



The Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program

An Equity Imperative: How the Workforce System Can Advance Workplace Health and Safety During and After the Pandemic

Amanda Newman, June 2020



“It’s really a moral tension for organizations... It’s important to name that a lot of the jobs available right now are high-risk while also recognizing that income is critical for so many people – it always is, but especially right now.”

- Blair Franklin, Executive Director, YES Drop-in Center in Baltimore

In early spring 2020, staff of the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program began hearing from workforce development professionals about workers’ fears related to both COVID-19 safety and loss of income. Professionals also shared the conflicts they were confronting in trying to help workers connect to jobs and provide for their families while also protecting their health and the health of their loved ones. In response, we began learning more about how workforce professionals are managing these new challenges. This brief summarizes 11 interviews with workforce development leaders and highlights key ideas for workforce professionals and funders concerned about workplace health and safety during the pandemic. It is important to note that risks are not distributed equally. Due to occupational segregation and other factors rooted in structural racism, Black, Indigenous, and people of color are more likely to face the impossible choice between health and livelihood and are suffering more severe health consequences from the virus. These equity considerations must be centered in health and safety responses.

Every worker deserves a job with healthy and safe working conditions. The outbreak of the novel coronavirus, however, has demonstrated that for far too many people this is not the reality. The pandemic has created a new set of workplace hazards, forcing many people looking for work to make impossible choices between taking jobs that risk exposure and losing crucial income. These risks are heightened by inadequate [workplace safety standards](#)¹ and personal protective equipment (PPE), contributing to the spread of illness and costing lives of people in jobs on the frontlines – including in grocery stores, nursing homes, hospitals, warehouses, and meatpacking plants. As businesses reopen, more people are being [pushed back into jobs](#)² that pose risks even as the virus spreads, and these numbers are expected to rise if supplemental unemployment insurance expires in July.

Workforce development professionals who connect people to jobs have a crucial role to play in strengthening workplace health and safety. Policymakers, worker advocates, union members, employers, and workers themselves also play critical roles. Serving as intermediaries between workers and employers, workforce development professionals are well-positioned to advance workplace health and safety.

Advancing workplace health and safety is also an equity imperative for the workforce development field. As national protests draw attention to violence against Black lives, Black workers performing critical services during the pandemic are also [more likely](#)³ to report serious

risk of exposure to the virus on the job and fears of retaliation for raising concerns. Due to historical and current patterns of structural racism, many workers of color and immigrant workers are [concentrated in frontline jobs](#)⁴ with greater risk of exposure. Along with other [persistent disparities](#),⁵ this occupational segregation impacts workers' access to quality and affordable healthcare, contributing to illness from the virus. Black people are currently more than [1.5 times more likely](#)⁶ to become sick and die from the virus, and Latinx, Native American, and Asian people are [overrepresented in cases or deaths](#)⁷ in certain states. By taking steps to strengthen workplace protections, workforce development professionals can address racial disparities compounded by the virus and help save lives.⁸

In the early months of the pandemic, the Economic Opportunities Program spoke with workforce development leaders across the country as they strengthened existing strategies and considered new approaches to address workplace health and safety. Professionals on the front lines of connecting people to work – from caseworkers to job developers to program directors – can learn from these approaches to inform their own strategies. It is important to note that workforce professionals are themselves navigating a crisis, responding to historic unemployment as state and local resources are [rapidly declining](#).⁹ Public and philanthropic funders can support the workforce field to advance workplace health and safety, including by increasing funding for staff time to prioritize these efforts and fostering partnerships with local advocacy organizations to drive systems change.

¹ <https://www.nelp.org/publication/worker-safety-crisis-cost-weakened-osh/>

² <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/29/847701797/as-governors-urge-businesses-to-reopen-workers-are-getting-pushed-off-unemployme>

³ <https://s27147.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Silenced-About-COVID-19-Workplace-Fear-Retaliation-June-2020.pdf>

⁴ <https://cepr.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020-04-Frontline-Workers.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/covid-19-racial-health-disparities-highlight-why-we-need-address-structural-racism>

⁶ <https://covidtracking.com/race>

⁷ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/30/865413079/what-do-coronavirus-racial-disparities-look-like-state-by-state>

⁸ Data on both the health impacts of the virus and the workers with greatest risk of exposure are incomplete and changing regularly. Please look for the most updated data sources to inform your work.

