses the state and are sent directly to the federally designated local workforce development boards, also called "one stop centers." This creates an administrative separation between state-run safety net programs and the workforce services that serve the same beneficiaries.

While WIOA requires "one stop" in each community, there is a difference between co-location vs. real-world integration. Unless an employment and training program (such as SNAP Employment and Training or TANF) is operated by the state's designated human services agency , there is little to no reporting on whether the beneficiary participated in the programming after referring the beneficiary to a separate workforce program, much less whether certain outcomes were achieved (e.g. type of job obtained, length of employment, higher earnings).

To coordinate with local workforce development boards, the single state local area designation is the best option. This allows a state to deliver coordinated services better by designating and overseeing local one-stop delivery centers rather than the disjointed patchwork of federally designated "local workforce boards."

Any state currently not operating under a single state local area designation cannot become one under current federal law. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA), prohibits the Secretary of Labor from waiving requirements related to the funding to local areas.[22] Under both WIA and WIOA, there is a grandfathering provision that permits states to have a single state local area designation only if they already had one prior to passage of the acts.[23] In fact, the Department of Labor (DOL) has ruled as such, that states that did not have single-state status as of 2013, as determined by the grandfathering provision, cannot be redesignated as a single-state local area.[24] States that have applied for single-state designation have been denied. For instance, Maine was denied in 2017.[25]

Simple Cost Allocation Model

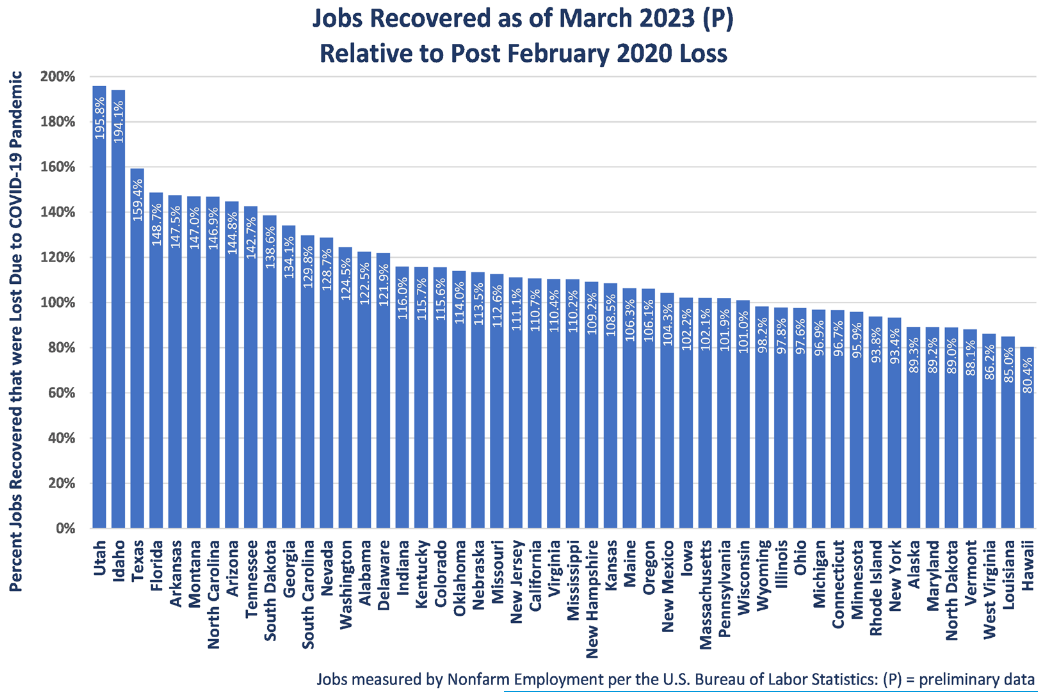
A third element to this discussion is cost allocation. Cost allocation is the process of identifying, aggregating, and assigning state or local expenses by program to the respective federal agency reimbursing benefits and administrative expenses. Currently, WIOA cost allocation is done mainly through a patchwork of Memorandums of Understandings (MOUs). Each federal agency is engaged with local workforce boards or the state to oversee their respective portion of cost allocation.

Besides Utah, which has a single cost allocation model, states are stuck with multiple cost allocation models for each federal program. This means that each program administrator is required to submit its own data to the respective federal agency for reimbursement, generally requiring individual caseworkers for every program. Even in states that have pursued state integration, like Texas, they have a highly devolved model, where local area cost is based upon local MOU allocation negotiations.

Utah's Unique WIOA Model

Of all the states, Utah limited its job loss and had the quickest job recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Chart 1 shows the percentage of jobs recovered that were lost at the onset of the pandemic in February 2020 using data for March 2023. Utah leads all other states, which it has done for almost every month since the pandemic. For every one job lost, Utah has gained two. Meanwhile, fifteen states still have not recovered all of their lost jobs. According to one study, Utah did well with its job recovery because it adopted less severe shutdown policies during the pandemic.[26] However, Utah is doing so well compared with other states that there must be more to the story.

