FEBRUARY 2025

Jobs for the Future

Advancing California's Workforce Equity Through Population-Specific Strategies

A Framework for Program Design and Systems Change

AT A GLANCE

This framework serves as a guide for state agencies and workforce practitioners looking to support populations facing systemic barriers through actionable insights that advance equity-driven workforce strategies. It synthesizes key lessons and innovative practices from California's Equity Target Population Fund, an initiative focused on serving young people who are not working or in school, veterans, people with disabilities, and people with records of incarceration.

AUTHORS

Mara Lockowandt
Director, **JFF**

Sanjana Seth
Senior Manager, **JFF**

Sarah Hooker Bentley
Director, **JFF**

Armand Gutierrez
Research Consultant, **Engage R+D**

Jennifer Garcia
Research Consultant, **Engage R+D**

Rami Arafah
Senior Consultant, **Engage R+D**

Acknowledgments

This framework and associated technical assistance provided to the Equity Target Population Fund (ETPF) was funded by a grant award totaling $1.6 million (100%) from California's Employment Development Department (EDD), with $0 (0%) financed from nonfederal sources.[1]

We want to thank the EDD for the opportunity to provide technical assistance and develop a learning community with the ETPF grantees. In addition, we want to thank all of the representatives from each ETPF grantee site who participated in the learning community and offered their insights, as well as the program participants who took part in interviews and focus groups, all of which led to the development of this framework.

About JFF

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

About JFF's Language Choices

JFF is committed to using language that promotes equity and human dignity, rooted in the strengths of the people and communities we serve. We develop our content with the awareness that language can perpetuate privilege but also can educate, empower, and drive positive change to create a more equitable society. We will continually reevaluate our efforts as language usage continues to evolve. info.jff.org/language-matters

About Engage R+D

Engage R+D helps clients harness the power of evaluation, strategy, and learning to advance its mission. It believes that when organizations engage people, data, and ideas, they achieve better results for communities. www.engagerd.com

Contents

Executive Summary 4

About the Equity Target Population Fund 5

About This Framework 5

Cross-Cutting Strategies 5

Scaling and Sustaining Programs 6

Introduction 7

Overview of Grantees 8

Overview of the Framework 9

Language Matters 9

Human-Centered Approach 10

Theory of Change 11

Cross-Cutting Strategies 13

Overview of Strategies 13

Resource Alignment 15

High-Touch and Personalized Training 17

Targeted Data Insights and Communication 19

Centering Participant and Staff Experiences 21

Tailored Community and Employer Partnerships 22

Population-Specific Strategies 23

Overview 23

Young People Who Are Not Working or in School 26

Veterans 30

People With Disabilities 35

People With Records of Incarceration 40

Scale and Sustainability 45

Challenges to Achieving Scale and Sustainability 46

Recommendations for Scale and Sustainability 47

Conclusion 50

Endnotes 52

Executive Summary

Targeted efforts to promote inclusion and equity in the labor market are essential for California to fully realize its economic potential and ensure that all Californians, including young people who are not working or in school, veterans, people with disabilities, and people with records of incarceration, can contribute to and benefit from the state's economic vitality. Despite record levels of investment in workforce training, and a promising post-pandemic recovery, key demographic groups continue to face significant systemic barriers to accessing and completing workforce training and experiencing economic advancement. The unique barriers some Californians face—such as challenges translating military experience to civilian employment, or discrimination in the hiring process due to past involvement in the justice system—require specific solutions from organizations and professionals with unique expertise. By investing in inclusive, population-specific strategies, the state can improve opportunities for members of populations that have not received equitable investments from public and private systems and institutions, thereby strengthening its workforce and driving economic growth.

Hypothesis

By advancing targeted support for populations facing systemic barriers to economic advancement and applying successful strategies that have proved successful for other population groups, workforce organizations can identify shared solutions and drive systemic change. This approach can ultimately close equity gaps and enhance workforce outcomes for populations that have not benefited equitably from a state's economic vitality.

About the Equity Target Population Fund

The Equity Target Population Fund (ETPF) was a two-year initiative of the California Employment Development Department (EDD) that was supported by Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Title I Governor's discretionary funds in Program Year 2022-23. The ETPF invested in nine innovative projects statewide that were designed to improve outcomes for four populations that face significant barriers to employment: young people who are not working or in school, veterans, people with disabilities, and people with records of incarceration. ETPF grants are intended to support initiatives that foster sustainable partnerships, deliver comprehensive wraparound supports, and increase equitable access to quality jobs for some of California's highest-need populations, ultimately positioning them for sustainable, quality employment.

About This Framework

This framework serves as a guide for state agency leaders and workforce practitioners who want to support populations facing systemic barriers through actionable insights that advance equity-driven workforce strategies. It synthesizes key lessons and innovative practices from targeted engagements to promote the adoption of effective solutions across the state. Central to the framework is a unifying theory of change and a set of cross-cutting strategies gleaned from the ETPF initiative, which are explored through four chapters outlining population-specific strategies and featuring practical case studies, client profiles, and workforce practitioner considerations. The concluding section focuses on scale and sustainability, offering practical recommendations for state leaders to learn from and expand these efforts to drive meaningful change. This framework shares tools, strategies, and examples in practice that stakeholders can use to address systemic barriers, enhance cross-sector collaboration, and provide equitable access to quality employment opportunities across the state.

Cross-Cutting Strategies

State leaders are eager to identify both cross-cutting strategies for supporting specific target populations and common solutions with the potential for uplifting multiple key demographic groups facing longstanding barriers to success in workforce training and employment. Through interviews, focus groups, and peer learning engagements, cross-cutting strategies emerged as key ingredients for supporting target populations:

Resource Alignment: Maximizing the impact of available resources through strategies such as co-enrollment and braided funding ensures that individuals can access multiple services and supports

High-Touch and Personalized Training: Customizing training approaches and wraparound supports can help address the distinct assets and barriers for each population and enable programs to improve the potential for their participants to succeed

Targeted Data Insights and Communication: By utilizing data to track the outcomes and challenges participants face, programs can continually adapt to their needs, enhancing access, retention, and success while effectively communicating impacts to funders and stakeholders

Centering Participant and Staff Experiences: Building resilience, inclusivity, and capacity within organizations, as well as elevating the lived experiences of client-facing staff members, is essential for effectively serving populations facing systemic barriers in the workforce because this work demands unique skills and a thoughtful approach to fostering an inclusive environment

Tailored Community and Employer Partnerships: Building strong partnerships with employers and community organizations creates responsive training and employment pathways, offering workers and learners hands-on experience, mentorship, and opportunities for career advancement

Scaling and Sustaining Programs

Given the specificity and intensity of the services that organizations offer to support clients who are members of populations systematically underserved by existing systems and institutions, adequate funding is essential for scaling and sustaining programs. However, money isn't the only resource that workforce organizations need in order to implement or strengthen services and supports. The short-term nature of grant programs for these initiatives, ongoing systemic barriers to advancement that certain populations face, bureaucratic and administrative burdens on practitioners, and siloed knowledge across the field often hinder practitioners and the ecosystem more broadly from sustaining effective programs and scaling impact. We've developed key recommendations for approaches that workforce practitioners and state-level leaders can adopt to scale and sustain population-specific workforce training initiatives.

Key Recommendations

- Design future investments to promote organizational capacity-building, foster innovation, and incentivize adoption of population-specific best practices
- Enhance monitoring, evaluation, and learning practices to minimize administrative burdens and foster wider learning efforts
- Lead the curation and dissemination of population-specific strategies and best practices to help state, regional, and local workforce practitioners accelerate learning and adoption across investments and initiatives
- Establish processes and models for enhancing interagency and cross-sector partnerships focused on populations facing systemic barriers in the workforce

01. Introduction

California has a history of using Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title 1 Governor's discretionary funds to spark innovation and support organizations in strengthening services and supports for populations facing longstanding barriers to workforce training and job placements.[2] The 2022-23 Equity Target Population Fund (ETPF), administered by the California Employment Development Department (EDD), is an example of this strategy. A goal of the ETPF was to uncover key insights by bringing together organizations with expertise in serving four distinct populations: young people who are not working or in school, veterans, people with disabilities, and people with records of incarceration.

To support the success of funded programs and amplify lessons learned, the state government also awarded funding to Jobs for the Future (JFF) to provide technical assistance and facilitate a peer learning community for ETPF grantees in partnership with Engage R+D.[3] Starting in June 2023 and ending in March 2025, grantees came together for regular virtual and in-person meetings and activities that offered opportunities to share common challenges and elevate promising practices, identifying both population-specific and cross-cutting strategies for improving participant outcomes throughout the program life cycle. JFF and Engage R+D also conducted participant listening sessions and learning labs focused on each of the grant's four target populations.

Throughout these engagements, grantees collaborated to identify effective strategies and recommendations for state leaders and practitioners looking to foster, scale, and sustain population-specific workforce training across California. The technical assistance team also engaged with program participants and frontline staff members through interviews, focus groups, and site visits to get ideas and feedback on content. This framework is the product of these engagements and is aimed at helping state agencies pinpoint cross-cutting strategies. It includes recommendations for implementing and scaling population-specific approaches that enhance economic vitality while enabling practitioners to learn from peer organizations statewide.

