HOW CAN INVESTMENTS IN WORKFORCE TRAINING MEANINGFULLY ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF IMMIGRANT WORKERS?

Report Back and Lessons from Southern CA Convening and Day Labor Worker Survey
INTRODUCTION

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the unemployment rate in California was at an all-time low, yet working Californians know that this is only part of the state’s economic story. In fact, between 2006 and 2017, the median hourly wages for workers ages 25 to 64 actually declined by 0.5%, despite the rising cost of living for families and individuals across the state. Many of Southern California’s working people, including parents, caregivers, and financial providers, are working without a family-sustaining wage and are struggling to access job opportunities that provide more than $500 a month. This economic inequity is the devastating reality for many day labor workers throughout Los Angeles, Riverside, Rancho Cucamonga, and Pomona. Without equal growth in wages and workforce training for low-wage workers, including day laborers and undocumented immigrants, California risks leaving out many of the residents that further our state’s economic prosperity.1

The California Workforce Development Board (CWDB) recognizes that “there is a hidden cost to low-wage work that is ultimately borne by communities, particularly communities of color and immigrant populations.”2 In response, the State Board (CWDB) works with regional workforce development partners and employers to provide training and education opportunities that are supposed to lead to increased wages and better jobs for workers in California. But what the workforce development system fails to recognize is that undocumented workers, who represent one in ten workers in California, are both excluded from the majority of workforce training programs and disproportionately subject to poor working conditions and unlivable wages. How can investments in workforce training and education meaningfully address the realities and needs of immigrant workers? How can California ensure that all workers, including immigrant workers, can access and benefit from our state’s workforce development system?

To better understand what immigrant workers face and need with respect to workforce development and adult education, the California Immigrant Policy Center (CIPC) collaborated with the Pomona Economic Opportunity Center (PEOC), Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA), the Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California (IDEPSCA), and the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) to develop a survey for 75-day labor workers in Southern California. We also held a convening for 30 representatives from community organizations and their members from the greater Los Angeles area and San Diego who met to share ideas for strengthening the workforce development and adult education systems for immigrant and refugee communities and low-wage workers. From the survey respondents and convening participants, we learned:

- Immigrant, day labor, and low-wage workers face a variety of significant challenges in accessing job training and adult education programs and services.

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Some of these challenges include inflexible scheduling, location, and transportation barriers, childcare needs, and ineligibility due to immigration status.

- **People who work as day laborers want workforce training and adult education that is accessible, culturally competent, and holistic.** Eighty-one percent of survey respondents believe that training and education would help them secure jobs and/or advance in their career.

- **Workers that complete job trainings can fulfill a necessary system-navigator role for those struggling to access and utilize the workforce development system.** In fact, many day labor workers, day labor worker centers, and community-based organizations have a significant interest in creating and expanding navigator initiatives that uplift directly impacted workers as expert navigators.

- **An “immigrant integration” framework creates gaps in understanding the barriers to, and outcomes of, workforce training and education.** The convening participants called for a new, more immigrant-empowering model that values the current skill sets of immigrant, day labor, and low-wage workers, who often have a wealth of experience and knowledge from abroad. In practice, the “immigrant integration” model prioritizes job placement over more robust benchmarks (such as worker satisfaction and retention) to evaluate our workforce development and adult education systems.

This report discusses the key takeaways from the day labor worker survey and workforce development convening in greater detail and highlights how community-based organizations have the frontline expertise and wraparound structure necessary to lead the workforce development system to a more promising future for workers.

**Key Survey Findings: Recognizing the Unique Needs and Challenges of Day Laborers**

The survey findings produce a more complete picture of how immigrant and low-wage workers interact with the workforce development system, and how community-based organizations, although under-resourced, take on a necessary role to support immigrant and low-wage workers to navigate and access job training opportunities.

**Immigrant workers in the day labor industry want job training and education opportunities.** Respondents reported being most interested in language skills and in having training opportunities available at day labor and worker centers, rather than having to commute to a job center.

- The survey respondents are some of the most excluded when it comes to job opportunities. Over half reported making less than $10,000 a year, and were unemployed when seeking resources at their respective day labor center. [See Fig. 1] With a limited income to survive on, and a clear need to secure stable employment, day labor workers expressed a need for training opportunities that provide a sufficient stipend, collaborate with their day labor centers, create pipelines to long-term employment, and result in family-sustaining wages.
Of the workers surveyed, 81% believe that training and education would help them obtain employment or advance professionally. It is clear that workers want to be able to learn new skills and improve their current skills. [See Fig. 2]

English language training was the top choice for enrollment if given the opportunity. However, other training needs included: construction/carpentry, electrical skills, technology, plumbing, hospitality, painting, solar, nutrition, and public speaking, among others. [See Fig. 3]
When asked what change with respect to access to jobs and training opportunities they would like to see, some workers said they would benefit from having job training at the day labor centers themselves, which would allow them to seek employment opportunities while enhancing their skills. Additionally, this would help with issues of commuting and accessing reliable and affordable transportation to job training sites.