Utah is the only state with fully integrated federal and state funds for both human services and workforce services.[27] During the 1990s, Utah successfully merged human services with workforce services to create better coordination. Utah began with a legislative audit of the state's 23 workforce programs that were operated out of six different state agencies. The 1992 audit unearthed a fragmented system with "duplication of bureaucracy," which made it difficult for low-income Utahns, particularly those with significant challenges, to access services.[28]



Source: Georgia Center For Opportunity

In 1994, Utah Governor Mike Leavitt followed the report's chief recommendation and established a strategic planning commission taskforce to analyze the conflicting rules and eligibility standards, and to propose a set of principles to integrate and coordinate the workforce programs to serve Utah recipients.[29]

Finally, in 1995 Utah consolidated 36 programs across five agencies in House Bill 375. At the same time, Utah received approval for a unique cost-allocation model that permitted Utah to integrate federal and state funds for these services.[30] This consolidation continued and today Utah's Department of Workforce Services (DWS) has more than 50 federal funding sources. Utah's structure was specifically grandfathered in both the 1998 WIA and continued in the 2014 reauthorization.[31]

The Utah Department of Workforce Services integrated programs so that recipients access services through "one door," in other words a single point-of-access, with one caseworker. Utah implements a true work-first approach: human services are treated as services supporting the attainment of work. They start with every case by assessing their total needs, both immediate (i.e. housing, cash assistance, food assistance, health care assistance, etc.) and long-term (i.e. workforce training, substance abuse treatment, etc.). The caseworker and recipient develop a plan of action together that can use more than 50 federal sources braided together in one package to meet the recipient's unique situation.

Utah can provide this streamlined and customized service because of two significant exceptions to WIOA. First, Utah has a single-state local area designation. This allows them to create one-stop centers in every community that serve the total population. They have brick and mortar locations in each of their 29 counties for the customers who need physical access, but they also use technological pathways to connect to most of their potential recipients.

Utah also has a federally approved cost-allocation plan. This may be the most important component of the Utah model and allows the state, in combination with integrated service delivery, to strategically utilize all federal resources unlike any other state. This allows their finance team to use Random Moment Time Sampling (RMTS), a statistically valid sampling method of random moments in time with random employees within a specific set of employees that accurately reflects the workload of the agency. RMTS assesses how long their caseworkers spend with each of the federal programs they operationalize for their customers. Under an arrangement with the federal government to simplify reporting requirements, the data are submitted to just one federal agency: the federal Department of Health and Human Services. All federal agencies affected by the cost allocation plan also review and approve it.

Because of Utah's cost allocation plan, caseworkers are able to focus on the needs of the individual or family before them, holistically respond to their immediate needs, and develop a long-term plan with them to find self-sufficiency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

State Reforms

1. **Audits.** Performance audits are an important tool for lawmakers to understand the status of their workforce development systems. In this regard, state legislatures can require independent performance audits of all their local workforce boards and eligible training providers. These audits should evaluate local board and training provider's performance outcomes, including job placement and wages, but also how effectively the local workforce board is integrated into the local safety-net office. The audit should evaluate whether the state's online lists of eligible training providers are easy to navigate and assess—or "poorly-designed, infrequently updated, and hard to use" as a Harvard report recently warned.[32] Finally, state lawmakers should evaluate the one-stop center's physical location and consider the efficiency of these facilities when technological options may serve more recipients. These audits should include alternate proposals, including cost and saving estimates.

   Examples
   - As explained above, Utah's workforce integration began with a legislative audit of the state's 23 workforce programs that were operated out of six different state agencies. The 1992 audit unearthed a fragmented system with "duplication of bureaucracy," which made it difficult for low-income Utahns, particularly those with significant challenges, to access services.[33]
   - A 2021 Vermont audit found that the state's programs weren't serving the population that needs them the most.[34] Most concerningly, it found that many participants ended up unemployed or actually had lower earnings after the workforce training than before they started.
   - There were worse results in Florida. A 2018 Tampa Bay Times investigation found that local workforce boards had significantly misreported on their measures and "local offices took credit for finding jobs for thousands of people who never sought help."[35] A 2021 Labor Department Employment and Training Administration compliance review confirmed the Florida findings.[36] In response, Florida passed House Bill 1507 and House Bill 1505 in April 2021, overhauling Florida's workforce system.[37]
   - In 2023, the Louisiana House passed a resolution directing their legislative auditor to perform an audit or evaluation of assistance programs to identify areas for improved coordination of efforts.[38]

2. **State Taskforce.** Governors or lawmakers should establish a taskforce for the purpose of laying out a plan to consolidate safety-net programs with workforce development programs. The members of the taskforce should be highly respected and prominent individuals with the power to compel agencies to provide all the information and details necessary to successfully develop a plan to streamline and consolidate the programs into a single department. The taskforce should have a deadline to deliver its report to the Governor and the legislature ahead of the next regularly scheduled legislative session.