Overview of Grantees

The following table lists the organizations that received ETPF grants and the target population(s) they focused on serving through the funds.[4]

Grantee Organizations	Population(s) Served Through ETPF
Asian American Drug Abuse Program (AADAP)	Veterans
Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program	People with records of incarceration
Goodwill of San Francisco Bay	People with records of incarceration; veterans
Interfaith Community Services	Veterans
JVS SoCal	People with records of incarceration
Sacramento Employment and Training Agency	People with disabilities
West Oakland Job Resource Center	People with records of incarceration
Workforce Development Board of Ventura County	People with disabilities
Workforce Investment Board of Tulare County	Young people who are not employed or in school; people with disabilities

Overview of the Framework

This framework brings together key insights from the population-specific learning engagements and lessons from the community of practice to uplift innovations and promising practices. It is organized into four sections:

- **Theory of Change:** An overview of the guiding theory of change for the ETPF program
- **Cross-Cutting Strategies:** Insight into broad strategies that apply across populations
- **Target Population Sections:** Four sections, each dedicated to a target population, featuring case studies, client profiles, and guidance for workforce organizations aiming to initiate or enhance services for these groups
- **Scaling and Sustainability Considerations:** Strategies for practitioners, state leaders, and funders to expand and sustain programs and services effectively

The case studies featured throughout the framework highlight ETPF grantees' successful strategies in action and lessons learned in working with their target populations.

Language Matters

At JFF, we believe that language matters to our mission of driving equitable economic advancement for all. The words we use every day can perpetuate and exacerbate inequality.[5] But they also can educate, empower, and drive positive change.

As part of our technical assistance, we explored the implications of terminology and word choice with grantees, as well as how training providers and the ecosystem of stakeholders can better operate with empathy and compassion in workforce training delivery services. JFF's guiding principles for language use are as follows:

- Use people-first language, which emphasizes each person's humanity over any characteristic
- Use an asset-based lens. Focus on each person's and community's strengths and potential. Avoid labeling people or groups with words that emphasize deficits or challenges
- Identify the systems or conditions that cause inequity for the populations we're referring to
- Avoid vague or ambiguous terms. Be as specific as possible, even if it requires using more words
- Only mention an individual's personal or demographic characteristics when relevant to the subject discussed
- Ask individuals how they wish to be identified and use that

The word choice selected for the four populations centered in this document are as follows:

- Young people who are not working or in school
- Veterans
- People with disabilities
- People with records of incarceration

Human-Centered Approach

In developing this framework, JFF and Engage R+D prioritized a human-centered approach to ensure that the insights and recommendations are deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the populations served. Our methodology included the following components:

- **Centering impacted voices:** Gathering insights directly from those most affected by the workforce training services through client interviews and focus groups, ensuring that participant perspectives shaped the learning engagements and recommendations
- **Journey mapping:** Conducting journey-mapping activities with workforce practitioners and clients, capturing unique pathways, challenges, and successes faced by diverse populations. By visualizing these experiences, we gained deeper insights into the needs, motivations, and opportunities that inform tailored interventions, ultimately fostering more effective and inclusive outcomes
- **Co-designing workshops:** Facilitating co-designed learning sessions with audiences, including clients and service providers, to collaboratively develop and refine strategies and insights
- **Rapid prototyping and feedback loops:** Adopting an iterative process with opportunities for continuous refinement based on grantee insights throughout the two-year grant period, ensuring that strategies and recommendations remained responsive and practical

02. Theory of Change

JFF and Engage R+D co-developed a theory of change (TOC) with direct input from grantees to guide the planning, implementation, and evaluation of population-specific workforce programs. This TOC can be thought of as a road map that shows how the different components of the ETPF approach are expected to lead to systems change. Though this framework was developed for the ETPF program, it was designed to be broadly applicable to other workforce initiatives focused on populations facing systemic barriers.

The ETPF theory of change comprises the following elements:[6]

Components of the Theory of Change	
Hypothesis	Hypotheses include driving assumptions that explore existing beliefs about how the theory of change works.
State Levers	Levers are the tools or mechanisms that can be pulled to create an impact. It refers to the specific actions that the state uses to bring about a desired change.
Cross-Cutting Strategies	Strategies involve approaches or methods that organizations or local workforce boards use to achieve their outcomes and goals.
Key Outcomes	Outcomes refer to the specific and measurable changes that are expected to occur as a result of implementing a particular strategy.
Goal	Goals provide focus and direction for the theory of change. They are the ultimate change that an organization (or group of organizations) is working toward.

Theory of Change for Advancing Population-Specific Strategies for Equitable Workforce Development

Hypothesis

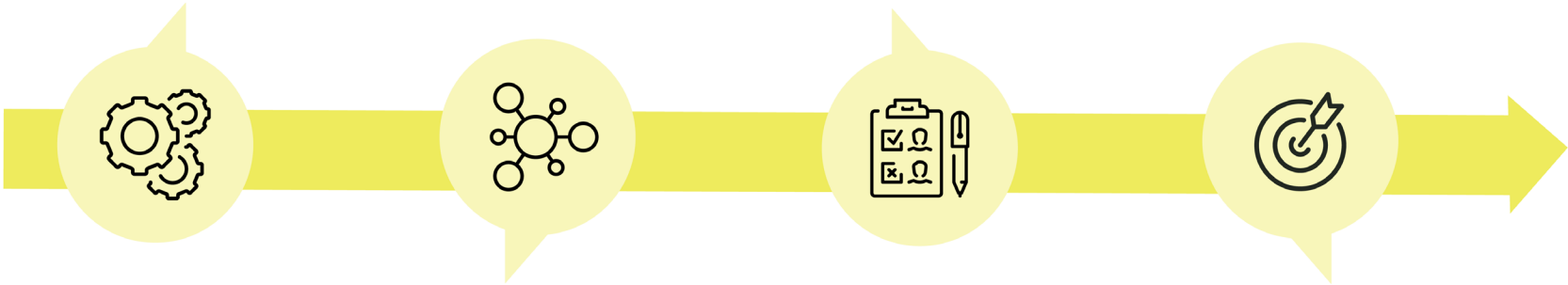
By advancing targeted support for populations facing systemic barriers to economic advancement and applying successful strategies that have proved successful for other population groups, workforce organizations can identify shared solutions and drive systemic change. This approach can ultimately close equity gaps and enhance workforce outcomes for populations that have not benefited equitably from a state's economic vitality.

1. State Levers

- Funding strategy
- Monitoring, evaluation, and learning
- Intra-agency collaboration and partnerships
- Promotion of best practices and field-building

3. Key Outcomes

- Increase access to quality jobs for ETPF target populations
- Forge meaningful partnerships within key industries, and make investments that sustain sector-based initiatives
- Develop and/or identify innovative, replicable, and scalable models to support target populations



2. Implementation of Cross-Cutting Strategies

- Resource Alignment
- High-Touch and Personalized Training
- Tailored Community and Employer Partnerships
- Targeted Data Insights and Communication
- Centering Participant and Staff Experiences

4. Goal

Generate greater opportunity for Californians who have been locked out of the mainstream economy, are members of populations that are underrepresented in high-wage occupations and industries, and/or face multiple barriers to quality employment

03. Cross-Cutting Strategies

Overview of Strategies

When we reviewed the common elements across ETPF programs to which program leaders and participants attributed their success, we identified a set of recurring strategies. Effective programs apply those strategies to improve equitable access to workforce training and job placement for individuals facing systemic barriers to economic advancement while tailoring their implementation to the needs of specific populations. These strategies are divided into five themes:

Resource Alignment

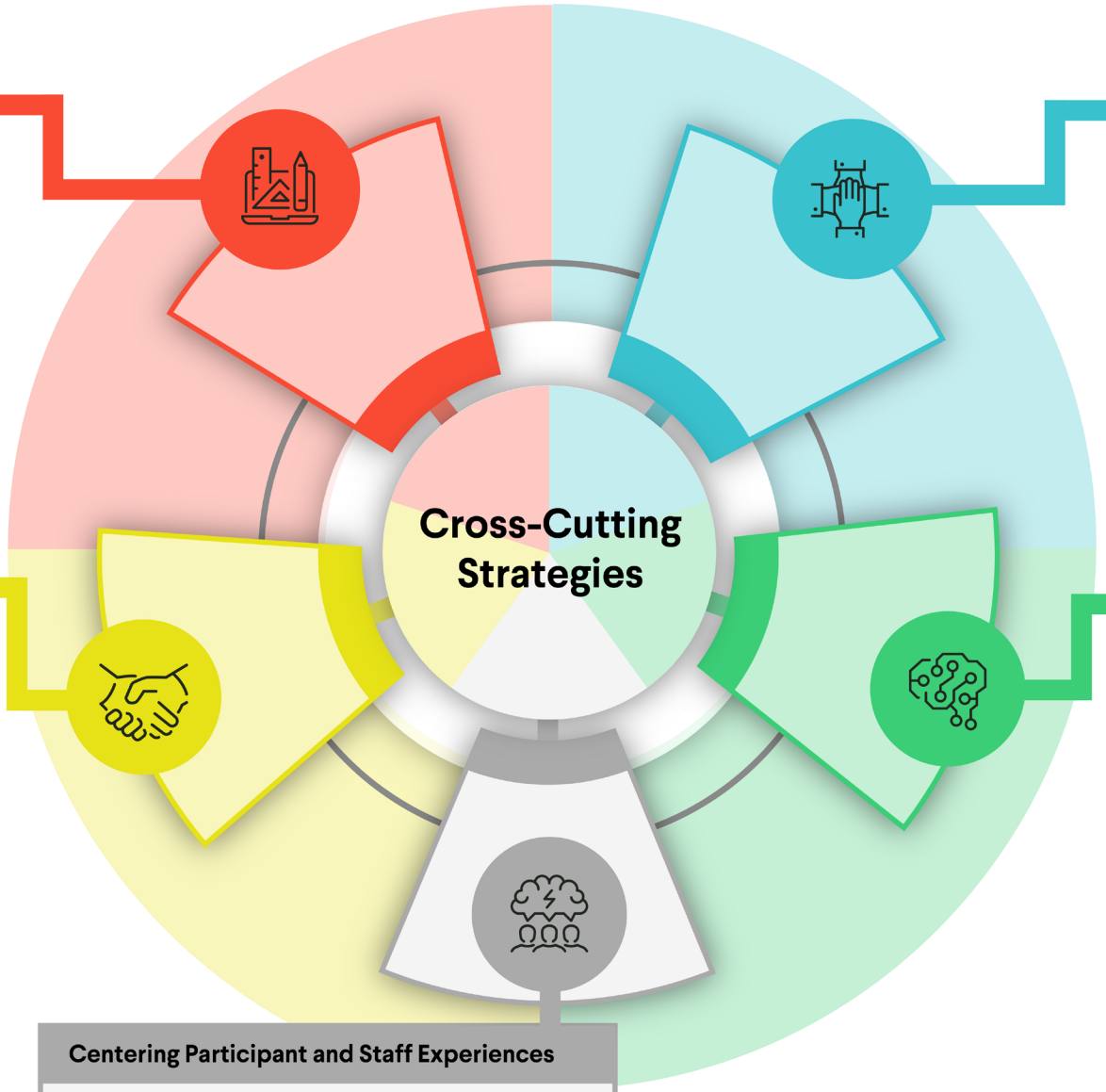
Centering Participant and Staff Experiences