Immigrant day labor workers face many barriers when trying to access, complete and benefit from workforce training and education. Survey respondents reported a variety of challenges to accessing workforce training:

- Over one-fourth of those surveyed reported no job training or workforce development programs in or near their neighborhoods.
- Twenty one percent reported scheduling was a barrier to accessing job and skills training. [See Fig. 4]
- Another 21% reported that their ineligibility as a result of immigration status was the most significant barrier to receiving workforce training and job training services. [See Fig. 4]
- Other major challenges included language access issues, lack of childcare or transportation services, inability to meet the eligibility or completion requirements, the absence of culturally competent instructors and classes, and the overall cost of attending these programs, especially when it takes the place of earning a day’s wage.
Findings from the Southern California Workforce Development Convening: Empowering and Investing in Community-Based Organizations to Expand Access for all Immigrant and Refugee Communities

On September 13, 2019, CIPC convened over 30 organizational representatives and their members in Los Angeles to better understand the unique challenges and opportunities that community-based organizations face when engaging with the workforce development system. Through our discussions, community-based organizations shared many unique assets that could be leveraged, yet they face significant barriers to helping make the workforce development system stronger.

Unique expertise and assets of community-based organizations:

- Both workers, community members, and organizational program staff recognize that community-based organizations are optimal sites for workforce training and adult education, given that they already provide tailored services for community members with specific barriers and needs, including a wealth of job training and workforce services.

- Community-based organizations and service providers often have strong wrap-around structures that allow them to respond to shifting demographics, realities, and needs of the people they serve. Additionally, many of these organizations,
including convening participants, are physically located within the heart of low-income and immigrant communities, bringing services directly to the people who need them the most and are least able to access them elsewhere.

- Community-based organizations possess an extensive understanding of the communities they serve and deliver a breadth of training resources and culturally relevant curriculum that goes beyond a one-size-fits-all approach, but rather is responsive to the different skills and backgrounds of their worker-members.

- Community-based organizations innovate and implement participatory learning models that ensure instruction and services are informed by the workers they serve, in order to better meet needs, teach relevant and necessary skills, retain workers that experience barriers to program completion, and provide long-term support to ensure success within the workforce.

- As part of their wraparound models, community-based organizations improve upon programs through feedback loops that assess not only program outcomes, but participant satisfaction, in addition to analyzing outreach methods and program accessibility. This relationship provides a clearer and more informed understanding of workers’ needs and outcomes.

**Significant challenges for community-based organizations:** Convening participants identified a range of significant challenges that limit the capacity, reach, and impact of community-based organizations that serve immigrant workers.

- Currently, community-based organizations, worker centers, and day labor centers receive little, if any funding as part of the workforce development system, compared to larger service providers and agencies.

- Although California has demonstrated a commitment to creating alternative funding opportunities for community-based organizations, many have limited capacity to apply for state and local grants, given the significant time and resources required. The absence of established relationships between regional and local Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) and many local community-based organizations further hinders organizations’ ability to obtain support and funding opportunities. While the California Workforce Development Board (CWDB) and the Labor and Workforce Development Agency have invested significant time and resources to increasing community outreach and engagement, more could be done to facilitate meaningful partnerships, including a cross-referral system and community engagement in the workforce boards’ decision-making processes.

- The lack of representation on local or regional WDBs prevents community-based organizations from having an empowered voice within the workforce development system, despite providing workforce development training to workers, many of whom face significant barriers to employment.
Many of the workforce services and programs available to immigrants fall under a model of “immigrant integration.” However, this framework creates gaps in understanding the barriers to, and outcomes of, workforce training and education, and ultimately limits the spectrum of robust services to improve access to and completion of workforce development programs. The “immigrant integration” framework can undermine and undervalue the current skill sets of immigrant day laborer and low-wage workers, who often have a wealth of experience and knowledge from abroad. As a result, funding is pipelined into curricula and training programs that do not always meaningfully engage workers nor achieve skill advancement for already skilled, but under-employed and underpaid immigrant workers. The “immigrant integration” framework in its current form limits the ability for community-based organizations to create and deliver more innovative, responsive and holistic programming. Furthermore, the current model tends to prioritize job placement over more robust benchmarks (such as worker satisfaction, retention, and other metrics) to evaluate our workforce development and adult education systems. This focus misses the opportunity to track other, more holistic outcomes and narrows pathway to fully understanding and serving immigrant communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

California has the opportunity to invest in the futures of immigrant workers by investing in the core providers for immigrant communities: community-based organizations. By looking to day labor centers, worker centers, and community-based organizations as key partners and leaders in the workforce development system, California can break down barriers to job training and adult education for low-wage and immigrant workers and achieve a stronger, more innovative workforce development system. The following recommendations are based on our survey findings and convening discussions:

1. **Expand workforce development representation to include community-based organizations and strengthen community participation**

   Currently, most workforce development boards throughout the state do not have representation from community-based organizations. State and local workforce development boards could create a requirement to include community-based organizations, either through direct representation on the board or through advisory councils. In addition, the state and local boards could explore opportunities to deepen their community engagement efforts around key decisions, such as the development of local and state workforce plans.