⁹ <https://time.com/5826016/states-budget-crisis-coronavirus/>

What Workforce Development Professionals Can Do

Provide workplace safety information and coaching to clients

Workforce Development professionals can provide training and have coaching conversations with clients to inform them about the risks of the virus, their options, and their rights and protections on the job. “This is where individual conversations with workers are really important,” says Clair Minson, who oversees workforce development efforts at the New Orleans Business Alliance. “It’s about ensuring people have the information they need to make the best choices for themselves and their families.”

In Baltimore, the YES Drop-in Center provides workforce development services to homeless young adults in Baltimore. During the pandemic, staff are having regular check-ins with clients to discuss their comfort level with returning to work and resources they need to stay safe. “We’re talking about transportation – can we figure out a safe way to get you to work? Do you have access to the PPE you need to keep yourself healthy?” says Blair Franklin, Executive Director of YES. Staff aim to have these conversations by phone or video when possible, and the organization is using an emergency fund to distribute phones to clients. “It lets you engage more deeply, to see and hear emotional cues. It may be that getting employed is not the best option for someone right now, that it’s a better time to focus on other priorities, like mental health services.”

In New York, The HOPE Program has continued to connect clients to jobs in food retail, warehousing and logistics, and teleservices throughout the pandemic, and is providing counseling to help clients make informed decisions about work. Shortly after the outbreak,

the organization began coaching staff – many of whom are themselves program graduates – to have open conversations with students to assess the health risks of returning to work. “Many of our students live in public housing, shelters, and treatment facilities that make it difficult to maintain social distancing,” says Kelly LoBianco, chief program officer. “There are fears for oneself and fears that if you are taking an essential job you are potentially transmitting the virus to your community.” Staff are helping connect students who choose not to enter jobs to public benefits and emergency cash relief.

In addition to individual counseling, some organizations have developed training sessions to help clients better understand the risks of the virus, how to protect themselves, and their rights to a safe and healthy workplace. The HOPE Program has contracted with its [occupational health and safety training](#)¹⁰ instructor to design a COVID-19 safety workshop they are delivering remotely. Staff are using emergency funding to purchase and deliver laptops to students so they can stay connected to digital training and services. The training, which draws from [OSHA](#)¹¹ and [CDC guidance](#),¹² includes information about how the disease spreads, expectations for workplace safety, and steps to report unsafe working conditions to the state.

Alison Dickson, an instructor in the School of Labor and Employment Relations at the University of Illinois, notes that much of the information clients need about workplace safety is important outside of the pandemic. In 2015, she began developing a [Workers’ Rights for Workforce Development](#)¹³ curriculum, which prepares workforce development professionals

¹⁰ <https://www.osha.gov/training/outreach>

¹¹ <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/covid-19/controlprevention.html#interim>

¹² <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/worker-safety-support/index.html>

¹³ <https://cic.net/frontline-focus/tools-frontline-staff/>

to educate clients about their workplace rights and how to protect them. Topics include legal rights to a safe workplace, racial discrimination on the job, leaves of absence, and protections for labor organizing. “Central to COVID-19 safety trainings is a strong foundation in all of these areas,” explains Dickson. “Whether job seekers or essential workers, people are going to be in a stronger position to navigate the workplace if they’ve had some exposure to workers’ rights.”

Be the “eyes and ears”

Workforce development organizations are well-positioned to gather information about employer safety practices during the pandemic to address workplace concerns as they arise. West of Chicago, Hugo Avila serves as a business services coordinator at Southwest Suburban Cook County American Job Center (SERCO), where most job vacancies are in manufacturing. Avila, who has participated in Dickson’s training and has integrated workers’ rights information across programing, is regularly communicating with employers to understand their workplace conditions and new safety protocols during the outbreak.