High-Touch and Personalized Training

Tailored Community and Employer Partnerships

Targeted Data Insights and Communication

To highlight these strategies in action, we have included several case studies featuring ETPF grantees throughout this section. Specific examples of how ETPF grantees applied these strategies to the program's four target populations are shared in this framework's population-specific sections.



Resource Alignment

Maximize the impact of available resources through strategies such as co-enrollment and braided funding.

High-Touch and Personalized Training

Customize training experiences and wraparound supports to address the distinct assets and barriers of each population.

Tailored Community and Employer Partnerships

Build partnerships with employers and community organizations to create pathways that offer workers and learners hands-on experience, mentorship, and career advancement opportunities.

Targeted Data Insights and Communication

Track data on outcomes and challenges of participants, and use the information for program improvement and communicating impact.

Centering Participant and Staff Experiences

Build resilience, inclusivity, and capacity within organizations, and elevate the lived experiences of client-facing staff members to effectively serve populations facing systemic barriers in the workforce.

Resource Alignment

Braid and leverage multiple funding sources

Braided funding refers to combining various funding streams for a common goal while separately tracking and reporting on spending for each source;
Leveraged funding refers to using a smaller funding source to attract additional funding through in-kind or matching strategies.[7]

By necessity, workforce leaders serving the four target populations must become experts in braiding and leveraging multiple funding sources to comprehensively meet the unique needs of individuals from groups facing systemic barriers to workforce training. To do so, they must utilize federal, state, and local funds in addition to financial support from private foundations, philanthropic organizations, and corporate partnerships. Organizations need adequate staff capacity, training, and technological infrastructure to effectively manage these funds.

Examples in practice

- Intentionally coordinate funding from the multiple systems that impact the target population, such as health care insurance programs and Medicaid and Medicare, in addition to programs related to mental health, substance abuse, housing, and other vital supportive services
- Use public workforce and social services funding for core programs, supportive services, and on-the-job training, through funding streams such as WIOA, CalWORKs, CalFresh Employment & Training, and Perkins V.

Consider the example of a veterans training program that has the goal of addressing veteran unemployment and poverty, mental health, and access to basic needs. To support this one initiative, the organization leading the program braids funding from multiple federal agencies along with philanthropic funding:

- The Department of Rehabilitation and Department of Labor for job training and placement opportunities
- A local community foundation for supportive services (e.g., stipends) and mental health support
- A corporate grant for technology such as laptops and computers, to improve digital literacy

Implement co-enrollment strategies

Implementing co-enrollment strategies can both enhance service to clients and position the organization for stronger financial sustainability. Co-enrollment refers to intentionally managing clients' enrollment and participation in complementary programs, both within and beyond the workforce system. This strategy ensures that clients have access to a range of services and can accelerate their career pathways while maximizing public funds. Organizations need adequate staff capacity, key partnerships, and technological infrastructure to effectively support co-enrollment.

Examples in practice

- Co-locate adult education and job training services and assist clients in enrolling in both types of programs simultaneously
- Enroll clients as a cohort in postsecondary credential programs, along with providing employment-readiness services

High-Touch and Personalized Training

Provide access to basic needs and individualized wraparound supports

To empower individuals to achieve their career goals, workforce programs serving the four target populations must address critical barriers that could hinder access to employment. These critical barriers can include food and housing insecurity, lack of transportation, and lack of access to health care, as well as the challenges of overcoming traumatic life experiences. Effective wraparound support services are often provided through high-touch, urgent, and relationship-driven programming.

Examples in practice

- Provide stipends for things such as transportation, clothing, food, and child care to address participants' basic needs, or provide flexible monetary support through general funds that participants can use for various expenses based on their individual needs. Such stipends often attract participants and provide an incentive for staying in a program long enough to realize the benefits of continued participation

- Implement a trauma-informed approach to assessing participant eligibility for supportive services and mental health support while delivering high-touch, one-on-one, direct support

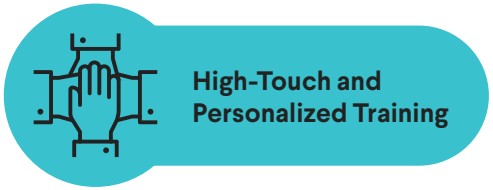
Develop personalized training experiences for participants

Workforce development teams intentionally develop a customized training experience for participants that is tailored to their specific needs. By allowing for variation in training method and approach, this strategy enhances participant engagement and outcomes while addressing the diverse challenges and barriers faced in the workplace.

Examples in practice

- Utilize integrated resource teams and dedicated case managers to conduct needs assessments and provide personalized support for participants

- Develop customized training experiences that build on prior learning and expertise, and offer flexible delivery models, such as pre-apprenticeship programs, accelerated pathways, or self-paced options



CASE STUDY

JVS SoCal

JVS SoCal is a regional leader in workforce development and career services, serving people with records of incarceration as part of the ETPF initiative. JVS SoCal implements a multifaceted approach through its Employment Accelerator Program, starting with a "no wrong door" approach with clients that prioritizes building trust and familiarity during orientation. Each client receives intensive case management and a tailored individualized employment plan (IEP), developed in partnership with a career coach and a certified rehabilitation counselor, if needed, to help them define their career goals and outline the steps to achieving them. Guided by their IEPs, clients participate in career-readiness workshops that cover essential skills like resume writing, online job searching, interview preparation, professionalism, and customer service. To meet a client's practical needs, JVS SoCal offers supportive services, including work and interview attire and transportation reimbursements, as well as financial empowerment education and introductory IT training. JVS SoCal's personalized and high-touch supports even include accompanying clients to interviews to boost their confidence and ensure that they feel supported.

Through intensive case management and a holistic approach to career readiness, JVS SoCal is helping people with records overcome personal and systemic barriers to employment. This approach demands significant commitment and dedication from the JVS SoCal team. Despite these challenges, JVS SoCal has leveraged partnerships with local employers, pre-apprenticeship programs in construction, and supportive services organizations to better meet the needs of its clients and help them achieve career success. For example, JVS SoCal partners with Mass Liberation, which helps people who are rejoining their communities after incarceration to secure housing, employment assistance, life skills training, and community education in wellness and finance. Their goal is to fill in any gaps in the supportive services their clients need, such as trauma-informed counseling, transitional housing, and transportation assistance.

Targeted Data Insights and Communication

Use data-driven decision-making

Effective workforce training providers use data-driven decision-making to better understand and address specific challenges faced within and across population groups that face systemic barriers to economic advancement. Data-driven practices can lead to enhanced participant experiences and programmatic outcomes while helping providers meet performance targets.

Examples in practice

- Establish the data systems necessary to track and disaggregate metrics, including program outcomes, employment rates, and overall well-being, based on important participant demographic characteristics, such as disability, veteran status, race and ethnicity, age, and gender

- Establish continuous improvement processes to monitor and interpret the data and determine necessary program adjustments

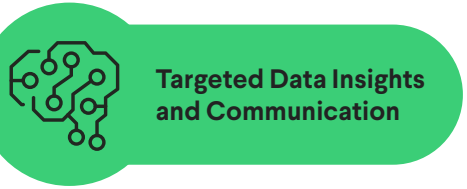
Communicate impact to the field

Innovative workforce programs prioritize effectively communicating impact to the field to highlight the value of programs, grow credibility in the field, foster funder support, build partnerships in the workforce ecosystem, and, eventually, inform best practices in serving populations that face systemic barriers to economic advancement.

Examples in practice

- Create learner profiles and spotlights to highlight individual successes and program impact, along with impact reports to demonstrate the effectiveness and value of programs

- Host site tours and open houses while participating in networks, conferences, or collaboratives focused on serving similar populations



CASE STUDY

Goodwill of San Francisco Bay

Goodwill of San Francisco Bay (Goodwill SF) empowers individuals facing employment barriers by providing job training, skills development, and career services that create pathways to economic stability, with a particular focus on veterans and people with records of incarceration, through its ETPF grant. The organization offers employment in Goodwill retail and donation centers and partners with Bay Area employers to place individuals in sustainable careers. One critical way it achieves its mission is by effectively communicating its impact to the field—which includes a range of audiences, such as funders, state leaders, potential participants, and other workforce initiatives doing similar work.