2. **Increase flexibility for community-based organizations to provide adult education and job training to immigrants, regardless of status**

   Community-based organizations’ wraparound service models make them well positioned to provide additional adult education and job training opportunities to immigrant and low-wage workers. Greater investment in partnerships
between community-based organizations and local adult schools could create expanded opportunities to provide more holistic and flexible services to immigrant and refugee communities.

3. Ensure grant initiatives like the Breaking Barriers to Employment Initiative (AB 1111) and the proposed Social Entrepreneurs for Economic Development (“SEED”) Initiative directly fund community-based organizations in areas with sizeable immigrant, undocumented, and ELL populations.

The development of AB 1111 funding and the newly proposed SEED Initiative are promising because they allow for flexible funding and services for immigrants regardless of status. In order to ensure that community-based organizations can participate, it is imperative that local and state agencies responsible for administering the grants conduct ample, intentional outreach, provide technical assistance, and develop relationships that can make grant opportunities accessible to under-resourced, immigrant-serving organizations.

4. Create opportunities for immigrant and low-wage workers that have completed workforce development training to be system navigators

Of survey respondents, 40% reported they had participated in a job training program in the past, and could potentially provide support to other workers looking to navigate their workforce development system. This sort of navigator-based system has been piloted as part of California’s English Language Learners (ELL) Navigator Initiative and could be expanded to create opportunities for workers who have completed job training programs themselves.

5. Shift the immigration workforce development narrative beyond “immigrant integration” to a more holistic approach that engages and empowers immigrants

For generations, immigrants have furthered the successes and innovation of California. However, California’s workforce development system has discussed the needs, experiences, and skills of immigrants through the narrative of “immigration integration,” which, rather than encompassing a holistic model of services and outcomes, has, in recent years primarily, focused on job placement. Within the workforce development and adult education system, there is a need for education and services that acknowledges the skills of immigrants and incorporates cultural competency that can tie in each person’s background, culture, experiences, and unique needs and interests to further their learning. There is also a growing, yet under-resourced, need for more flexible services and more diverse service providers to meet these various needs. By incorporating a holistic, more flexible model that engages and empowers immigrants, California can better connect immigrant communities with the resources they need and deserve.

6. Change evaluation and assessment metrics to better understand the needs of low-wage and immigrant workers and account for the successes of community-based organizations
While workforce development programs are evaluated according to key metrics that are guided by federal legislation, state and local workforce boards have an opportunity to create equity-focused evaluation tools and metrics that are more aligned with breaking down barriers to accessing and completing training and education programs. Additional metrics created in collaboration with community-based organizations will provide greater flexibility for organizations, and allow workforce boards to have a greater understanding of worker needs, barriers, and progress within the larger workforce development system.

**CONCLUSION**

We at the California Immigrant Policy Center envision a more equitable future in which the contributions of immigrant workers are valued, the shifting and growing needs of immigrant workers are addressed, and every worker, regardless of status, has the opportunity to build their skills and secure quality jobs with a family-sustaining wage. As California invests in a better future of work for all workers, our workforce development system has a critical opportunity to meaningfully address the disparities in job training, employment, and wages that disproportionately impact immigrant communities. This report provides recommendations developed in response to the realities of immigrant day labor and low-wage workers, and informed by collective dialogue with community-based organizations based in Southern California. We hope that these recommendations demonstrate the multiple opportunities to strengthen our state’s workforce development system and inspire a deeper commitment to building a better future for immigrant workers.
ABOUT CIPC

The California Immigrant Policy Center (CIPC) is a constituent-based statewide immigrant rights organization with offices in Los Angeles, Sacramento, and Oakland. It is the premier immigrant rights institution in the state that promotes and protects safety, health and public benefits and integration programs for immigrants, and one of the few organizations that effectively combines legislative and policy advocacy, strategic communications, organizing and capacity building to pursue its mission. It is powered by a staff of policy experts and advocates; a Steering Committee composed of 14 statewide organizations; 85 member organizations; and nine regional coalition partners spanning Southern and Northern California, the Central Coast and the Central Valley. CIPC advocates for policies that uphold the humanity of immigrants and refugees while advancing racial, social and economic justice.

For the past 20 years, CIPC has played a central and essential role in advancing a progressive statewide immigrant justice agenda. For the past five years, it helped pass 30 pro-immigrant laws in the state, including: The Safe and Responsible Driver Act, the TRUST Act, the One California initiative, the E-Verify Bill and the Health for All Kids among others — signature legislative accomplishments propelled by the organization’s ability to coordinate, convene, and mobilize a broad and diverse array of advocates towards a common goal.

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