

Preparing Immigrant Job Seekers to Reach Their Full Potential: Opportunities for Local Workforce Boards Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

The United States has a [projected shortfall of 7.5 million private sector workers](#) across all skill levels by 2020. Preparing immigrants to reach their full career potential is an important component of addressing that shortfall and contributing to the economic growth of the country as well as increasing opportunities for these individuals, their families, and their communities. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) presents new requirements and opportunities for workforce leaders in states, regions, and communities to prepare job seekers, including immigrants, to meet the needs of businesses and to reach their potential.

The Immigrant Workforce Is Growing and Dynamic

More than 42 million immigrants live in the United States, and [by 2060](#), nearly 20 percent of the U.S. population will be foreign-born. [As of 2014](#), the foreign-born population comprised 16.5 percent of the labor force and had greater labor force participation rates than the native-born population.

Immigrants have greater labor-force participation rates than the native-born.

Immigrants are employed in all industries and are [major contributors to the workforces of key industries](#). Nationally, immigrants are more likely than the native-born population to be employed in the administrative services, agriculture and extraction, construction, leisure and hospitality, and manufacturing industries. Immigrants are also highly represented in the healthcare and social services; professional, scientific, and management services; and trade, transportation, and utilities industries. Together, these industries comprise nearly 60 percent of the nation's gross domestic product.

[Immigrants have diverse skills](#): 41 percent of immigrants who arrived in the United States in the last five years have at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 30 percent of the native-born population. But another 23 percent of recent immigrants have not completed high school.

Forty-one percent of recent immigrants have at least a bachelor's degree, but 23 percent have not completed high school.

Immigrants have dynamic workforce challenges: More than [1.7 million skilled immigrants](#) are unemployed or underemployed. Immigrants comprise [one-third of the 36 million low-skilled adults](#) and one-quarter of adults with low numeracy skills in the United States. Also, while some immigrants may be fluent in English, [87 percent of limited English proficient individuals](#) in the United States are foreign-born.

New Requirements and Opportunities Under WIOA

As local workforce boards implement WIOA, they will need to meet the workforce challenges of businesses; improve the skills of adults and youth with barriers to

employment; and better integrate education, workforce, and human services programs. Immigrants, [no longer concentrated in a few urban areas](#), are part of the economic engine in communities across the nation. Local workforce boards that address the employment needs of and incorporate immigrants into their workforce solutions will be positioned to achieve these broader objectives under WIOA.

Title I Adult Formula Program Provides Priority of Service to Individuals Who Are Basic Skills Deficient

A new policy under WIOA is that individuals who [meet the definition of “basic skills deficient”](#) have priority of service for the Title I Adult Formula program. This definition includes adults who need to improve their English skills because they are “unable to ... read, write, or speak English, at a level necessary to function on the job, in the individual’s family, or in society.”

Participants with limited English proficiency who meet other requirements receive priority for career and training services under the Title I Adult Formula program.

Local workforce boards should be aware that under [the Unified and Combined State Plan requirements](#), states must describe how they will monitor and implement this priority of service. As such, local workforce boards should ensure that the Title I Adult Formula program is prepared to implement this requirement fully.

Further, local workforce boards should implement processes to identify individuals who may qualify as basic skills deficient quickly and proactively. For example,

informing community partners and job seekers coming in to One-Stop Career Centers about this new policy would meet the Labor and Education departments’ vision for a customer-centered one-stop system and help local workforce boards identify eligible individuals.

Training Under Title I Can Improve English and Entrepreneurial Skills

Under the Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker Formula programs, [participants can improve their English language skills](#) or enroll in integrated education and training programs that are provided concurrently or in combination with other eligible training services, such as occupational, on-the-job, and incumbent worker training.

Improving participants’ English language skills, in combination with other occupational training strategies, is an allowable cost under Title I Adult and Dislocated Worker Formula programs.

Local workforce boards should apply innovative models, such as contextualized English language programs, to train individuals who are limited English proficient for career success. Integrating English language acquisition with job preparation and training is a win-win, resulting in job seekers who have language and occupational skills employers need and who are ready to contribute to the workforce.