Goodwill SF's strategy for communicating its impact is grounded in a four-pillar framework focused on audience, data, intent, and a central success story. The framework starts with identifying a specific audience and ensuring that the message aligns with its interests. Next, data is used to showcase tangible results relevant to the chosen audience, and to determine the specific intent of the communication strategy to guide the approach. At the intersection of these pillars is a central success story—often one that highlights a participant's journey through Goodwill SF's programs, which brings the strategy to life.

This framework places participants, including people with records and veterans, at the center of the communication strategy and results in a more compelling story for various audiences in the field. Stories of individuals' journeys often create a more powerful and human narrative, illustrating the tangible effects of program initiatives by moving beyond abstract data to show real outcomes, and eventually increasing both engagement with and investment in these initiatives.

Centering Participant and Staff Experiences

Honor worker lived experiences and embrace cultural humility

Effective workforce development teams proactively center worker and learner lived experiences while embracing cultural humility to foster an inclusive and equitable environment. Prioritizing the voices and perspectives of those directly impacted by the workforce programs ensures that programs are relevant and respectful of those with diverse backgrounds. This approach creates a supportive atmosphere for the four target populations, enhancing engagement and trust and ultimately leading to more effective outcomes for all participants.

Examples in practice

- Prioritize inclusive service design by implementing alumni advisory committees, worker voice initiatives, and peer mentor programs to inform program development
- Create feedback mechanisms for continuous improvement

Prioritize staff development and wellness

Sustainable programs prioritize staff development and wellness, which in turn strengthens staff members' ability to deliver culturally competent initiatives for diverse populations. By investing in training and wellness programs, organizations can enhance understanding, build trust, and deliver services with greater empathy. Client-facing roles like case manager and career coach are crucial in helping jobseekers overcome employment barriers, but high caseloads, significant participant needs, and substantial administrative workloads can lead to burnout, resulting in high staff turnover rates. Effective programs address such challenges by prioritizing staff wellness to retain high-quality, expert staff members.

Examples in practice

- Provide cultural competency training and professional development focused on the specific needs of target populations to enhance staff members' skills and understanding of participants' lived experiences
- Implement mental health supports and wellness initiatives to promote staff well-being and prevent burnout

Tailored Community and Employer Partnerships

Partner with experts in navigating multiple systems used by target populations

Workforce organizations committed to equity establish partnerships with experts along the complex networks of agencies and systems in their communities that serve populations facing systemic barriers in the workforce. This intentional programmatic design enables client-facing staff members to better support individuals' specific needs and empowers participants to navigate external systems more effectively, fostering long-term resource access and community resilience.

Examples in practice

- Collaborate with disability advocacy groups to guide individuals in accessing benefits, transportation, health care, and accessible housing
- Connect with school- and college-based programs serving target populations to recruit potential participants

Collaborate with employers committed to quality jobs

Workforce organizations focused on equitable economic advancement prioritize partnerships and job placements with employers committed to quality jobs, worker protections, and pathways to advancement. In addition, organizations can focus their own training programs in industries and sectors that create pathways leading to high-quality jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage.

Examples in practice

- Identify and promote employer incentives to hire and support populations facing systemic barriers in the workforce (e.g., the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, the Disabled Access Credit, or wage subsidies), and work with employer partners to create clear advancement opportunities, including training and mentorship, for these populations
- Leverage union and labor management partnerships to support workers' efforts to improve wages, working conditions, and career advancement pathways, including through pre-apprenticeship and Registered Apprenticeship models

04. Population-Specific Strategies

Overview

The cross-cutting strategies for population-specific workforce development initiatives are a helpful starting point for practitioners who are developing, implementing, or refining workforce initiatives serving individuals from groups facing systemic barriers. However, these populations also need tailored solutions that address their unique assets and needs, along with the ability to take advantage of population-specific resources and navigate the multiple systems that affect their workforce success. In this section, there are four population-specific sections that represent the ETPF populations of focus:

- Young people who are not working or in school
- Veterans
- People with disabilities
- People with records of incarceration

Each chapter includes the following components:

- **Definition and Population Overview in California:** A clear definition of the population and an overview of their demographics, challenges, and opportunities within the state
- **Considerations for the Client Journey:** Key factors that shape the experiences of individuals from the population as they navigate workforce programs, including barriers, touch points, and/or successful strategies
- **ETPF Training Participant Profile:** A detailed look at participants from organizations involved in ETPF, highlighting their backgrounds, experiences, and outcomes
- **Case Studies:** Spotlights on ETPF grantees and how they tailor cross-cutting strategies to support the populations they serve through ETPF

While the following chapters address each of the ETPF target populations individually, it is important to acknowledge that there is considerable overlap between these demographic groups. Culturally responsive programs recognize that participants have intersectional identities—for instance, many veterans are also people with disabilities—and provide personalized solutions that address their lived experiences. This intersectionality also shows up in the training-participant profiles featured in the following sections, and in the strategies adopted by ETPF grantees to support their success.

In exploring population-specific training experiences with participants and program staff members, JFF and Engage R+D used a journey map—a key concept from human-centered design—to capture the unique pathways, challenges, and successes that different populations encounter when initiating, progressing in, and completing workforce development programs. By visualizing these experiences, we gained deeper insights into the needs, motivations, and opportunities that inform tailored interventions and ultimately foster more effective and inclusive outcomes. The graphic below provides an example of a typical participant journey that we developed in collaboration with ETPF grantees. This high-level journey map was further customized for each target population based on feedback from participants and staff members, yielding many of the insights and reflections captured in the population-specific sections that follow.

Client Journey Map

From the perspective of a workforce program participant . . .

Cross-Cutting Strategies

Workforce providers can incorporate these cross-cutting strategies across the participant journey:

- Resource Alignment
- High-Touch and Personalized Training
- Tailored Community and Employer Partnerships
- Targeted Data Insights and Communication
- Centering Participant and Staff Experiences

Young People Who Are Not Working or in School

Definition and Population Overview in California

Young adults ages 16-24 who are not working or in school (sometimes referred to as "opportunity youth" or "disconnected youth") can benefit from a range of specialized supports, from workforce training through job placement. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the percentage of young people who are not working or in school has increased to 12.5% in California, with Black and Latine youth facing higher rates, at 21% and 13%, respectively.[8] This young adult population has intersectional needs, with high rates of disability (17.7%, compared with 6.5% for youth who are working or in school), caring for their own children (20%, compared with 6% for youth who are working or in school) and living in poverty (31%, compared with 16% for youth who are working or in school).[9]

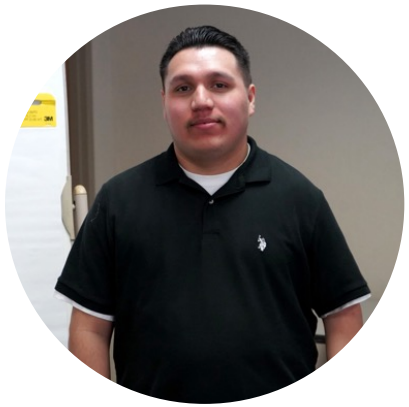
Youth workforce program developers need to consider the unique strengths and resilience of young people who are not currently working or in school, recognizing how their diverse experiences can support their job training and economic advancement. By harnessing these young adults' skills, creativity, and motivation, programs can create supportive environments that foster personal and professional development. For example, many programs that are intentionally tailored for this population incorporate flexible training options and access to mentorship that align with young adults' aspirations, alongside support services that address holistic needs like mental health, financial literacy, and career counseling. This approach can empower young adults to build sustainable pathways to employment and economic stability, tapping into their inherent potential to thrive in the workforce.

Considerations for the Client Journey

While each client journey is unique, practitioners can consider the following when working with young people who are not working or in school:

- **Personal connections:** Establishing strong personal relationships is crucial for engaging youth. One-on-one support from staff members can foster trust and encourage young adults to seek help when they need it.
- **Peer influence and networking:** Harness the power of peer networks by encouraging youth to connect with one another. Peer-led groups can provide support, share resources, and inspire confidence, making the transition into the workforce less daunting.
- **Engagement through technology:** Use social media and digital platforms to reach young people where they are most active. Creating engaging content about job opportunities, training programs, and success stories can increase awareness and participation.
- **Involvement in program design:** Involve youth in the design and evaluation of workforce programs. Their insights can lead to more relevant and appealing offerings that address their specific needs and preferences.
- **Support for life transitions:** Recognize that young people are often navigating significant life changes (e.g., transitioning from school to work, moving out of their family home, or starting their own family). Providing targeted support during these transitions helps build their confidence and resilience.
- **Career exploration resources:** Tools and opportunities for career exploration can help youth identify their interests and strengths and guide them toward viable career pathways that align with their aspirations.

ETPF Training Participant Profile

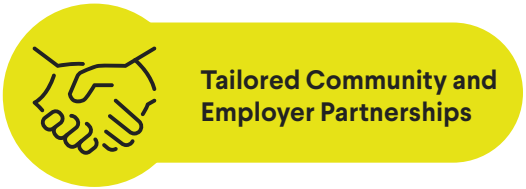


Ronnie Zamarripa of Visalia, California, has faced significant challenges as a young adult pursuing a career in information technology in the Central Valley. Despite his early passion for technology—he started providing tech support for his family at age 14—Zamarripa's path has been complicated by his need for consistent support and accommodations due to living with epilepsy. Navigating higher education and job opportunities as a young adult with a disability has presented hurdles, but Zamarripa's resilience and advocacy for himself and others with disabilities have kept him moving forward.