   Examples
   - A key part of Utah's reform was a taskforce. Following their initial audit, Utah Governor Mike Leavitt established a strategic planning commission taskforce to analyze the conflicting rules and eligibility standards, and to propose a set of principles to integrate and coordinate the workforce programs to serve Utah customers.[39]

- When North Carolina expanded Medicaid eligibility in 2023, Part II of that legislation, HB 76, directed the Secretary of the Department of Commerce to develop a plan to create a seamless, statewide, comprehensive workforce development program.[40] It's unfortunate that this plan was attached to the larger bill because Medicaid expansion will inevitably add more work-capable adults to Medicaid and may incentivize more individuals to remain unemployed or underemployed.

- At the time of publication, the Texas Senate has passed and a House committee has approved SB 2315, related to the creation of a taskforce to develop a plan to consolidate workforce development and human service programs.[41] Georgia also introduced but faile to pass HB 738, which also would create a "One Door" Taskforce.[42] Because Georgia has a biennial legislative session, this bill can be considered next session in 2024.

3. **State Program Consolidation.** State lawmakers should make the experience of low-income people easier by streamlining government programs. Either the governor's office or the state legislature can move all similarly directed programs into a single department. This will allow said department to coordinate eligibility systems of all programs under the state's control. This creates a single portal to handle all human services and workforce development services that is coordinated behind the scenes to present constituents an integrated service delivery.

From an administrative viewpoint, this will streamline program waste, reduce duplication, conflicts, and costs--ultimately saving tax dollars. But more importantly, this will ensure that every individual turning to the state's safety-net system starts by laying out a pathway to self-sufficiency.

As noted above, a fully integrated workforce system does require single-state designation and an approved cost-allocation model.

Examples

- Florida operates a hybrid employment and training (E&T) approach that does not require federal WIOA approval. Through an interagency agreement, Florida coordinates their employment and training program between the Department of Human Services and Department of Workforce Services. In its state E&T plan, it summarizes their integration as follows: "The Department of Children and Families is the agency responsible for administering the SNAP E&T program. DCF and [the Department of Economic Opportunity] entered a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and as part of that agreement, DCF continues to identify Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents (ABAWDs) and refers these individuals to DEO for mandatory participation in the SNAP E&T program. The delivery of E&T services is provided by the Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs) network."[43]

- Texas houses its E&T program in their Health and Human Services Commission but provides services through the Texas Workforce Commission and its network of local workforce boards.[44] Though it was disrupted by COVID-19, Texas ran a pilot program to assign SNAP work registrants to the E&T program in certain regions of the state, making E&T mandatory in those areas.[45]
- Georgia created the Georgia Gateway, a web portal for accessing certain safety-net benefits, to consolidate eligibility systems for SNAP; Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food packages; medical assistance (Medic-

aid, PeachCare, or Planning for Healthy Babies); subsidized child care services; and TANF. The state Department of Community Health, Human Services, Early Care and Learning, and Department of Public Health coordinated to create the system.[46] Although the system brings those programs into one place, it does not address conflicts or unify the eligibility rules. It also leaves out many other programs.

Federal Reforms

4. **Federal Option to Fully Integrate Safety Net and Workforce Departments.** The next WIOA reauthorization bill should allow a state to fully integrate welfare and workforce services within a single state agency, consolidating administrative structures and program offerings.[47] Even the Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration's 2018 budget proposed Congress give DOL the authority to grant waivers for single-state consolidation.[48]

   Examples
   In 2017, Maine Governor Paul LePage requested that the Department of Labor approve a waiver to combine his state's three workforce development boards serving different geographical locations into one statewide board with a single-state local area designation. The Department of Labor rejected the waiver request.

   In 2019, Governor Kim Reynolds's administration consolidated the Iowa's 99 counties from 15 regional workforce boards into six.[49]

5. **Performance Transparency and Accountability.** While WIOA's Title I defines a performance accountability system based on primary indicators, like employment after completion of the program and income, but there are also state-adjusted levels of performance resulting from negotiations between each state and the Secretary of Labor. These negotiations and subsequent adjustments are not transparent.

   Congress should require complete transparency of performance measures, including those used to measure how each One-Stop center performs on an objective level as compared to other One-Stop centers nationally and how individual training providers compare to other training providers. Congress should also develop a set of performance measures that evaluate the effectiveness of post-secondary programs that serve similar populations. For instance, anyone should be able to compare the outcome and cost effectiveness of the WIOA program to community college degrees and/or apprenticeship programs.

Conclusion

There is still much work to do to improve safety-net programs and the workforce development system to help low-income individuals and families to thrive, rather than just survive. The important next step is to integrate those systems to help individuals and families climb up the economic ladder. Work is an important component that has both financial and non-financial benefits, which is why the integration of safety net programs and workforce development programs is crucial.

Fortunately, Utah has developed a model that points to a One-Door model. Governors and state legislatures can take steps now to consolidate and streamline services. Congress can also play a role by allowing all states to fully integrate those programs to best meet their needs.

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