Avila describes walking a fine line in order to gather information while preserving relationships with employers. “I don’t want to come off as interviewing or trying to put a spotlight on them, but I want to try to get a better sense of what’s going on.” For instance, Avila asks employers if they have reduced the number of people working each shift. Based on his understanding of the facility, Avila can gain a sense of whether workers would be able to maintain social distancing. Avila is also communicating with clients, primarily by email and phone, to identify additional concerns workers have on the job. “Our existing participants who are working, we are reaching out to them and asking them to provide us any feedback they can about what’s going on,” says Avila.

As hiring picks up in Ohio, staff at Towards Employment are asking employers new questions about their health and safety

protocols and documenting this information internally. “Just as we used to ask employers generally about the workplace and the job and the wages, now we’re also asking about COVID,” explains Jill Rizika, executive director of Towards Employment. Questions include whether employers are taking temperatures, how they are enforcing social distancing, and which staff in which areas of the workplace are required to wear masks.

Like SERCO, Towards Employment is also in contact with participants who are working during the pandemic. Particularly in jobs with significant interaction with the public, “conversations with Towards Employment’s career coaches, who support job retention, are all about COVID-19,” says Rizika. “Do I have the right equipment? Is it replaced as frequently as it should be? If I feel concerned about my safety, who do I talk to? How can I raise concerns in such a way that I don’t jeopardize my job?” Career coaches are fielding participants’ questions and concerns and working with them to navigate high-stakes situations for themselves and their customers.

Center workers in the job referral process

Workforce development organizations can use information gained from workers and employers to determine whether to refer job seekers to certain businesses during the pandemic. At Southwest Cook County American Job Center, SERCO is managing a digital job board, refreshed weekly, with opportunities available during the pandemic. Avila notes that SERCO has stopped referring clients to jobs that are not meeting safety expectations. “What we’re doing is being more conscious of what we’re promoting. If we’ve had a conversation with an employer or a participant and it sounds like the company may not be a good situation for our clients at the current moment, we pull it from our job board. Like if we know the employer isn’t requiring PPE.” SERCO is also suspending employer referrals when staff become aware of health and safety concerns raised through news media or if an employer stops communicating regularly with staff.

Job developers can also have direct conversations with businesses to encourage workplace changes that support and protect workers. “I’ve had those kinds of conversations in the past where I say, ‘I have some concerns about your facility’ or ‘I don’t think your wages are at the level they should be,’” says Avila. He notes that participating in training related to workers’ rights and protections has helped build his own capacity to have these types of conversations with employers.

At Café Reconcile in New Orleans, which prepares young adults for jobs in the restaurant industry, staff note that severing relationships with employers in the current labor market requires centering their organizational values. “Culinary and hospitality in the city will probably not come back at the same level it existed pre-COVID,” says program director Kathy Litchfield. “It’s going to be a more competitive labor market, but philosophically, I cannot imagine a scenario where we would partner with an employer or encourage our young people to seek employment in a space that was not safe and healthy for them. Especially given the virus is hitting our students’ communities and families the hardest. We’ll figure out another way.”

Importantly, workforce development professionals can adopt these strategies to address a range of workplace concerns related to physical health, mental health, and other aspects of wellbeing. As Minson notes, “If we see value in doing this type of worker protection for safety-related concerns, we can do the same with employers when racist or discriminatory practices and policies are surfaced. If we’re thinking holistically about health and safety of workers, we also need to include the impacts of racism on workers’ mental and emotional health.”

Prioritize employers for services based on their job quality

Workforce development organizations can leverage public and private funding streams to incentivize better workplace safety practices. On the West Coast, the San Diego Workforce Partnership is experimenting with ways to prioritize employers that meet health and safety standards during the pandemic. For instance, staff are leveraging Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act On-the-Job Training funds – a strategy they were developing prior to the pandemic – to determine which employers they work with. “We’re basically saying that we are not going to give these dollars to companies that aren’t creating a safe work environment, that aren’t paying people a particular wage,” says Brooke Valle, a chief officer at the Workforce Partnership. “So, we’re pushing on safety plus other things, all in one package.”