Zamarripa's journey took a positive turn when he connected with the Workforce Investment Board of Tulare County's (Tulare WIB) Youth@Work program through the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR), where he had been a client for seven years. The Youth@Work's specialized programs, including the Summer Training and Employment Program for Students, provided Zamarripa with career navigation services designed for young adults. Through a team approach, counselors from both DOR and Youth@Work ensured that he had access to necessary supports and accommodations, creating opportunities that aligned with his skills in and passion for IT. These programs helped him complete a technical support internship at Kaweah Health and paved the way for his next step, an accelerated 10-month cybersecurity program at Fresno City College. With the certifications and experience he will gain, Zamarripa is well on his way to securing the career he has always wanted in the evolving field of cybersecurity.

His advice to others facing challenges on their career path: "Continue to remind yourself of the reason why you're doing what you're doing. . . . Take it day by day, step by step. My internship was the first of many steps to achieving my ultimate goal, which is to maintain a full-time position in the IT industry."

> *"Take it day by day, step by step. My internship was the first of many steps to achieving my ultimate goal."*
>
> **Ronnie Zamarripa, Cybersecurity Program Participant**



Tailored Community and Employer Partnerships

CASE STUDY

Workforce Investment Board of Tulare County

The Tulare WIB has established a robust set of partnerships to support young people who are not working or in school. Through subcontracts with several regional partner agencies, the Tulare WIB provides tailored, short-term, occupational skills training and work-based learning opportunities across high-demand sectors, including advanced manufacturing, transportation and logistics, and health care.

The passionate, collaborative approach that the leaders of this robust network of organizations brings to the work is palpable when you meet with staff members from CSET, Proteus Inc., and the Tulare County Office of Education's Services for Education & Employment (SEE) Youth@Work program, the key subcontractors delivering youth services through the ETPF program in Tulare. Staff members and partners are engaged in cross-training and shared impact reporting to ensure consistency in service delivery, fostering an environment of collaboration. The WIB facilitates a monthly meeting with the Tulare-Kings Healthcare Partnership and participates in quarterly meetings with Tulare-Kings and Youth@Work providers CSET and SEE. Teams partner closely with educational institutions, including local K-12 school districts, local adult schools, and community colleges, including the College of the Sequoias and Porterville College. Together, the teams conduct outreach, recruit youth to their programs, and place participants in career pathway training, recognizing that educational institutions can become potential future employers for those completing their programs. Such partnerships also enable staff members to identify youth who would benefit from specific initiatives, such as a leadership program that primarily targets young adults in the foster care system.

Youth@Work subcontractors engaged in the ETPF program take a personalized approach to case management throughout a participant's journey, from orientation to training and job placement. Participating youth receive a range of essential supports—such as transportation, interview attire, and tools required for training—as well as workshops offered through community partners on topics such as financial literacy and banking. This holistic, community-wide approach—anchored in compassion, connection, and communication—ensures that youth not only find jobs but feel that they have the resources needed to navigate the many transitions they will face during young adulthood.

Veterans

Definition and Population Overview in California

The term veteran generally refers to individuals who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces, including the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard, and have been discharged under conditions other than dishonorable.[10] Veterans possess a range of skills and experiences from their military service that can be valuable in the civilian workforce.

California is home to approximately 1.8 million veterans, the highest number of any state.[11] As of 2016, over 90% of veterans in California were male, with more than half over the age of 60. Veterans of the Vietnam War represent the largest portion of the veteran population, while younger veterans—those who started service after September 11, 2001—account for 15% of the state's veterans. California is also home to a more racially and ethnically diverse population of veterans compared with the national veteran population. For instance, 17% of California's veterans are Latine, compared with just 7% nationwide; and 6% of the state's veteran population is Asian, compared with only 1% nationwide.[12]

Veterans bring unique assets to the workplace, including characteristics developed through military training and experience, such as a strong work ethic, leadership skills, adaptability, and resilience. They are skilled in teamwork, problem-solving, and performing under pressure, which are invaluable strengths on teams across different work environments.[13] Veterans also face unique challenges transitioning to civilian employment, including translating military skills to civilian job requirements, addressing physical and mental health issues, and overcoming potential employer biases. For example, in 2022, about 30% of veterans in California had a disability, which is more than double the rate of about 13% seen in the nonveteran population.[14]

Considerations for the Client Journey

While each client journey is unique, veteran-serving organizations highlight these important considerations:

- **The ability to translate military skills into civilian language:** Veterans often struggle to articulate the value of their military experience in terms that resonate with civilian employers. It is crucial to help veterans identify how their military skills, such as leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork, directly transfer to civilian job roles.

- **Trust between civilians and veterans:** Many veterans are hesitant to engage with civilian service providers due to a perceived lack of understanding or shared experience. Developing trust early in the relationship is essential and often hinges on providers demonstrating genuine respect for veterans' backgrounds and experiences.

- **Customized, responsive, and direct support:** Veterans highly value individualized and adaptive support from case managers. A tailored and direct approach (such as one-on-one or in person) that responds to their unique needs, timelines, and aspirations is crucial in fostering engagement and success throughout their workforce journey. This provides veterans with the focused attention they need, allowing case managers to build rapport, offer consistent guidance, and ensure that veterans feel understood and supported at every step of their transition.

- **The power of shared lived experience:** Veterans often feel more comfortable working with case managers or counselors who are also veterans or have a military background. This shared experience builds a deeper connection and understanding, reducing potential feelings of isolation and improving communication.

ETPF Training Participant Profile

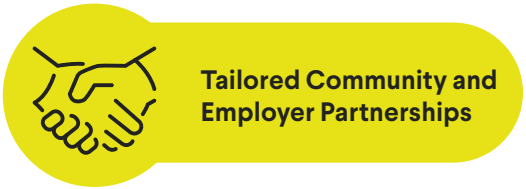
Melanie Carter is a U.S. Navy veteran who served from 1994 to 2005 and currently lives in Los Angeles. Since her military career ended, she has held numerous jobs, most recently working as a bus operator and custodian for Los Angeles Metro, but she left that position after experiencing traumatic events on the job. That prompted Carter to reflect on her life and what she wants from employment. "At this stage and phase of the game, I want to find one thing that I can do for the next 20 years that I would be passionate about," she said.

Carter had difficulties building trust with civilians and needed more supportive services alongside training programs, which made working with some veteran-focused programs challenging. She finally found a supportive and reliable ally in her vocational counselor at the Asian American Drug Abuse Program (AADAP), who was also a veteran and understood her unique experiences. Carter's journey toward meaningful employment has been shaped by the support she received at AADAP and a community of fellow veterans at the Bob Hope Patriotic Hall, home to the Los Angeles County Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. Through these programs, Carter accessed personalized career counseling, skill-building workshops, and—most importantly—a network of peers and training staff who understood her experiences. This support equipped her with the tools and confidence to pursue her career goals.

> *"At this stage and phase of the game, I want to find one thing that I can do for the next 20 years that I would be passionate about."*
>
> **Melanie Carter, U.S. Navy Veteran**

Carter envisions her ideal job as one that offers a steady four-day work schedule, prioritizes on-the-job safety, and allows her to make a meaningful difference in people's lives. Having faced her own struggles with depression, she now strives to uplift others and create a sense of community and belonging for fellow veterans who are seeking safe, comfortable, and supportive spaces—especially those experiencing mental health challenges. Carter recognizes the vital importance of having others check in and ensure that you're doing OK, and she is passionate about fostering that support for those around her.

The encouragement and resources she received empowered her to transform her experiences into a mission to ensure that no one feels alone. As she explained: "I know that somebody is having a tougher day than myself, and so I always think about that. . . . Someone is getting evicted from their apartment. Somebody doesn't know how they're going to eat today. I learned to just be very appreciative of everything that comes my way, big or small."



CASE STUDY

Interfaith Community Services

Interfaith Community Services is dedicated to empowering individuals and families in San Diego County to achieve self-sufficiency and stability. Its mission is rooted in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations by providing comprehensive programs and services that promote dignity and independence. A key area of the organization's work is helping veterans successfully transition into civilian life, by offering housing assistance, mental health support, employment services, and recovery programs. San Diego County has one of the largest veteran populations in the country, at over 200,000.[15] Through personalized case management and a focus on long-term solutions, Interfaith ensures that veterans receive the resources and care necessary to rebuild their lives.

For help in navigating the various systems used by its target populations, Interfaith partners with experts from key organizations like Camp Pendleton, San Diego County's Live Well Military & Veterans Resource Center, the Veterans Association of North County, veterans centers, North County career centers, the EDD's local veteran employment representatives, the San Diego Veterans Employment Committee, Veterans Transition Support, and regional Veterans Affairs offices. Through its established relationships, Interfaith is able to strategically connect with eligible veterans and provide them with tailored support that ensures their access to training programs, employment services, and supportive resources.

High-Touch and Personalized Training

CASE STUDY

Asian American Drug Abuse Program

Asian American Drug Abuse Program (AADAP) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing substance abuse prevention and treatment and community-based support services to individuals of all backgrounds in Los Angeles. One area of focus, and the primary focus of its ETPF grant, is working with the veteran population.

Its Employment Access Unit provides a range of workforce development services to help veterans find and maintain employment, including job search assistance, resume-building, and vocational training. Additionally, wraparound supports like transportation aid and work clothes are available to reduce barriers to employment. AADAP also provides business services, financial coaching, and income support, helping clients manage expenses and build financial stability.

AADAP's holistic approach is about centering empathy, passion, and partnership in its work helping program participants overcome barriers like housing instability, past trauma, or employment gaps. By tailoring support and collaborating with other agencies, it ensures that participants have the resources and guidance needed to achieve long-term success. According to Ricky Galbreath, a vocational counselor who is also a veteran, AADAP takes a "human-centered approach" to its work with clients.