[Entrepreneurial skills training](#) is also an allowable activity under the Title I Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth Formula programs. Entrepreneurship has been the hallmark of immigrants in the United States. In 2014, [28.5 percent of new entrepreneurs were immigrants](#), and immigrants were twice as likely as the

native-born to start new businesses in 2012. Local workforce boards should continue to promote and offer entrepreneurial skills training to interested adults, dislocated workers, and youth, which will expand the innovation culture within the local and regional economy.

Youth Who Are Limited English Proficient May Be Eligible for the Title I Youth Formula Program

WIOA requires local workforce boards to [spend at least 75 percent of Title I Youth Formula funds](#) on providing services to out-of-school youth. In- and out-of-school youth who are limited English proficient and who meet other applicable requirements are eligible for the Title I Youth Formula program.

These youth have a [significant educational gap](#). For example, nearly 13 percent of limited English proficient youth ages 16 to 18 are not enrolled in school and do not have a high school diploma or equivalent, and almost 37 percent of limited English proficient youth ages 19 to 24 do not have a high school diploma or equivalent.

Local workforce boards should partner with entities that serve immigrant youth to ensure access to workforce services through the public workforce system. These partnerships can help local workforce boards reach the 75 percent threshold of services to out-of-school youth.

Addressing the Workforce Needs of English Language Learners Supports Increased Program Integration Requirements

WIOA requires increased integration of the core programs – Title I Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth Formula programs; Title II Adult Education program; Title III

Wagner-Peyser Employment Service; and Title IV Vocational Rehabilitation Services. In addition to statutory requirements, [the Department of Labor notes](#), “States and local boards, One-Stop Career Center partners and operators must increase coordination of programs and resources to support a comprehensive system that seamlessly provides integrated services that are accessible to all job seekers, workers, and businesses.” [The Department of Education states](#), “One-stop centers must be physically and programmatically accessible to all customers ... One-stop centers use principles of universal design and human-centered design ... [and] the use of pictorial, written, verbal, and tactile modes to present information for customers with ... limited English proficiency.”

About 40 percent of Title II Adult Education program participants are in English literacy programs to improve their English skills.

As local workforce boards implement service delivery strategies to realize an integrated public workforce system, they should note that under [the Unified or Combined State Plan requirements](#), states must describe how they will ensure that individuals with limited English proficiency are able to access the one-stop system. Also, [40 percent](#) of Title II Adult Education program participants are enrolled in English literacy programs.

Thus, to achieve successful integration with Title II Adult Education programs, local workforce boards should ensure that Title I Adult, Dislocated Worker, and Youth Formula programs are able to address the workforce needs of individuals with limited English proficiency. For example, local workforce boards should ensure language access, implement innovative models for

skill development including those that allow for concurrent language acquisition and occupational training, and appropriately train staff.

Co-enrollment of participants who meet applicable eligibility requirements can support program integration. For instance, eligible Title II Adult Education program participants should be co-enrolled in Title I Adult, Dislocated Worker, or Youth Formula programs, as appropriate. Co-enrollment helps ensure that participants, including people with limited English proficiency, receive the array of employment and training services they may need. Also, co-enrollment can help local workforce boards meet their performance targets.

Partnering with entities that have experience serving immigrants, such as community- and faith-based and human services organizations, can help local workforce boards ensure that WIOA participants receive appropriate supportive services and are prepared to reach their full career potential.

Local Workforce Boards Must Include Community Leaders on Standing Committees

Under WIOA, [local workforce boards may establish standing committees](#) to assist them with carrying out their functions. WIOA requires standing committees to include community leaders with related expertise who are not members of the local workforce board.

Local workforce boards should include leaders experienced in serving immigrants on standing committees such as those focused on improving service strategies. For example, local workforce boards that establish a Youth Standing Committee should include leaders who have experience serving WIOA-eligible immigrant youth in

the local area. Engaging these community leaders ensures that local workforce boards can more readily address the needs of immigrants facing barriers to employment and tap into this constituency for future talent solutions.

The National Immigration Forum

The National Immigration Forum, a leading immigrant advocacy organization, advocates for the value of immigrants and immigration to the nation.

To advance policy and strategies that provide new Americans with the opportunities, skills, and status they need to reach their full potential, the Forum brings together innovative alliances of diverse business, community college, labor, faith, law enforcement, and other key constituencies from across the country.

Please contact Kathy KL Tran, Policy and Advocacy Assistant Director for Skills and Workforce Development, at ktran@immigrationforum.org with questions or to share your strategies for preparing immigrants to reach their full career potential.

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