Partner with local labor and advocacy organizations

Workforce development organizations can partner with worker advocates in their local communities to drive systems changes in employer practices and public policy. Unions play an important role in [strengthening workplace protections](#),¹⁴ but due in part to policies that have weakened collective bargaining, only [6.2%](#)¹⁵ of private sector workers [belonged to a union](#)¹⁶ in 2019. In many local communities, worker centers fill a need by organizing and advocating to improve conditions for nonunionized workers, particularly workers in low-wage jobs, immigrant workers, and workers of color. In Southwest Cook County, SERCO and local worker center Arise Chicago have partnered in the past by making cross-referrals of workers between the two organizations, and Hugo Avila is prepared to refer clients during the pandemic as needed.

¹⁴ <https://www.onlabor.org/what-do-unions-do-in-a-pandemic/>

¹⁵ <https://qz.com/work/1789615/union-membership-rates-in-the-us-continues-to-decline/>

¹⁶ <https://theconversation.com/who-wants-to-join-a-union-a-growing-number-of-americans-102374>

In Baltimore, Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) runs a construction training program and has an in-house advocacy team. “Not all issues low-wage workers confront can be resolved through training,” says Christopher Dews, a policy advocate at JOTF. “We also need legislative changes to remove barriers to employment and to a quality of life many other Americans enjoy.” Dews notes that JOTF’s advocacy agenda is deeply informed by workers’ concerns. “We base our agenda on what we’re hearing from our workforce development graduates and members of the local community,” says Dews. “For instance, requiring doctors to verify paid sick leave – a lot of workers don’t trust the process of visiting a doctor and are worried about medical bills, not to mention employers are requiring workers to verify hours they’ve already earned.”

As a result, JOTF is advocating to ban employers from requiring doctors to verify illnesses for paid sick days so that workers won’t have to bear the expense – and the inconvenience – of a doctors’ visit every time they have an illness. JOTF’s other health and safety priorities include

permanently expanding paid sick leave in Maryland from seven days to 14 days and ensuring workers have the right to refuse to return to unsafe workplaces. JOTF is also pushing for a state database to monitor employer safety complaints during the pandemic.

Like most workforce organizations, the San Diego Workforce Partnership does not have a policy team in-house. During the pandemic, Director of Early Workforce Development Laura Kohn partnered with early childhood organizations, union representatives, and industry associations to advocate for safe childcare for essential workers. For workforce organizations interested in advocating to strengthen health and safety protections during the pandemic, Kohn advises, “Staff can make themselves available to local advocacy organizations and collaboratives to begin to build those bridges. This will position workforce development organizations to play a role in the process, even if they don’t have the bandwidth to lead it. You allow your voice to be brought to the table to represent the perspective and needs of job seekers and working families.”

What Funders Can Do

The design of workforce development funding streams and performance measures can make it challenging for workforce development professionals to advance activities that strengthen worker health and safety – particularly in an environment of rapidly declining resources. Public and philanthropic funders can take steps to support the workforce development field to strengthen workplace health and safety both during and after the pandemic.

Provide funding to increase organizational and staff capacity

Several workforce development professionals noted that their organizations support activities that strengthen workplace health and safety – including direct conversations with clients, employer relationship-building, and advocacy – due to availability of funding for specific staff positions or staff time. For instance, the YES Drop-in Center employs a full-time youth leadership and advocacy coordinator who focuses on building partnerships with local advocacy organizations, ensuring advocacy efforts incorporate youth voice and are youth-led. At SERCO, Hugo Avila is part of a team of five business services staff who are able to build trust with a variety of employers and learn about their workplace conditions. As manager Soneeta Mangra-Dutcher of Central Iowa Works notes, developing close relationships with employers sets the foundation for discussions about worker health and safety and other workplace practices.