People With Disabilities

Definition and Population Overview in California

The state of California defines a disability as a physical or mental impairment that "limits a major life activity." Various state agencies, including the California Workforce Development Board, the EDD, and the Labor and Workforce Development Agency, use the term "people with disabilities" when referring to individuals who meet this definition.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are approximately 44.1 million people in the United States and 4.5 million people in California who have reported having one or more disabilities.[16] The disabilities in this dataset include hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care, and independent living difficulties. Self-reporting of disabilities can lead to undercounting and inaccurate data due to perceived stigma and a reluctance to disclose a disability. Further, a large share of disabilities are "invisible"—meaning that they are not immediately apparent to an outside observer—which can be a barrier to receiving necessary services and accommodations.

In 2021, 11.2% of California's working-age adults had a disability, but only 40% of that group was employed—substantially below the state and national employment averages for the general population. Additionally, 21.5% of working-age people with disabilities were living below the poverty line, nearly double the state's overall poverty rate of 11.6%. These numbers reveal significant underemployment and economic challenges for people with disabilities, with disparities often deepening across racial and ethnic groups.[17] Programs should be mindful of the fear individuals have of losing Social Security Disability Insurance or Supplemental Security Income (SSDI/SSI) benefits when their income increases due to employment; participants often need help navigating the challenges and trade-offs while mitigating the impact on their financial stability.

There is an ongoing debate in the field regarding the use of person-first language ("people with disabilities") versus identity-first language ("disabled people") when referring to this population. Many individuals with disabilities prefer person-first language because it emphasizes the person before the disability, which avoids defining them by their impairment. Conversely, some people prefer identity-first language because they see their disabilities as integral to their identity rather than separate from who they are. JFF uses the term "people with disabilities."

Considerations for the Client Journey

While each client journey is unique, organizations working with people with disabilities highlight these important considerations:

- **Holistic support through co-enrollment:** People with disabilities often benefit from co-enrollment in programs offered through the workforce system and other systems, including through California's DOR. Co-enrollment allows access to a broader range of funding streams and accommodations for this population but requires that teams have expertise in navigating multiple systems to coordinate services.
- **Transparent communication and advocacy to achieve career aspirations:** Staff members can support participants in achieving their aspirations by providing comprehensive career coaching that covers a variety of options, including on-the-job training and supported employment programs, along with building participants' self advocacy skills to help them address barriers and receive the accommodations needed to succeed in their training journey.
- **Flexible program delivery models:** Disabilities vary greatly, so offering flexible program lengths—such as shorter programs or extended certification courses—can help meet the diverse needs of people with disabilities.
- **Family dynamics and cultural considerations:** Consideration should be given to the family relationships of people with disabilities. For example, discussing disabilities may be taboo in some households, which can influence people's support systems and engagement in programs.

ETPF Training Participant Profile

Salvador Batrez, a line cook who lives in Ventura, California, has faced numerous challenges on his journey to economic stability. Recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dealing with housing instability, and navigating life with a record of incarceration, Batrez struggled to find employment and a sense of direction. As he navigated various programs, he was eventually referred to Managed Career Solutions (MCS). There, Batrez began working to rebuild his career and his confidence.

Through programs like Disability Employment Works and Prison to Employment, his MCS case managers took a personalized, compassionate, and high-touch approach to Batrez's unique needs, including his PTSD diagnosis. The MCS team helped Batrez set career goals, polish his resume by incorporating his prior work experience, and refine his interview skills. Additionally, they provided essential resources like work clothes and reliable transportation to job interviews. These targeted strategies ultimately helped Batrez secure a stable job as a line cook at BJ's Restaurant & Brewhouse, where he now draws on his prior restaurant experience. "I feel a sense of responsibility. I feel trusted, which I have not felt like [in] a long time," he said.

Today, Batrez is thriving in his role and feels a renewed sense of responsibility and trust that he has not felt in years. With this stability, he is setting his sights on furthering his education in mathematics and advocating for more robust resources for individuals facing barriers like his own.

Batrez hopes programs like those of MCS continue to receive funding because they have been instrumental in his progress and can pave the way for others to succeed.

> *"I feel a sense of responsibility. I feel trusted, which I have not felt like [in] a long time."*
>
> **Salvador Batrez, Line Cook, BJ's Restaurant & Brewhouse**

Resource Alignment

CASE STUDY

Managed Career Solutions

MCS is a social purpose corporation that helps Californians achieve economic self-sufficiency through employment. It offers workforce development programs, vocational assessments, and small-business development services, serving a wide range of individuals, including veterans, people with disabilities, and the long-term unemployed. With support from agencies like the U.S. Department of Labor and the Social Security Administration, MCS operates throughout the greater Los Angeles region, providing accessible services for individuals seeking employment and career advancement.

In Ventura County, the MCS team takes a personalized approach to working with people with disabilities, tailoring its services to each individual's needs. It operates with a small, close-knit team where everyone acts as a "job developer," as described by Margo Scoble, a program director at MCS. The organization prioritizes co-enrollment, intentionally connecting participants with multiple programs and services. Its co-location in an America's Job Center of California location enables access to additional support, and it maintains strong relationships with the Department of Rehabilitation, facilitating co-enrollment through DOR counselors to enhance outcomes. In fact, the team maintains strong individual connections with DOR counselors and emphasizes transparency in communicating with them and program participants.

High-Touch and Personalized Training

CASE STUDY

Sacramento Employment and Training Agency

Sacramento Employment and Training Agency (SETA) provides tailored services designed to empower people with disabilities, fostering career growth and economic independence. It demonstrates a strong commitment to inclusivity by offering personalized services, forming strategic partnerships, and providing co-enrollment opportunities. Supported by trained case managers and targeted initiatives, SETA equips participants with the skills and resources needed to pursue meaningful career pathways. Through the Ticket to Work Program, the agency provides SSI/SSDI beneficiaries with access to benefits planning, work incentives, and a coordinated array of workforce services and resources. The program offers a safety net, enabling participants to explore employment opportunities without the immediate risk of losing cash or health benefits. SETA's approach ensures that services are tailored to individual needs while strategically leveraging resources in collaboration with partner organizations within the Sacramento Works Job Center system to effectively support each participant's journey toward success.

A cornerstone of SETA's success in serving individuals with disabilities is the use of Integrated Resource Teams (IRTs), which provide a personalized, comprehensive approach to training and career development. IRTs bring together a diverse group of professionals, including case managers, trauma-informed coaches, DOR counselors, adult education providers, community-based organizations, and employers, to collaboratively design and coordinate services for each client. By fostering joint planning and aligning processes like intake, assessments, and data sharing with partner organizations, SETA is able to streamline service delivery to participants while also identifying opportunities for co-enrollment across programs. This multidisciplinary approach not only maximizes available resources but also ensures that participants receive tailored, holistic support that addresses their education, training, and employment needs. Through this coordinated effort, SETA empowers people with disabilities to achieve long-term success in their careers and lives.

People With Records of Incarceration

Definition and Population Overview in California

In this report, we use the term "people with records of incarceration" to refer to individuals who have been incarcerated in jails, youth correctional facilities, or prisons. In the United States, over 77 million people, or 1 in 3 Americans, have a criminal record, with disproportionate representation among Black and Latine communities.[18] In California, 1 in 5 residents (approximately 8 million people) has a past criminal conviction, although the number of incarcerations has dropped significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 40% of people in California's state prison population have a disability, as do more than 50% of women in California state prisons.[19] Black and Latine individuals are overrepresented, with Black men and women accounting for 28% and 23% of prisoners, respectively, while making up only 6% of California's adult population. Similarly, Latine men account for 46% of prisoners but only 38% of the adult population.[20] These disparities highlight systemic racial injustice that requires a dual approach focusing on both jobseekers' and employers' perspectives.

Individuals rejoining their communities after incarceration often have valuable skills and perspectives. However, they also often face systemic challenges, such as criminal background checks, that make it difficult to access stable housing, reliable transportation, child care services, and technology skills training. Programs such as the Work Opportunity Tax Credit and the Federal Bonding Program aim to recognize the talents of people with records and incentivize employers to harness their untapped potential. By supporting digital skills development and effective communication strategies, these initiatives are helping to ensure that people with records can thrive and contribute fully to their communities.

Considerations for the Client Journey

While each client journey is unique, practitioners can consider the following when working with people with records:

- **Comprehensive support and resources:** People with records often reenter society without a safety net to help them contend with significant financial, housing, employment, and transportation challenges. Programs can offer stipends, transportation services, housing assistance, and necessary work materials, such as clothing and tools, to reduce these financial burdens. Access to these resources allows participants to focus on skill development and training.

- **Communication skills and personal narratives:** Many people with records struggle with confidently presenting their backgrounds to potential employers. Practitioners can provide coaching to help people develop effective "elevator speeches" and present their personal stories in ways that highlight their resilience, adaptability, and problem-solving skills. This preparation helps participants confidently discuss their backgrounds and positively engage with potential employers.

- **Legal and record expungement support:** A criminal record is often a significant barrier to employment. Programs should offer or connect participants with legal assistance for expungement or record sealing to help reduce barriers and improve job prospects.

- **Employer trust and relationships:** Employers may hesitate to hire individuals with records due to stigma or perceived risk. Workforce training providers should focus on building long-term, trusting relationships with employers who are open to hiring people with records. This involves not only promoting tax incentives like the Work Opportunity Tax Credit but also demonstrating the reliability and skills of participants through internship programs, trial employment opportunities, or employer-led workshops.

- **Case managers with lived experience:** Having case managers who possess similar lived experience can enhance the effectiveness of workforce programs. Workforce training providers should prioritize involving staff members who understand the challenges faced by people with records to create relatable and supportive environments.

- **Mentorship opportunities:** Mentorship is crucial for people with records in workforce programs. Workforce training providers can collaborate with local community-based organizations to establish mentorship opportunities that provide consistent guidance and support for participants throughout their journeys.

ETPF Training Participant Profile

Sophie Burke currently works for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) in Redding, California. But getting there wasn't easy: Her childhood and early adulthood were marked by instability and persistent mental health challenges in a home environment that was difficult and, at times, abusive. She struggled to find a positive path forward, battling substance abuse and, ultimately, multiple instances of incarceration.

At her most difficult point, when she found herself living in a tent one Christmas Eve, Burke made the decision to seek help and commit to her recovery, vowing that she was "never going to turn back." She completed a rehab program and began to think deeply about her future, finding strength in her search for belonging and purpose. Drawing on her longstanding desire to serve her community, Burke set her sights on a career in the forestry and fire service. She vowed to "be that inspiration that other people didn't get to have."

After facing rejections from traditional fire academies due to her record of incarceration and financial situation, Burke took a life-altering turn when she connected with the Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program (FFRP), a wildland firefighter training and credentialing program in California that embraces people with records. FFRP provided Burke with more than just job training; it offered a supportive community that helped her heal and grow. She embraced FFRP's team-building exercises and emphasis on relationship-building. Driven by her own commitment and the mentorship of FFRP staff members, Burke completed her training and secured her first position in the fire service.

Today, Burke is poised to start a new role as a forestry logistics officer with Cal Fire. She takes pride in visiting the FFRP offices, catching up with staff members, and speaking to current program participants about her experiences. In reflecting on her journey, Burke offers these words of encouragement to anyone who finds themselves in her former shoes: "Go for it. Take the leap of faith. You'll never know until you try."

> *"Go for it. Take the leap of faith. You'll never know until you try."*
>
> **Sophie Burke, Forestry Logistics Officer, Cal Fire**

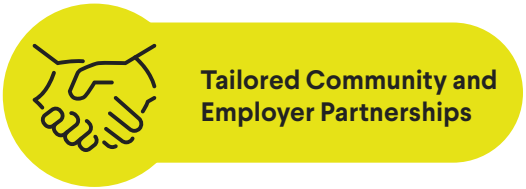
Centering Participant and Staff Experiences

CASE STUDY

Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program

Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program (FFRP) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing the representation of formerly incarcerated individuals in the wildland and forestry sectors. Developed in response to California's growing need for wildfire personnel, FFRP provides training, skills, and resources to people with records, helping them transition into stable and gainful employment as firefighters and forestry technicians across three training sites in the state. FFRP exemplifies leading with cultural humility and uplifting the voices of formerly incarcerated individuals who have firsthand experience with the challenges of seeking employment in the fire service. The organization was co-founded by Brandon Smith and Royal Ramey, who met while training at Bautista Conservation Camp, one of California's 35 fire camps, while incarcerated. Their lived experiences and deep understanding of the systemic obstacles faced by people with records have shaped the program's mission and structure.

FFRP's approach is deeply rooted in community and collaboration and emphasizes the importance of understanding and addressing the specific barriers faced by participants. The organization works closely with participants to identify their needs, barriers, and career goals in order to ensure that they are well matched to opportunities upon program completion. The use of mentors with lived experience and the establishment of an alumni advisory group further strengthens FFRP's community-centered approach by providing ongoing support and advocacy for program graduates as they advance in their careers. This holistic, culturally responsive model demonstrates FFRP's dedication to not only workforce development but also the long-term success and empowerment of people with records.



CASE STUDY

West Oakland Job Resource Center

The West Oakland Job Resource Center (WOJRC), a vital workforce intermediary in Oakland, focuses on connecting people with records to high-quality employment in transportation, distribution, and logistics as part of the ETPF initiative. Through strategic partnerships with the California State University Maritime Academy, the Machinists Institute, and the USS Potomac, WOJRC has established direct pathways from job-readiness training to industry-specific employment, particularly in maritime jobs. Collaboration with local maritime labor organizations ensures that clients receive essential training and make valuable connections to support their successful integration into the workforce. The Machinists Institute, a union-affiliated organization, applies proven training methods that prepare clients to meet industry standards and connects them to labor unions from the start.

WOJRC promotes employer engagement and provides value to the local labor market. Regional employers had mixed experiences with other nonprofit training programs due to the mismatch between the skills graduates possessed and those desired by the employers. WOJRC emphasizes industry skills and industry-recognized certifications to align more strongly with the needs of local employers. Additionally, the organization builds partnerships with vetted nonunion employers to ensure that workers receive fair treatment and equitable pay. To help ensure that future programs are financially sustainable, WOJRC is exploring a fee-for-service model that would encourage employers to invest in training so that they would have a vested interest in client success. By fostering strong partnerships and demonstrating impact, WOJRC remains committed to uplifting people with records and providing meaningful career pathways in the Oakland community.

05. Scale and Sustainability

As equity-driven workforce strategies are tested and adopted across California, determining ways in which effective practices can be replicated and their impact scaled is becoming increasingly important. Over the course of the ETPF initiative, our team has worked with state leaders, workforce practitioners, and subject matter experts to explore how population-specific funding can be used to create and scale impact in a sustainable way. Our emphasis on sustainability is particularly informed by input from ETPF grantees, who have emphasized the importance of properly pacing and supporting efforts to scale.

In this section, we highlight some of the challenges underpinning scalability, as well as recommendations state leaders can consider when addressing them. These recommendations are grounded in our understanding of and assumptions about where state leaders have significant leverage and can influence change.

Challenges to Achieving Scale and Sustainability

Population-specific workforce programs often face inherent challenges that undermine their sustainability and impede state leaders' efforts to scale their impact, including the following:

- **Short-term funding**: Workforce practitioners we engaged with clearly indicated that there are limitations to scaling strategies and program impacts when operating under short-term grant funding (i.e., for two years or less). Creating meaningful change for individuals and groups facing systemic barriers often requires that programs take a longer-term and higher-touch approach compared with programs aimed at the broader population. In considering short-term grant opportunities, practitioners may be disincentivized to work with new populations or implement innovative approaches, given the risk of falling short of their contractual goals. Further, short-term funding cycles can make it difficult to attract and retain quality staff members with expertise and/or lived experience as part of the target population, who may want or need greater job security.

- **Systemic barriers:** Supporting individuals and groups facing significant challenges requires workforce practitioners to take a holistic approach that includes a focus on basic needs for populations that experience high levels of poverty and housing insecurity. Many of the barriers confronting these groups (e.g., transportation, housing, and child care) must be addressed before individuals deeply engage with workforce training, which might not be within practitioners' formal scopes. In this sense, the upstream challenges in participants' lives create very real downstream complications in their efforts to secure quality employment. These complications, in turn, often result in increased pressure and burdens on practitioners to do more with less, ultimately leading to capacity strain and organizational burnout.

- **Administrative burden:** Just as addressing upstream challenges adds to practitioners' workloads, so too do the various requirements that come with grant administration, such as data reporting, participant eligibility verification, and the pressure to achieve progress metrics. For example, many practitioners report that they serve participants who may not officially be counted toward their grant requirements. This occurs because it is often difficult to obtain the documentation that they need from participants in order to demonstrate the organization's eligibility to receive targeted federal funding. Individuals may be reluctant to disclose information that would verify a prior criminal record or a disability diagnosis, for instance. Practitioners have also highlighted the effort it takes to effectively report progress in CalJOBS, California's online resource for employers and jobseekers, which often requires staff time that could otherwise be dedicated to service implementation.

- **Siloed knowledge:** Scaling and sustaining impact requires an open flow of communication regarding learning, best practices, population-specific strategies, and other core knowledge. Ideally, this information would circulate seamlessly among and between state leaders, practitioners, policymakers, and other stakeholders. During our engagement, we observed a number of siloes hindering the flow of knowledge and information in the workforce development ecosystem. Such siloes may cause state leaders and practitioners to feel that they are reinventing the wheel when designing or implementing new grant programs for target populations, rather than strategically leveraging existing knowledge, partnerships, and lessons from prior investments.

Recommendations for Scale and Sustainability

While our work with the ETPF initiative has identified numerous challenges to scaling and sustaining programs, it has also surfaced several actionable recommendations to help state leaders address these challenges. These recommendations are summarized below, along with a brief discussion of what they may look like in practice.

1. Design future investments to promote organizational capacity-building, foster innovation, and incentivize the adoption of population-specific best practices.

State leaders can use the solicitation and grant-making process to help drive impact toward shared workforce equity goals. State leaders should start by applying lessons learned from previous funding cycles to encourage and incentivize grant recipients to adopt population-specific best practices in their programming. Additionally, state partners can clarify the various population-specific eligibility and documentation requirements for prospective grantees during the solicitation and planning process, with a focus on simplifying access to services when possible. To support broader organizational capacity and better enable organizations to strengthen and scale programs, state leaders may also want to explore trust-based and flexible funding approaches.

To further enhance program impacts, state leaders can consider making more structural revisions to the design of grant programs. Planning grants are effective tools for helping practitioners design and launch sustainable programming. Further, grant programs can be expanded to include an integrated planning phase. Lengthening funding cycles would reduce performance pressure on grantees, encourage innovation, and increase the likelihood of making meaningful impacts.

2. Enhance monitoring, evaluation, and learning practices to minimize administrative burdens and foster wider learning efforts.