As the nation navigates the current economic and health crisis, public and philanthropic funders can invest in staff capacity so that workforce development organizations can prioritize activities that help keep workers safe. Funders can also provide much-needed [flexible funding](#)¹⁷ for general operations so that

organizations can connect students to resources that help them stabilize and continue to access programs and services. Importantly, organizations situated differently require differential resources. Under-resourced organizations and organizations located in and working with communities of color most impacted by the virus will require substantial resources to address economic and health disparities. Funders can seek out and support the work of these organizations, including those they do not typically fund.

As the nation recovers, funders can consider ways to encourage grantees to expand existing work or develop new capacities to protect worker health and safety beyond the crisis. For instance, funders can ask about organizations' commitment to workers' rights, as well as their interest in expanding or developing new approaches, including through training curricula or local partnerships to advocate for workplace protections.

“Set the table” for local partnerships

Several workforce development professionals noted that funders can play a key role in bringing together local organizations to advocate for policy changes informed by the experiences of workers and communities most impacted by the virus. In New Orleans, Café Reconcile is part of a coalition of workforce organizations that participate in state advocacy efforts. Caitlin Scanlan, a director at Café Reconcile, notes that initial funding to convene and train coalition members helped “cultivate habits amongst our organizations. We all started to network and communicate differently, and the advocacy work has carried on beyond this initial investment.”

In Baltimore, Christopher Dews notes that local funders bring workforce development and

¹⁷ <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/How-the-Coronavirus-Crisis-May/248352>

advocacy organizations together for conversations about racial justice, which helps strengthen relationships. “If you are a workforce development organization in Baltimore, at some point or another you’re going to run into those who do policy,” says Dews. Dews has been asked by workforce organizations to present on JOTF legislative priorities to staff, and workforce organizations have referred participants to JOTF to testify in support of legislation that promotes fair and equitable access to job opportunities.

Develop performance measures that promote job quality and equity

Workforce development professionals noted that public and philanthropic [performance metrics](#)¹⁸ that prioritize job placements – the number of people connected to jobs – can make it difficult for organizations to promote job quality factors such as workplace health and safety. “I feel like one of the biggest issues is that organizations have these metrics to meet, but

then people fall off their jobs,” explains Hugo Avila. “Placing people in job situations where they’re not set up for success actually does them more harm.”

During the crisis, public and philanthropic funders can work with grantees to adjust performance measures to place greater value on connecting people to safe job opportunities than on the quantity of placements. “This may mean we have to make fewer placements, but we need to draw a line in the sand,” says Valle. In the longer term, public and private funders can develop performance measures that prioritize quality jobs – including dimensions such as earnings (wages and benefits) and safe work environments. “While these outcomes are harder to measure than placements and starting wages, they reflect the goals of the workforce system,” says Valle. Importantly, funders can require that participant outcomes are disaggregated by race, gender, and other identities to identify disparities and craft targeted responses that center equity.

¹⁸ <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/of-interest/philanthropy-wont-solve-big-problems-unless-it-stops-obsessing-about-metrics/>

Looking Ahead



“We can use this pandemic as an opportunity to really bring job quality to the forefront to create a better set of opportunities than we had going in.”

-Brooke Valle, Chief Strategy and Innovation Officer, The San Diego Workforce Partnership

As workers face unprecedented health and safety concerns during the pandemic, workforce development organizations and their funders have an opportunity to advance practices and policies that protect workers and public health. As Blair Franklin notes, taking these steps is an equity imperative: “Given everything COVID-19 is uncovering about the level of inequity that exists, it is our duty and our responsibility. It’s

about the health and safety of all of us, and about who society deems expendable.”

New practices, partnerships, and policies adopted during the pandemic can set the foundation for a greater focus on employer practice change and policy advocacy after the crisis, creating safer, fairer, and more equitable working conditions that enable more workers to thrive.

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