State leaders can help drive innovation and learning in the workforce ecosystem by reexamining current data-reporting practices to ensure that they incorporate a broad lens that includes monitoring, evaluation, and learning practices. We recommend that they start by reducing and streamlining reporting requirements, when possible, while still ensuring that programs capture population-specific

demographic data. To ease administrative strain on relatively small community-based organizations in particular, state leaders can also explore options to provide them with direct support for CalJOBS data tracking and reporting. Doing so could create more time and capacity for grantees and state leaders to engage more deeply in evaluation and learning activities and expand their collective inquiry to include not only what is happening, but why and how.

State leaders can also catalyze a broader learning agenda by commissioning larger, cross-initiative evaluations focused on efforts to improve population-level workforce outcomes for various groups, including young people who are not working or in school, veterans, people with disabilities, and people with records of incarceration. By conducting qualitative and quantitative analyses across existing population-specific grant programs, the state can gain a stronger understanding of the collective progress that has been made, the barriers that remain most salient for particular groups, and the evidence-based strategies that have the most meaningful positive impact on Californians. The workforce system can also benefit from additional investment in field-level research on cross-cutting challenges, such as post-program employment for populations facing systemic barriers (e.g., post-placement retention and job mobility).

3. Lead the curation and dissemination of successful and innovative strategies to help state, regional, and local workforce practitioners accelerate learning and adoption across investments and initiatives.

State leaders have an important role to play in fostering the development and growth of best practices and in the diffusion of that learning to the broader field. Throughout the grant life cycle, state leaders can ensure that grantees receive responsive coaching and technical assistance, as well as opportunities to engage in shared learning, to enhance grantees' capacity and organizational health, foster innovation, discuss best practices, and troubleshoot population-specific challenges.

To scale adoption of this learning, state leaders could build and invest in evergreen resources and tools. One way to do this is to develop online platforms, repositories, and knowledge campaigns focused on population-specific best practices across grant programs and in the private sector. Additionally, state leaders can invest in broader cross-initiative learning and networking opportunities (e.g., larger learning communities, webinars, conferences, and newsletters) for practitioners who are focused on the same target populations, to enhance equity at scale by encouraging the alignment and replication of best practices.

4. Establish processes and models for enhancing interagency and cross-sector partnerships focused on populations facing systemic barriers in the workforce.

Breaking down longstanding information siloes is a common through line in these recommendations. State leaders are in a position to serve as models in conducting more integrated interagency collaboration and engaging in public-private partnerships, which can ultimately lead to wider impacts for populations facing significant barriers. Given the multiple disconnected public agencies that govern the resources and support for target populations (e.g., those in need of workforce, education, or rehabilitation assistance), state leaders would benefit from establishing interagency work groups to take full advantage of population-specific efforts toward a shared strategic agenda.

By including private sector partners in state-level efforts, agencies can also address persistent challenges that the workforce field faces in securing long-term employment for individuals from populations facing systemic barriers. State leaders have a role to play in mobilizing employer support, developing effective employer incentives for hiring individuals from target populations, and developing agendas for state and federal policy change.

By modeling such partnerships at the state level, leaders can also set higher expectations for local and regional cross-sector collaboration. In particular, the workforce field would benefit from enhanced support and capacity-building focused on braiding funds from multiple systems serving target populations, and managing co-enrollment. Finally, expanded state-local partnerships are needed to help ensure that state initiatives and investments are informed by an understanding of practitioners' day-to-day efforts, the populations they serve, and the systemic challenges they face.

06. Conclusion

Equity Target Population Fund (ETPF) proved to be an innovative grant program focused on equitable economic advancement for young people who are not working or in school, veterans, people with disabilities, and people with records of incarceration, in addition to being a model that centered collaboration and shared learning among grantees. JFF and Engage R+D are immensely grateful to all of the organizations, practitioners, and individuals who have contributed their time, insights, and unwavering dedication to the ETPF initiative and the development of this framework. Through their willingness to open their doors (and virtual rooms), we have been able to curate invaluable knowledge about the workforce development efforts happening across California. The strategies and approaches identified through this initiative are a testament to the hard work and relentless commitment of the workforce practitioners who ensure that no one falls through the cracks on their path to career success. With the greatest humility and gratitude, we recognize that this progress is built on the dedication of these individuals who refuse to give up on their clients. These workforce practitioners are not only breaking down barriers but also empowering individuals to achieve economic advancement, one person at a time. In telling their stories, we hope to honor their tremendous efforts and inspire others across the state to join them in strengthening services and supports for populations facing longstanding barriers to economic advancement.

Through the ETPF initiative, we've seen firsthand how targeted, population-specific approaches can close equity gaps and enhance workforce outcomes for those who have faced barriers to advancement. By continuing to adopt and scale targeted, population-specific approaches, we can uplift communities that face the greatest challenges, fostering a more inclusive, resilient, and equitable workforce system in the process.

Learning and applying the lessons shared by the ETPF grantees highlighted in this framework has the opportunity to advance equity at scale across the entire workforce system in the following ways:

- **Practitioners:** Continue to integrate population-specific expertise, tailored approaches, and strategic partnerships into your training programs, uplifting successes and promoting knowledge-sharing and field-building

- **Funders:** Mobilize to provide flexible investments to support, sustain, and replicate innovative, population-focused strategies and solutions

- **State leaders:** Lead and model greater interagency collaboration and partnership, in addition to shared learning, to catalyze a united movement toward a workforce system where all individuals who have faced systemic barriers have equitable access to economic opportunity

California leaders at all levels can commit to these proven approaches, recognizing that true shifts in economic inclusion and mobility across the state require that they collaborate and address systemic challenges together. By working in partnership, they can create a workforce system that empowers every individual and expands equitable opportunities to all Californians, regardless of their demographic characteristics or life experiences.

Endnotes

1 "Federal Grant Funding Disclosure: Stevens Amendment," Employment Development Department (State of California), accessed November 14, 2024, https://edd.ca.gov/en/jobs_and_training/federal-grant-funding-disclosure-stevens-amendment/.

2 "WIOA 15 Percent Governor's Discretionary Funds" (Sacramento, CA: Employment Development Department, January 25, 2024), https://edd.ca.gov/siteassets/files/jobs_and_training/pubs/wsd23-04.pdf.

3 While this report focuses on the ETPF PY 2022-23 grant program, JFF and Engage R+D also provided technical assistance for the Equity Special Populations (ESP) PY 2021-22 grant program through March 2024. For more information on the ESP program and a list of grantees see, "Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Equity and Special Populations PY 2021-22: Award List and Project Summaries" (Sacramento, CA: Employment Development Department), accessed November 25, 2024, https://edd.ca.gov/siteassets/files/jobs_and_training/pubs/wssfp21-01award.pdf.

4 "Equity Target Population Fund Program Year 2022-23," California Grants Portal, updated July 5, 2023, https://www.grants.ca.gov/grants/equity-target-population-fund-program-year-2022-23-2/.

5 To learn more about JFF's Language Matters Guide, please see our full resource online.

6 Adapted from InFocus's Theory of Change Guide: https://impactinfocus.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Theory-of-Change-Guide-No.-1-The-Situation.pdf.

7 "Blended and Braided Funding," Urban Institute, accessed November 25, 2024, https://workforce.urban.org/node/57.html.

8 "Youth Disconnection in America," Measure of America, accessed November 25, 2024, https://www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive/.

9 "Youth Disconnection in America," https://www.measureofamerica.org/Dyinteractive/.

10 National Guard and Reserve members will have veterans status and be eligible for VA benefits if they deployed on federal active duty for at least 180 days and received a discharge that was higher than dishonorable or bad conduct, or served at least 20 years and received a discharge that was higher than dishonorable or bad conduct. For more information, see "Who is a Veteran?" Law for Veterans, accessed November 25, 2024, https://lawforveterans.org/who-is-a-veteran.

11 "Veterans," California Census 2020, accessed November 25, 2024, https://census.ca.gov/resource/veterans/.

12 Understanding the Veterans Services Landscape in California (Sacramento, CA: Legislative Analyst's Office, January 2017), https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/3525.

13 "Veterans Employment Toolkit," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, accessed November 25, 2024, https://www.va.gov/vetsinworkplace/valuableassets.asp.

14 "Veterans in California," USAFacts.org, accessed November 25, 2024, https://usafacts.org/topics/veterans/state/california/.

15 "Leave No Veteran Homeless," Health and Human Services Agency (San Diego, CA), accessed December 9, 2024, https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/hhsa/programs/hsec/leave-no-veteran-homeless.html.

16 "Anniversary of Americans With Disabilities Act: July 26, 2024," Census.gov, June 12, 2024, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2024/disabilities-act.html.

17 Caroline Danielson, Patricia Malagon, and Sarah Bohn, *Poverty in California* (San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California, 2021), https://www.ppic.org/publication/poverty-in-california/#:~:text=In%20fall%202021%2C%20poverty%20was,when%20child%20poverty%20was%20highest.

18 "Americans With Criminal Records" (Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project, 2014), https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/08/Americans-with-Criminal-Records-Poverty-and-Opportunity-Profile.pdf.

19 *Disabilities Reported by Prisoners – Survey of Prison Inmates 2016*, U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, March 2021, https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/drpspi16st.pdf?utm.

20 Heather Harris and Sean Cremin, "California's Prison Population" (San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California, September 2024), https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/jtf-prison-population-jtf.pdf; Christine Mitchell and Amber Akemi Piatt, *From Crisis to Care: Ending the Health Harm of Women's Prisons* (Oakland, CA: Human Impact Partners, February 2023), https://humanimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/HIP-From-Crisis-to-Care-02-2023.pdf.

Building a Future
That Works
For Everyone